

BOOK REVIEWS AND CRITICAL ESSAYS

MWENDA NTARANGWI, DAVID MILLS AND MUSTAFA BABIKER (eds). *African Anthropologies: History, Critique and Practice*. Dakar: Codesria, 2006. Pp. 274. ISBN: 978-1-84277-763-3.

Adam Kuper's book *Anthropology and Anthropologists*, first published in 1973, was one of the earliest histories of academic anthropology that directly addressed the discipline's painful relationship with colonialism. The chapter in Kuper's book dedicated to this topic begins with a quotation from Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, who describes a painting he had seen in the waiting room of Kwame Nkrumah, the first post-colonial leader of the West African nation of Ghana (Kuper 1983 [1973], 99). The painting portrayed Nkrumah himself breaking free from the shackles of colonialism in the midst of thunder and lightning. The background features three tiny European figures running away: a priest, a capitalist and an anthropologist. This image corresponds to an idea, supposedly widely shared by African and Western leftist intellectuals in the 1960s and 70s, about anthropology as the 'handmaiden' of colonialism. Accordingly, much ink (and some paint) has been spilled over the question of anthropology's involvement in the colonial project. Yet very little has been said about the status of anthropology in post-colonial African societies. After all, the Europeans might have run away, but anthropology, just like Christianity and capitalism, did stay. For instance, K. A. Busia, who was the leader of the political opposition against Nkrumah, held a Ph.D. in anthropology from Oxford and a chair in sociology at the University of Ghana (a fact that offers potential for an intriguing re-interpretation of Nkrumah's painting!). Does a 'neo-colonial' relationship exist between the anthropological communities of Africa and the West? What kind of future does anthropology have in twenty-first century Africa, where securing a livelihood as an anthropologist depends to a greater extent on short consultancies commissioned by NGOs and development aid donor organizations? These are questions that the authors address in this edited volume of thirteen essays titled *African Anthropologies*.

The book is a collaborative effort between African and Western anthropologists and roughly half the writers were affiliated with African research institutions at the time of publication. Some of the contributors, most prominently Johannes Fabian, are already widely known for their critical, political approaches to the history of anthropology. The essays vary a great deal in length and style. The book includes argumentative academic articles, historical overviews, autobiographical accounts and short vignettes. This mixture seems justified, as one of the main goals of the project has been to illustrate a diversity of research traditions on the continent. Furthermore, because of its versatility, it is difficult to give a good assessment on the consistency of the volume and I think it is more important to note that the book works as a whole.

The work consists of three sections that reflect the three themes that are also mentioned in the subtitle: history, critique and practice. These themes are briefly introduced in the Preface, while the actual Introduction, written by the editors, provides the reader with a historical background and a picture of the institutional setting in which anthropology is

practiced in contemporary Africa. The first, historic section of the book includes essays varying in focus from individual researchers (e.g. David Mills' piece on Audrey Richards) to national traditions (e.g. Alula Parkhurst's overview of Ethiopian anthropology). The second part, concentrating on critique, offers discussions about topics commonly avoided by anthropologists (e.g. Robert Launay's discussion about Islam in West Africa) and reconsiderations of certain established epistemological categories and discourses (e.g. Mustafa Babiker's essay on the problems of studying pastoralist societies). The third section of the book deals with the experiences of teaching anthropology in African institutions (e.g. Mwenda Ntrangwi's reflections on teaching American exchange students) and the questions arising when one is researching his/her own society (e.g. W. Onyango-Ouma's thoughts about fieldwork 'at home').

The strongest feature of the book is the way it seeks to critically discuss certain Eurocentric divisions within the discipline. According to the editors, one of the book's key tenets is that "the pure/applied dichotomy (...) is an unhelpful way of categorizing the discipline, particularly in the African context" (p. 2). Here the term "pure anthropology" refers to theoretical work which takes place in the academic sector and is conventionally seen as different from the "applied" social research conducted by anthropologists employed by governments, development organizations and the like. This dichotomy also implies an order of precedence: the pure has an originative or core status, from which the applied is derived and depends upon. The editors point out that this picture does not match the realities of present-day Africa. On the contrary, anthropologists find themselves "straddling two worlds – that of consultancy for purposes of accessing research funds while offering much-needed anthropological knowledge, and that of the academy for purposes of producing anthropological knowledge and training students" (p. 3). Therefore, it would be impossible to tell which precedes which.

The rigid separation between academic and applied anthropology has been frequently questioned. Although the African context differs from the Western one, it also bears similarities in the manner anthropologists working in European and North American universities are repeatedly told to 'market' their knowledge and skills. So, has anything new actually been said? To my mind, yes. The book manages to give these familiar questions a new edge by showing how the pure/applied dichotomy relates to a distinction between African anthropology and Africanist anthropology. The former references Africans, mostly based on the continent, who study their own societies and cultures, while the latter refers to Western scholars, who have specialized in Africa but hold no ties or commitments to it outside anthropology. African and Africanist researchers are connected through disciplinary networks, but in an imbalanced way. In fact, it is argued that a legacy of colonialism lives on in the continued divide between these two communities. African scholars mainly carry out empirical research in the field, while Africanists are more involved in theorizing: the making of "pure anthropology". As a result of this division of labour, the theories in Africanist anthropology still tend to address questions arising from Western discourses, which might not be interesting or meaningful to the African scholars. Consequently, the theories are not 'applicable' to those African anthropologists who are in need of tools to analyze the real-life concerns of their own societies. Here, one is tempted to draw an analogy between knowledge production and neo-colonial economic relations, where a developing country produces raw materials (in this case research data) that are exported to the West and processed

into commodities (theories) for markets that satisfy Western consumers (academia). Of course, this division does not need to exist and the first step proposed in the book to mend it would be that the Western anthropologists should truly recognize the African anthropologists as their scholarly equals. This is yet to materialize and in many ways anthropology remains a Western project.

Primarily, *African Anthropologies* can be read as an alternative, or rather a counterpart, history of what took place when the dust had settled on the heated debates about the discipline's complicity in colonial rule. We are already familiar with story of the 'patricide' committed by young radicals in the West some decades ago, when they exposed their predecessors' relationship with colonialism. We also know that some of those same radicals have now gained statuses and positions similar to those of their predecessors. However, we have known far less about how a discipline burdened by its past managed to get a footing in post-colonial Africa and create its relationship with the former colonial metropolises. In this sense, the book is not only a project of the social and/or political history of anthropology in Africa, but more ambitiously, it is also a sketch of the global history of anthropology.

REFERENCES

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