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Abstract

The relationship between anthropology and history has been differentiated by the notion of change. Also, the history of anthropology lends itself to specific people as its object of study—people without history. Its construction as a discipline was imbued from the start with historically—determined white racism. This racism capitalized on the fact that Africa was little known as a historical entity and so the continent was consigned into the realm of a historical anthropology. For long, this form of colonial anthropology has been dominant. One of the main objectives of anthropology in Africa, as distinct from African anthropology, has been to rethink the role of the discipline in Africa and for Africans. A new field of study called historical anthropology has developed from this endeavour. This paper raises the central question of whether anthropology and history in Africa have resolved their contradictions in relation to disciplinary peculiarities and methodology. It argues that the notion of change and that of historical explanation define and refine the historians' approach and differentiates historians from anthropologists. It posits that historical anthropology as constructed in some western academies fails to resolve the tension emanating from the differences between the two disciplines. This is in so far as the notion of change is used and also the advantage the historian employs in the methodological approach of historical explanation. It is concluded that the feasibility of a historical anthropology is only tenable if the contradictions between the two disciplines are negotiated and resolved. Whatever vested interests African anthropologists might have in their discipline, after 25 years of hibernation they have been overtaken by events both in Africa and in the North. The deconstruction of anthropology has more or less been done for them by the Northerners and naturally from their point of view.

Introduction

Recent scholarship in Africa has witnessed attempts at reasserting or re-mainstreaming anthropology. If this is not done explicitly by emphasizing the continued significance of the discipline in Africa (Moore. 1993. 1994), some scholars have come up with something referred to as historical anthropology which is acting as a new analytical framework (Cohen and Atieno-Odhambo. 1989). However, historical anthropology is ill-defined and it raises more questions than it solves, at least in Africa. What is more is that historical anthropology is an externally initiated and driven initiative just like most approaches used in analyzing Africa have been and still are. As a result, the question of anthropology and Africa remains valid because as Mafeje (1998: 95) has shown “Anthropology in Africa’ could not necessarily be construed as ‘African anthropology’, leave alone the more pertinent question of anthropology by Africans”. In Africa, as in the rest of the Third World, anthropology took over where topical disciplines of mainstream societies of the west left, and remained largely a residual discipline for residual societies without history.

One important question that re-emerges from this new marriage between history and anthropology dates back to 1972 when Henry Mwanzi insisted that anthropology should either become history or nothing at all. The reason for this position which, I think, remains relevant today is that whenever anthropology was associated with history, there has been nothing but recognizable error. Is there new
anthropology was associated with history, there has been nothing but recognizable error. Is there new evidence today that anthropology and history have developed beyond the recognizable error that Mwanzi ably captured in 1972? (Mwanzi. 1972: 1).

The question is very fundamental today because as late as 1994, David Bunn recommended that a balance between narration and oral production should be struck. He suggested, with some forceful finality, that ‘African history can best find this balance, by becoming more like anthropology’ (Bunn. 1994: 32). Don Robotham has been more explicit in his analysis. While challenging scholars like Anthony Giddens who think that anthropology has reached a point that leads towards its effective dissolution today, he argues, on the contrary, that this will ‘be a period in which the distinctive contribution of anthropology will be more important than ever for human society’ (Robotham. 1996: 359). Jane Guyer (1998: 12) has insisted that anthropology has a constant critical process that illustrates that it was never only a handmaiden of power. It is this critical process that she thinks constitutes the contribution of anthropology today.

But most of the scholars quoted above brush off the main problem that led African academies at independence to turn away from anthropology. This was because of its heritage of political complicity and cultural denigration; the whole gamut of its colonial history did not allow independent states in Africa to accept anthropology in their curriculum. Contrary to Guyer’s (1998: 21) admonition, matters are made worse, not improved by the fact that “being a handmaiden of power was not the unique prerogative of anthropology” since all scientific disciplines serve interests. While Guyer notes the negative legacy of the discipline, she insists that “it is even more important to re-mainstream anthropology again in African social science: not by capitulation on the deeply emotive issues raised in the past, but by looking clearly and carefully at the great value of the legacy, and critically and creatively at the potential interface with the other disciplines” (Guyer. 1998: 2). To what extent are African scholars willing to brush off the harsh legacy of colonialism and instead focus on the creativity of the discipline that in fact gave colonialism its best ammunition for further control of ‘natives’? It is our argument that the emotive issues Guyer asks us not to surrender to are still the overriding influences that colonialism and neo-colonialism left on our continent and they cannot be easily left aside as we re-mainstream the discipline.

