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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 have published the first few responses in the current issue. We will conclude this discussion with several more contributions in the next issue.

On Gaining Access: A Response to Francis Nyamnjoh's "Blinded by Sight: Divining the Future of Anthropology in Africa"

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In his essay "Blinded by Sight: Divining the Future of Anthropology in Africa", Francis Nyamnjoh (2012b) uses the well-known story of the elephant and the blind men as a useful metaphor for exploring, revealing and critiquing the ways in which anthropology has been conducted in African (and especially South African) universities.¹ In so doing, he strongly challenges not only the

1 Of course, as with most metaphors, Nyamnjoh's use of "elephants" to denote anthropology's unit of study has its limitations, especially considering that anthropologists nowadays "study processes, effects, relationships, connections [and] fractures but as a general rule, no longer people or even 'a people'" (Fiona Ross, comments on an ear-

existing epistemologies, power dynamics and hierarchies he sees prevailing within the constructed “anthropology tribe” (68-71) but also the resultant subtle exclusions, of both subject matter and those not deemed to belong fully to the “tribe”. “Blinded by Sight” builds on a similarly heartfelt and strong critique of the ways in which education in postcolonial Africa has continued to rely on “highly mobile dominant colonial epistemology” and on what he sees as the “real or attempted epistemicide” of the “popular endogenous epistemologies of Africa” (Nyamnjoh 2012a: 129-130). Nyamnjoh’s critique of (South) African anthropology throws down the gauntlet before a discipline that not only has been widely seen as a “handmaiden of colonialism” (75) but still, in his view, exhibits the structural characteristics of its white colonial past, notwithstanding the many white, liberal anthropologists whose political-economy studies sought to reveal the injustices of Apartheid and colonialism.

Apart from being both stimulating and engaging, “Blinded by Sight” is challenging and provocative, as Nyamnjoh seeks to haul out into the light potentially divisive issues that are difficult to deal with and discuss as we try to decode the future of anthropology in Africa. Indeed, Professor Charles Piot, a visiting Mellon Scholar at the University of Cape Town, referred to the paper as “the elephant in the room” in his closing comments at the 2012 conference of Anthropology Southern Africa, whose theme was “Anthropological Futures”.² It is not surprising that those present were reluctant to broach this topic since – if the more provocative aspects of Nyamnjoh’s essay are to be taken seriously – it might appear, to paraphrase Tom Stoppard, that the skeletons in the cupboard are coming home to roost.³

While the essay’s title suggests that his argument applies to a broader African anthropology, Nyamnjoh (2012b) is largely addressing structural problems that he feels still exist within South African anthropology. This is no doubt important, given that South African universities are often seen as the pinnacle of higher learning, at least in Anglophone southern Africa, if not beyond. While I suspect that Nyamnjoh may be playing devil’s advocate when he writes of the various ways in which he feels excluded from full membership of the “anthropology tribe” (how excluded can a professor of anthropology and head of its section at Africa’s leading university really feel?), it is clear that

lier draft of this review). Furthermore, the metaphor of the “elephant” could also suggest an organic and bounded whole, which is at odds with anthropology’s current understanding of dynamic and fluid social formations. For the purposes of this review I will, however, work with (and extend) Nyamnjoh’s metaphor, albeit with these limitations in mind.

2 Held at the University of Cape Town, 31 August – 3 September 2012.

3 Stoppard, Tom (1968), *The Real Inspector Hound*, script downloaded from: <www.scribd.com/doc/92063145/The-Real-Inspector-Hound-Full-Text> (25 October 2012).

some other non-white anthropologists share some of his concerns (72). “Black and coloured” anthropologists, he argues, are “almost invariably perceived as more ‘native’ or as ‘the Other’ – the very stuff that makes anthropology possible – and therefore cannot claim to practise anthropology” (74). They get lumped in with the other “black elephants” whom white anthropologists have made *their* business to study. Equally, Nyamnjoh argues, white South African anthropologists have overwhelmingly refused to “study up”, largely ignoring privileged fellow whites – whom Nyamnjoh stops short of calling “white elephants” – in their ethnographic focus (70).⁴

Thus accused, many white anthropologists past and present might argue – to good effect – that prevailing political-economic circumstances led them to focus more urgently on the *effects* of whiteness and ideologies of white power than on specific “groups” of white people *per se*. Many from the English-medium universities might also point to the important work they were doing in opposing and debunking the insidious *volkekunde* anthropology that fed directly into the Apartheid state’s racist project of “separate development” (see Sharp 1981). This is something Nyamnjoh could have given his colleagues more credit for. I do, however, think that white anthropologists may have at times been reluctant to study the lives of privileged fellow whites, from whom they have often tried to distance themselves. But, as comments by American anthropologist David M. Hughes (2010: xvi) demonstrate, Northern anthropologists have sometimes made even more effort to distance themselves from white Africans than their local counterparts have. Indeed, white Africans, those “orphans of the empire” (Alexander 2004), have often been viewed in similar terms to proverbial white elephants: an unwanted reminder of past mistakes, even if once they were seen as valuable.