It would appear that the time lapse between 1972 and 1994 is long enough that either some scholars are forgetting certain pertinent questions relating to anthropology in Africa or new theoretical grounds have emerged that seem to provide the basis for the new thrusts in anthropology while glossing over old but unresolved issues. This paper revisits old issues related to the history of anthropology on the continent before making an analysis of emerging trends between anthropology and history. Here we illustrate that unless old historical questions relating to colonialism are addressed and resolved, history and anthropology might never be good interdisciplinary bedfellows in Africa. The cursory dismissal of colonialism as it relates to anthropology, as ‘colonial mentality thinking’ is not adequate in addressing the myriad legacies of this epochal relationship between colonialism and anthropology and its legacy in Africa. This paper is written by a student of history concerned about the manner in which some Africanists, especially Euro-Americans have practised anthropology in Africa underplaying the emancipatory role history is meant to play in Africa. This role is much more important today than ever before, given the new initiatives at recolonization and misinterpretation of important historical happenings in Africa including the recent re-interpretation of who really is responsible for slavery (see the paper by Magubane and Zeleza in this volume).
Imperial Origins of Anthropology

In the history of Africa, three epochs stand out as very repressive and dehumanizing. These are slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. While the history of slavery and colonialism has left indelible marks on Africa, neo-colonialism has been more hidden in manifestation than the former two, though its virulence leaves comparatively long lasting effects. These effects are clear and current to the extent that they deserve special mention. Neo-colonialism has been more devastating in its intertwined onslaught in economics and politics including the academic conceptualization of Africa. While anthropology does not play its handmaiden role in the neo-colonial context in Africa as it did in its colonial times, other disciplines like political science and economics certainly borrowed their leaf from colonial anthropology and are serving similar roles in the metropole today.

The neo-colonial era was consummated by the Cold War. The indicators for the Cold War can be traced deep into colonialism but its open burst dated back to post-war Euro-American politics. The Second World War opened up for the dollar dominance allowing for American hegemony on the rest of the world. American hegemony, Escobar (1995: 15) insists, is still part of the great influence western discourse has imposed on Africa in view of his analysis of ‘anthropology and the development encounter’ as opposed to Tala Asad’s Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter. During the struggle for independence in Africa, American double standards became apparent as it tried to play the ‘honest broker’ between anti-colonialism and pro-colonialism. This relationship was mediated by Cold War needs which demanded that America maintained European allies for Cold War support against the Soviet Union (Munene, 1995).

If the US emerged as a traitor against anti-imperialism, communist Soviet Union stood to gain African support. The US established ideological networks within which researched propaganda was drummed against communism. State intellectuals were employed after 1945 to assert their country’s hegemony over the rest of the world (Moore, 1996:128-129). Ideology and social thought were closely woven to ensure that American hegemony was asserted for Cold War reasons. Out of this have emerged new theories of the post-Cold War era that vouch for renewed Euro-American incursions into the Third World (Furedi, 1994). Since the nationalist perspectives have lost energy in Africa, it appears prudent for western ideology to assume that Africa’s short memory has forgotten, even forgiven Euro-America for the colonial encounters and neo-colonial abuses. In short, African history, its inspiring and emancipatory role, is gone and a call is made to embark on a postmodern age of affluence after the ‘end of history’. That is why anthropology is taking its centre stage for the postmodern age just as it did for the period of ‘modernity’ (colonial age). On the contrary, it is our view that there still exists a recognizable error in this conceptualization and it is not different from what Mwanzi saw in 1972. Imperialism is merely finding new ground to reassert itself and anthropology may be expected to play its historically ‘rightful’ role, only that other Africanist disciplines are at hand to pioneer and assist.

Colonialism was predicated on Western ideology and fed by Western social thinkers. The power of anthropological discourse for European colonialism in Africa was very strong. It was in the colonial essence that anthropology for Africa and the Third World was created in the British spheres of colonialism. Anthropology played the pivotal role of making what was strange in Africa appear less so (Wallerstein, 1983: 10). Also, the ideological categories on which colonialism survived were put in place and academically operationalized by, among others, anthropologists. Pejorative concepts like ‘tribe’, ‘native’, ‘primitive’, ‘savage’ or even ‘barbarism’ were made instrumental by anthropology. It denied colonized Africans pride in their race, civilizations, achievements and therefore postponed radical revolution against colonialism. By being consigned to the realm of anthropological objects of study, the ahistoricity of the continent was implicitly asserted.
Pejorative terminologies if consistently used have had the disparaging impact of killing and denying people their pride. Such terminology annihilates a people’s initiative to innovate and invent. That is why for the most part of colonialism in Africa, African men remained ‘boys’, meaning that they had ceased to grow. Such a practice had received its ideological backing prior to colonialism when Richard Burton averred that the African had ceased to grow and therefore remained mentally a child (Quoted in Fage. 1990: 12). It was further argued that of all races, the African race was not innovative and had not developed any civilization. What Trevor-Roper saw was ‘the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the world’ (Fage. 1990:12).

Walter Rodney was correct in observing that to be colonized is to be removed from history (Rodney. 1972: 246). To be removed from history is to be denied full identity as a human being. The rationale for an anthropological conception of Africans in colonialism was to vigorously assert the ahistoricity of the continent and reduce Africans into objects of curiosity and inquiry. It was to emphasize that Africa consisted of people whose movements were purposeless. History as conceptualized in the West entailed purposeful movements. Thus, anthropology contrasted the pre-colonial statism in Africa with the colonial dynamism of European modernity. There was no history in Africa prior to colonial conquest. The only history worthy of note in Africa was that of Europeans in the continent. At a broader disciplinary level, the dichotomy between disciplines and area studies mirrored the racial distinctions even better. As Mamdani demonstrates, “the disciplines studied the White experience as a universal, human experience; area studies the experience of people of colour as an ethnic experience” (Mamdani, 1998: 39).

History can therefore prudently be equated here to identity. The identity of Africans in colonial times was that of western modernity. Yet it has to be remembered that no African could attain the full scale of westernization in colonial times. Even Aimé Césaire or Frantz Fanon, after struggling to attain such a level of assimilation resigned to the reality of it - that assimilation could only go so far, but it could not assure one full accommodation in the ranks of the master race. Thus blacks could only aspire to become a poor copy of the master race but not masters themselves. What mattered to the colonizer was the loss of identity that this process initiated and entailed. The identity of the colonized was that of the dominated, the subject. Anthropology rationalized this domination by borrowing extensively from the German historicist philosophy through the pejorative analytical category of the ‘other’.

For example, it became common for anthropologists to conceptualize the Negro race as inherently inferior. Both its physical and mental traits, it was alleged, inhibited the black race from innovating and inventing. This approach was a precursor to numerous demeaning views held even by the ‘great’ founding fathers of America. It led to the whiting out of African history by western ideology to the extent that Africa was seen as having no civilization and achievements to boast of. African pride of cultural heritage was trampled upon when missionaries of ‘good will’ proclaimed its emancipation from barbarism by the Christian gospel. The gospel was nevertheless value-laden, ideologically designed to civilize by Christianizing the black race in Africa. Yet even colonialism was allegedly a civilizing mission, a view that is rampant in the analysis of some of our recent gurus of postmodernism. This coincidence, if it really was, proves that colonialism moved in tandem with Christianity. As Mudimbe (1989: 45) has argued:

The more carefully one studies the history of missions in Africa, the more difficult it becomes not to identify it with cultural propaganda, patriotic motivations, and commercial interests, since the missions program is indeed more complex than the simple transmission of the Christian faith.
The German historicist philosophy vested colonial anthropology with notions of racial superiority. This was a tradition to which both history and anthropology trace some link. In Herder, the notion of man divided into various races of mankind, each closely related to its geographical environment and having its original mental and physical characteristics molded by that environment is derived. Herder understood man as an individual and an end in himself (Collingwood, 1992: 89; Igers, 1968: 35). He saw in every race permanent characteristics that depended on its own inbred peculiarities. Given his teleological view of nature, he insisted that these immanent characteristics enabled certain races to develop to higher and higher forms. He saw Europe as a favoured centre from which historical life arose and that explained why he saw statism among humans of other races except in Europe.

Given Herder’s emphasis on special racial peculiarities determining human progress, he is credited with uplifting anthropology to a new status. Collingwood refers to him as the father of anthropology, meaning by that, the science which distinguishes various physical types of human beings and studies the manners and customs of these various types as expressions of psychological peculiarities going with physical ones (1992: 91). Thus to Herder, each human race was imbued with certain natural potentials for self-realization. ‘The purpose of our existence is to develop these incipient elements of humanity fully within us’ (Igers, 1968: 38). Anthropology has used this binary logic in relation to races of the world and has unsuccessfully tried to shed off this legacy, a reality that makes Guyer’s suggestion quoted above too much to ask for.

The emergence of anthropology in Britain took advantage of these racial dichotomies. Britain, from where anthropology arose in its colonial context borrowed aspects from sociology (Durkheim, Weber, Parsons and Comte), German historicist philosophy (Herder) and Marxism (Althusserian Structural Marxism). Anthropology was consequently nurtured in response to colonial demands. As we know it today, anthropology has a colonial conception and is imbued with notions of racial superiority, notions that inform the emotive content of Africa’s rejection of anthropology at independence and continued resistance to it in this age of adjustment. It is this racial aspect that was used as an ideology of justifying colonial incursions and raptures of other societies because values other than European ones were assumed to be of an inferior type. The age of adjustment has released similar threatening signs of imperial onslaught and siege. The attendant authoritarianism of the adjustment programs have made it possible to manipulate African societies in an attempt not only to seize African autonomy but also to erase its achievement of independence (see Zeleza. 1999: 46). This is hardly a good recipe for anyone to accept re-mainstreaming anthropology that easily.