Another thing that cannot be ignored is that things *are* changing in South African anthropology. Even if Nyamnjoh’s observations about the white “notables and royalty” (74) of the “anthropology tribe” are accepted as fair criticism (and some would say they are not), the implication is that all white anthropologists are guilty by association. Much has changed since I first registered in the anthropology department at Rhodes University in 1998, which then had a staff made up largely of white men age 50 and older. Today, the department is staffed mainly by younger, female anthropologists, not all of them white. The older generation of white anthropologists certainly played a large role in recruiting and training the younger, more representative, generation. These young anthropologists are actively exploring ways to make the discipline more inclusive and relevant to black students, in

4 He acknowledges, though, that some have studied non-English-speaking whites or “poor whites”, but contends that this is still indicative of a tendency to “study down” (70).

part by searching for endogenous material and methods for their courses rather than relying on the classical approaches and materials of the past (see Barbali 2012). I also noticed that there are many more young black and coloured anthropology students and lecturers attending the Anthropology Southern Africa conference than when I first attended in 2001.

I would also add that it is not only white anthropologists who have sometimes failed to recognise their black colleagues, since some black anthropologists have faced similar difficulties in acceptance from the various people whose dynamics they have tried to study. My friend Alister Munthali went back to his home village in northern Malawi to conduct research for his Ph.D. on childhood illness a few years ago. But he faced huge difficulties persuading the people that he was actually there to do anthropological research (Munthali 2001). “No”, they told him, “why would anybody come back here and sit under trees talking to people? You must have been fired from your job.” Others thought he had committed a crime in the city and had returned to hide from the police in his rural home.

Turning to the future of anthropology, I’d like to pick up on a fascinating character from Nyamnjoh’s metaphor that was not elaborated upon further in his essay: the merchant. The merchant surely represents the gatekeepers whom anthropologists often need to facilitate their entry into the field.⁵ While gatekeepers have always been important, it appears to me that the rapid changes in Africa, brought about or enhanced by globalisation, have thrown up new and often more complicated types of gatekeepers. Anthropologists will need to negotiate these very carefully and sensibly if they wish to maintain control over the practical and ethical aspects of their work. While in the past, government agencies were key gatekeepers, and the rules of engagement with them were arguably more easily knowable, new gatekeepers, including international NGOs, funders, big-business interests, faith-based groups, even militias and gangs in some cases, are on the rise. The rules of engagement with these might be highly varied, unwritten, changeable, extralegal and contradictory. Harrell-Bond and Voutira (2007) argue that in fields such as refugee studies, gatekeepers are becoming more and more restrictive, to the point of often denying researchers access to the populations under their control. Furthermore, as China becomes an increasingly powerful presence on the African continent, anthropologists will have to get used to dealing with gatekeepers who operate within rights discourses and in ways that might clash with the Western epistemologies and discourses that anthropology still largely fits into.

5 While he does not discuss gatekeepers in “Blinded by Sight”, Nyamnjoh does discuss some kinds of gatekeepers in another work (2012a: 145).

It is important to note that the merchant in Nyamnjoh's version of the story (64) is both sighted (and therefore possesses a powerful gaze which he can train on both the elephant and the blind men) and associated with money. Thus, powerful gatekeepers might lead unsuspecting anthropologists to whichever end of the "elephant" they wish them to explore (both in terms of which informants they wish them to engage with and what particular issues they deem important), and not entertain questions from them about the other parts of the beast. If they complain, the merchant might just buy them off, if not bump them off.⁶ NGOs, for example, which might be needed in order to access certain groups of interlocutors, might not be happy if anthropologists start highlighting issues or coming to conclusions that are at odds with the often powerful rhetoric they employ about those who fall within their ambit. Of course, these ethical challenges are already present, but as James Ferguson (2006) points out in his book about Africa in the neoliberal world order, large NGOs, multinational companies and others are increasingly carving out enclaves for themselves in which they can exercise sovereign power over any "inconvenient" anthropologists if need be.

I thus think we should be very aware of these pitfalls as we look blindly into the future. We need to choose and work with our "merchants" carefully so as to avoid or mitigate whatever dangers, biases or ethical problems our association with them might bring. Something else to note is that the image of the elephant suggests a unified whole, but in reality the left front foot may not agree with what the right hind foot is doing. This we must bear in mind as we consider the processual co-production with our interlocutors that Nyamnjoh rightly calls for. There are often factions or interest groups whose interests clash, and we need to be careful about how we manage this when we choose to co-produce. If we blindly align ourselves with a powerful faction, we may still be excluding less obvious interests or causing conflict that could be avoided.

To conclude, "Blinded by Sight" raises and reiterates some very important points and questions, which African anthropologists must continue to debate robustly. For the outcomes of a healthy debate will act as crucial divining bones that will help us not to predict the future, but to be better able to recognise what actions to take today to ensure a positive future for ourselves and our discipline. Long may the debate continue.⁷

6 An acquaintance of mine who was working as a translator for a Russian mining company in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was informed somewhat ominously: "If any of this information is leaked, we will deal with you in the Russian way." Needless to say, he did not hang around to find out what this might imply.

7 An early version of this review was first presented at the "Tuesday Seminar" of the Anthropology Section, School of African and Gender Studies, Anthropology and

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