### Race, Colonialism and Anthropology

The centrality of race to colonialism seems too evident to require extensive recapitulation. Given that colonialism was predicated mainly on economic necessity, the binary logic of superior and inferior human races was apt to prove the abuses of colonialism as worthy and justifiable. Race justified colonial exploitation on the basis of ideologies designed to serve a European ruling class and made gross human rights abuses into lessons of the enlightenment project. The notion of exploitation here captures the class relations of exploitation in capitalism. Colonial imperialism, it has been persuasively argued, was a product of capitalist needs. Race and class therefore found contemporaneity in capitalism and have been sustained by colonialism and neo-colonialism, respectively.

Race in itself has no relevance in political and class differences among population groups. It is however important to understand it in the context of the epoch that produced it. In the context of capitalism, race relations emerge first and foremost as relations of exploitation (Magubane. 1987: 6-7). That nature
of exploitation further necessitates ideologies that reduce part of humanity to ‘lesser breeds’ to justify exploitation. Biological determinism was one bourgeois ideology used to legitimate bourgeois overlordship over other races assumed to be intrinsically inferior. Such ideology has developed in history to become a self-propelling and uncontested fact (Lewontin, et. al. 1982). It was not until the American declaration of independence that the rule of law seemed to usher in new conceptions in race relations. But this was only as far as it could go, because yesterday’s champions of liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness in the US became today’s proponents of racial inequality and oppression. It is on this racial basis that Sierra Leone and Liberia were founded in West Africa.

In America, the needs of class exploitation justified racial differentiation. Slavery had ensured the creation of a black colony in the US. The internal colony theory has been used to examine the class exploitation in the US harping on racial differences. Indeed, as Eric Williams argues “slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery” (Williams. 1964: 7). In America, the founding fathers of the states had been vocal against European colonialism only to renege on the ideals of the American declaration of independence. Freedom and equality, to these founding fathers, did not include slaves. Thomas Jefferson believed that blacks and whites could not live together harmoniously. James Monroe on the other hand argued that ‘while this (black) class of people exist among us we can never count with certainty on its tranquil submission.’ Even Abraham Lincoln attributed physical differences to his racism, opining that these made it impossible for blacks and whites to live together on terms of social and political equality (Munene. 1995: 4-6). It is because of their double standards that the world witnessed the extermination of other races originally inhabiting the US. Is it any wonder that Claude Levi-Strauss was elated at the discovery of the Annual Reports of the Bureau of American ethnography that allegedly had all that was known and left about the American Indians? (Levi-Strauss. 1966: 124). Is it any wonder also that the work of the Bureau was taken over by the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. knowing what the history of this institute bears on the plight of the Third World Nations today. The institute was central to the formulation of Post-Fordist Reaganomics that came to define American neo-liberal thrusts into the Third World (Aseka. 1999:3).

Relations of exploitation were therefore underpinning the American edifice just as they were to be in the case of European colonialism in Africa. As Walter Rodney (1972: 155) has argued, it was economics that determined that Africa should be dominated, but it was racism that confirmed that the form of control should be direct colonial rule. In an age where such control was bound to be questioned and resisted, it was prudent for colonizers to develop ideologies that fitted in the times to placate the world about their interests. Such ideologies would cement colonialism as a civilizing mission and, therefore, valuable for Africa. The concept of civilization was therefore instrumental, drawing the line between the master race and the subordinate race. Rudyard Kipling saw the latter as the whiteman’s burden, giving it a colour line. Anthropology became instrumental in this respect of justifying the colonial system and giving Europeans respectability. It defined western colonialism as the engine of progress and justified the era as one of modernity.

The view that racism was central in colonial relations is widely accepted, but the place of anthropology in the colonial encounter has been contested. Talal Asad (quoted in Pels and Salemink. 1994: 1) tried to defend anthropology in the colonial encounter arguing that it was not the complicity of anthropologists with colonialism, but the location of anthropologists in the colonial context. He saw anthropology as a discipline developing within the colonial context but the anthropologist operated exclusive of colonialism’s hegemony and vagaries in Africa. There is evidence to the contrary and Talal Asad may be aware of it. It is true that anthropology was a child of colonial birth. It borrowed extensively from early political theory and sociology of Auguste Comte and relied heavily on European racial attitudes. Such attitudes were pregnant in imperial history that justified colonialism. Some
Anthropologists grew and were trained in imperial history that became an adversary of African history. The imperial attitudes and school of thinking were well represented in the informed personage of Dame Margery Perham who declared in 1951 that:

The dealings between tropical Africa and the West must be different. Here in place of the larger unities of Asia was the multi-cellular tissue of tribalism; instead of an ancient civilization, the largest area of primitive poverty enduring in the modern age. Until the very recent penetration by Europe the greater part of the continent was without the wheel... without writing and so without history (Vansina. 1944: 40).

Anthropologists borrowed extensively from the likes of Perham, taking the notion of tribe and primitive as given and equating the two as synonymous. Anthropologists also accepted the dichotomy between traditional and modern ages representing tribal Africa of pre-European age and colonial Africa, respectively. Tribal Africa was also equated to static or purposeless movements while colonial Africa was dynamic and full of progress. The static era was devoid of social history and therefore reserved for anthropology while the colonial age was the engine of progress and therefore qualified for history. The latter constituted the history of Europeans in Africa. Africans entered such history only when they were detribalized. Yet the rule of law could not be equally applied to whites and blacks because at best the latter could only aspire to become ‘detribalized natives’. In the process of such conceptualization, anthropology constituted the anti-thesis of and therefore a fight against history because its indices of measuring change were faulty (Magubane. 1971) just like the concept of tribe was meaningless (Mafeje. 1971; p’Bitek. 1972).

What further cemented the historicist tendencies in anthropology was its positivist fixation on writing. This fixation was great among the ethnographers employed in the early colonial institutes charged with the study of Africa. Many ethnographers equated tribe with primitive and the yardstick for primitivity was a non-literate person. Writing became an important criterion for ethnographers (Hsu. 1964). Institutes like the Royal African Society in London and Société des Africanistes in Paris were full of ethnographers who, according to Vansina, remained a bulwark of colonial attitudes. They maintained alongside Leopold Von Ranke that ‘What was not in the documents has not lived’ (Vansina. 1994: 43). They were at one with A. P. Newton that history only begins when men take to writing. Oral information was the stuff of ethnographers and tribes were an exotic warehouse for anthropologists (Vansina. 1994: 43).

It is apparent that anthropology borrowed heavily from imperial attitudes and worked to cement these attitudes as true and valid intellectual background. Many scholars have attested to the fact that anthropology was the ‘handmaiden of colonialism’. Kathleen Gough, for instance, dubbed anthropology as the child of Western imperialism (1968: 403), while Gjessing went further noting that anthropology had been responsive to imperial demands (1968). There is evidence that many early anthropologists hoped to be of benefit to the colonial system. Members of the Royal Anthropological Society under Daryll Forde persuaded the colonial government that anthropology could be of help to the colonial state (Mafeje. 1996: 8). Some colonial administrators in Africa did in fact double up as ethnographers. What is telling is that in colonial times, almost all African societies had anthropologists posted among them and not historians, economists or other social scientists. This evidence renders it extremely difficult to agree with Talal Asad that anthropologists did not comply with colonialism. It would require hypnosis to determine who did or did not act in complicity. And even the attempt to historically contextualise the experience of anthropology then as a means of understanding them does not negate the fact of their complicity (see Pels and Salemink. 1994). The fact of this complicity delayed the
emergence of African history until the post-war era. If today it is realized that all scientific disciplines have taken on such complicity and anthropology has consequently lost its colonial preserve, this makes matters worse, not better. But the argument that all social scientific work serves interests (Guyer, 1998: 21) needs to be qualified because some of these interests are geared towards the emancipation of the majority African masses put down by age-old exploitation and condescending discourses.

African Studies and Anthropology

The post-war era witnessed several new developments that ushered new challenges to anthropology. One was the rising interest in African studies and history in particular. Academic interest in history began due to the rise of African nationalism and the growing civil unrest in the US. All these fed on the new forces of the Cold War. In 1948, African history in academia was formally accepted in Britain. This was the same year that Kenneth O. Dike, a Nigerian, began to gather oral traditions as evidence for his doctorate. By the end of the 1950s, Basil Davidson had published a book on Africa while Ghana had acquired independence. In the US, Melville Herskovits had established the African Studies Centre that was to inspire more research on Africa. He has since come to be the acclaimed father of African Studies.

It must be emphasized that these developments were indeed valuable in the emergence of African history. The founding fathers of African Studies and history in particular had to depart from the orthodoxy of Eurocentricism and imperial history evident in previous anthropological practice. Many of them did this with courage and against numerous odds. But the full gamut of these developments will not receive enough justice if we fail to examine some shortfalls in them that perpetuated imperial attitudes and a lop-sided view of Africa. Thus, while anthropology may have received setbacks in Africa, with the rise of African Studies the new developments did not fully question colonialism, racism and imperial attitudes in scholarship. In large measure, African studies adopted or transfused anthropological attitudes into African history. Founders of African history therefore failed to thoroughly question colonialism. Some even insisted on viewing colonialism as an agent of progress.

The phenomenon of racism also still dominated the new developments in African Studies. These began with the whiting out of the study of Africa before the advent of the white Africanist. These studies of Africa before the Africanist could be traced back to Carter G. Woodson’s initiatives with his Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in 1915 followed by the founding of the Journal of Negro Studies in 1916 (West and Martin, 1977: 310-311). The works of W.E.B. Du Bois were indeed a milestone in African history before the rise of Herskovits, for instance. These scholars had not only concentrated on Africans in the diaspora but beyond and had insisted on transnational and transcontinental scholarship (Ibid). They avoided categories of sub-Saharan Africa or area studies that came to characterize Africanist scholarship. It is a great lie to trace the academic study of Africa to 1948 with the founding of the African Studies Center at Northwestern University in the USA.

It may therefore be instructive to note that the role of Herskovits in the rise of African history in the US had a lot to do with the gradual disappearance of African-American initiatives in the study of African history before the Africanists. Complicity with the powers that be in the US has been revealed given that he boasted of having supported the white dominated African Studies Association to get CIA funds as opposed to W.E.B. Du Bois ‘negro-hile’ Encyclopedia Africana project (West and Martin, 1997: 313). In Britain, on the other hand, Roland Oliver’s initiatives bore fruits but dichotomized Africa into meaningless categories. Racist attitudes did not peter out from this new development in African history. The accusation of complicity leveled at colonial anthropologists could as well extend to both American and English founders of African history some of whom have not altogether abandoned
these racist approaches. Recently, revelations about academic racism were leveled against no lesser person than Professor [Andrew] Roberts of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London (see *New African*, No 382 of February 2000). The question that remains unresolved in the new attempt to reassert anthropology in Africa has to do with perspectives in African studies that are tainted with racist and imperial attitudes.

At the time when most of Africa got independence, the question of perspectives in African studies was central. At the First International Congress of Africanists held in Accra, Ghana in 1964, K.O. Dike hoped that that would initiate a new era ‘when African studies will become progressively the concern of African scholars.’ The discipline of anthropology was not spared either at this conference. Kwame Nkrumah vouched for sociology as a replacement to anthropology given the latter’s denigrating perspectives. Nkrumah put it mildly because several years after, Okot P’Bitek asserted that anthropology should be expelled from all African universities given that its colonial role was over (p’Bitek. 1972: 6). Today, it is apparent that African scholars and enlightened Africans dislike anthropology (Mafeje. 1996). Is there room, as Bunn has vouched, for anthropology in Africa? Can it be a valuable companion or replacement for African history?

### Postcoloniality and the Disciplines in Africa

It must be remembered that Mwanzi (1972) gave anthropology only one option: that is, becoming history. Other than that, he thought that anthropology should fold up its tools. Mafeje is in agreement with him because to him, anthropology is faced with an eminent circumstance of atrophy (Mafeje. 1996). Mafeje insists that African anthropologists are comfortably making valuable contributions outside the discipline and do not therefore need the umbrella of anthropology. Counteracting suggestions by Kwesi Prah that African anthropology should be defined as their new terrain, Mafeje posits that Western anthropologists have already seized the initiative and are already talking on behalf of the ‘noble savage’. They are the anthropologists who are inventing this new framework of historical anthropology to respond to accusations against classical anthropology. Mafeje prefers to call it social history thereby questioning the difference between the two disciplines. What is provoking about historical anthropology is its basis derived from postmodernism and poststructuralism. The text that began this approach seems to have been Dell Hyme’s *Reinventing Anthropology* (1974) and later carried on by J. Clifford and G. Marcus, *Writing Culture, The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Jean and John Comaroff seem to be perfecting this approach in their *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (1992).

The genealogy of studies within this tradition of historical anthropology is long tracing its inspiration to postmodernist interest in symbols and signs as instructive elements of understanding local histories. Thus Terence Ranger’s works on *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa* and his ‘Invention of Tradition’ have played a central role (Hamilton. n.d.: 2). Subsequent to these were studies in historical anthropology initiated in David W. Cohen’s tradition during his tenure at the Program of African Studies at Northwestern University in which this approach was assiduously promoted (Vansina. 1994: 218). The works of John and Jean Comaroff’s received this boost during the early nineties when David W. Cohen used his position to promote this postmodernisation of history. The Kenyan born historian Atieno-Odhiambo was to land under the spell of historical anthropology when together with Cohen, they produced their book *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape* (1989). Recently, the British Africanist John Lonsdale (1992: 304) has confessed to being influenced by Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo.

It is clear that this postmodernisation of history has implied a number of effects on the discipline. First, there is the assertion of tentativity of knowledge, the impossibility of knowing anything to be
true and therefore the need to recognize that the everyday human acts mirror a myriad of intentions and identities that form aspects worthy of study in their singular, peculiar manifestation. This means that the past is dotted with multiple identities and meanings and can only be reconstructed to the extent to which we recognize its varied meaning and manifestation to different people. Ideology and power relations are thereby invoked to reduce texts to narrative that is value-laden. The past does not exist and what comes from texts has the in-built interest of its authors. Thus the various signs and symbols inherent in texts have to be deconstructed. Deconstruction is a Derridian influence in literary criticism. It is in this uncertainty and anarchy of postmodernism that history as a discipline cannot stand on its own. Thus, slowly, the initiative has moved from the British anthropological hostility to history to the American mutilation of the historical method by associating history with anthropology. Cold War and post-Cold War transition have afforded these bold thrusts by America given its new unchallenged hegemony over the world.

Postcolonial theory is at the heart of these American thrusts. Postcolonial theory, other than being a progeny of postmodernism and poststructuralism (Zeleza. 1997: 15) is heavily Afropessimist. The aim is to paint a picture of a continent that cannot survive on its own, a continent in which famine, chaos and anarchy reign forever. Afropessimism is a selective approach that blinds the world of the complete historical reality of Africa (Bourenane. 1992). Issues on Africa are therefore imagined, conjured up and narrated out of context. Many of the realities of Africa are also denied because postmodernism and poststructuralism have inhered postcoloniality with Arendtian narratives from which meaning is derived. Postmodernism does not believe in truth and so there can be no history but histories. Histories are not merely derived from reading evidence, but by subjecting speech and language to literary criticism through textual analysis. Words, it is argued, have a multiplicity of meanings and so language has to be deconstructed as texts are decentred to reveal their multiple meanings. Eventually, there is no one reality. Rather every historical reality is examined either as a metaphor (like Atieno-Odhiambo’s invention of Kenya, which has been assembled together and arranged around the metaphor of struggle) or through allegory. It is unbelievable that Atieno-Odhiambo doubts the reality of the struggle in Kenya by referring to it as a metaphor (1995: 2)

If the post-isms mentioned above share a lack of faith in historical evidence, what history can there be for Africa? Africa is particularly at issue because the old debate on the relevance and veracity of oral traditions is again being awakened. Using Derrida’s deconstructionist approach and Foucaults relativists discourse, the gist of oral information, post-isms argue, cannot be relied on to yield truths about a society. In fact these theories do not appreciate the subject in question but rather the context and speech. In consequence the researcher can only gain by realizing that these truths are relative in one’s narrative and this is laid manifest when they are deconstructed. In postmodernism and poststructuralism, the standard analytical procedure for analysis is literary criticism.

But these post-isms are as unhistorical as they are anthropological. The dividing line between the two is made clear by the fact that history does not occur in plural. Past events happened only in a particular way but it is our reconstruction of them that differs. We cannot therefore talk about histories as Jenkins (1991: 111) does. Rather we can talk about historical perspectives in which case we shall have recognized that discourses are full of ideology. To talk of histories is only feasible if we cease to be historians and look at history from outside the discipline. Because as it has been observed, every discipline is best constituted by what it forbids its practitioners to do, to talk about historical anthropology is not only a travesty but also a negation of the historical method and lore.

Take the example of Ethnography and the Historical Imagination in which the authors boldly argue that ‘historical anthropology is anti-empiricist, anti-objectivist, anti-essentialist’. This constitutes ‘a total rejection/half-embrace mode of conceptualization which does not fit in any frame of historical
analysis' (Mafeje. 1966: 16). Also, the book shares the post-colonial rejection of universal forms of understanding the past thereby seeming to endorse Jenkins histories. The authors, John and Jean Comaroffs have no good sense of disciplinary discipline when talking about historical imagination, whatever that means. Their concept of historical imagination seems derived from Hannah Arendt who in *The Human Condition* also talks of historical imagination. She dismissed the positivist paradigms because they led to ahistorical modes of thinking. To her, not everything is unprecedented and the basic principle of political modernity is narrative or story telling. Hers was Nietzschian inspired epistemology, which believed in fragmentary social reality. From evidence must be recreated a new concept, a new narrative and a new perspective. As Mafeje notes, the Comaroff's neo-modernist approach leaves the book open to confusion because 'it seems to reject everything but at the same time it embraces everything ultimately' (1996:15).

History as a discipline proceeds by the interpretation of evidence. The concept of evidence has been broadened beyond Collingwood’s (1946: 10) insistence on documents. The term history refers to different things that have a unity that is paramount to the historian. History may perspectively refer to the whole span of the human past. It may also refer to the discipline. Lastly, history may refer to what historians do to reconstruct that past. The triunilateral unity in this is evidenced in the fact that as an academic discipline, history depends on the historian to reconstruct that past of the human community. It proceeds by the interaction of the historian with his evidence. Perspectives emerge in this process and do not negate the fact that the past occurred in a particular way and was real. And when one perspective differs from another, that does not fragment, decentre or negate the fact of that singular past. That past is real and not tentative. It is precisely because of the different perspectives that history as a discipline is enriched. Without them, the essence of history would be diminished.

Historical anthropology and anthropology do not share these dimensions of history. Unlike historical anthropology, history cannot afford to be anti-empiricist. It cannot also afford to be anti-foundational the way some architects of subaltern studies are. History cannot also afford to be anti-theoretical because historical narrative and historical explanation meet in praxis. Narrative is just but one aspect of oral tradition as Vansina demonstrated (1985). In historical analysis, praxis is still a very important criterion. We have therefore to realize that literary criticism is not central to historical reconstruction, but rather historical explanation is the basis of historical reconstruction. Why accord literary criticism priority when history as a discipline has levels of analysis that are refined in historical explanation? In any case, one wonders along with Mafeje (1996: 16) what would distinguish historical anthropology from social history?

In historical explanation, unlike in historical anthropology, change over time is central. In historical anthropology, different forms of an event are confused with change over time. Yet forms do totally change without examining minute instances of transformation and accounting for them. The former approach yields static snapshots of events while the latter isolates human actions and analyses their purposeful movements over time seeking to explain their actions and choices against other options. This is why history cannot be left to allegory, metaphor or even imagination per se. History is totally real and that small aspect of its imagined past is captured historically when we pose questions on why people did one thing as opposed to the other options available. The problem with postcolonial theory is that it puts imagination before reality yet reality always comes before imagination in historical reconstruction.

Given these parameters of operation, it remains to be explained why anthropology is being vouched for in Africa in these postcolonial approaches. This is especially so in the case of scholars who think that anthropology has something to offer Africa now when it has all along failed to offer the same for the last century. Africans should be understood for questioning why anthropology is thought valuable now when its value for the most part of the past century has been restricted to denigrating and
manipulating Africans. One cannot fail to note an ideologically hegemonic agenda in this especially given that this move is anti-historical, non-disciplinary, politically strategic (after the cold war) and economically motivated (during the Structural Adjustment era).

Afropessimism and postcoloniality thrive on glossing over and mutilating historical reality. The relationship between postcolonial theory and Afropessimism is its attempt to gloss over colonialism as a cause of many of contemporary African challenges. Borrowing from poststructuralism, postcoloniality looks at colonialism as an agent of progress. It postures colonialism as a valuable period in African history in which African labour was put to productive use and justifies the outcome by arguing that without colonialism, Africa "wouldn't even have had the little development it had" (New African, No. 382, February 2000: 38). Indeed, the scholars using this approach like Achille Mbembe have lauded colonial right to punish as being aimed at profits and productivity and the creation of useful individuals while the primary objective of the right to punish in the postcolony is not to create useful individuals or to increase their productive efficiency (Mbembe. 1992: 18-19). Does this validate colonial exploitation? Is it any excuse or explanation for colonial collective misdemeanor and felonies? Such an approach is as postmodernist as it is Afropessimist and lacks any emancipatory thrust.

On the whole, the ideological value of this Afropessismist argument is to vouch for recolonization given the alleged African failure to manage her independence. It is this state of affairs that justified recolonization while avoiding colonial vagaries as the context should provide (Aseka and Murunga. 1997: 13). Social scientists are relevant in this context to provide ideological grounds for propaganda. History has always had an emancipative value to society (Kaye. 1995). But implicit in African studies have been imperial attitudes. Africanist scholarship has perpetuated anthropological perjury in the neo-colonial context. African scholarship and African history have been the most ardent critics. Anthropology or historical anthropology is designed to make an ideological point in the interest of contemporary western hegemony. It should be noted that however disguised postcolonial theory is packaged, it is repeatedly hoisted by its own poststructuralist petard (Milner. 1994: 102).

Conclusion

David Bunn's (1994: 33) conclusion that 'African history seems trapped by its own fear of difficulty' is in fact a misreading of the situation. Most Africanists have made similar mistakes, conveniently or otherwise. What is evident is that African historians are in touch with the recent pastiche that passes for theory in the West. But they have consciously chosen to neglect it because it is steeped in the postmodernist pursuit of affluence, a leisure that Africans cannot afford going by the figures on poverty in Africa churned out by western organizations. African history is conscious of its role and value in society, and African historians are putting perspectives, perceptions and flawed conceptions right. African historians have little time for eclecticism, but rather are pursuing knowledge that is integrationist and syncretic. Unlike Bunn, we see more rigour and difficulty in integrationist than eclectic approaches. As Marvin Harris argued (Quoted in Prah. 1990: 122):

Eclecticism... is often little more than euphemism for confusion,... the bankruptcy of creative thought, and the cloak of mediocrity.

It might therefore be that postmodernist eclecticism has a sound message for Euro-American scholarship; that it is trapped by its own fear of difficulty and historical anthropology represents a further slide into the abyss of this fear. Historicising anthropology and anthropologizing history is a move that is far removed from historical analysis and explanation. The future of history does not lie in such intellectual prostitution and gymnastics.
References


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