*Africa* 71 (1), 2001

REVIEW ARTICLE

# AFRICA AND THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

*Alan Barnard*

AHMED AL-SHAHI and JEREMY COOTE (eds), *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 28, 1 (1997), special issue in memory of Godfrey Lienhardt. Oxford: Anthropological Society of Oxford, 1997, 141 pp., £8.50 (US$17.00), ISSN 0044 8370.

JACK GOODY, *The Expansive Moment: anthropology in Britain and Africa, 1918–70*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 242 pp., £37.50, ISBN 0 521 45048 9 (hard covers), £13.95, ISBN 0 521 45666 5 (paperback).

ALMA GOTTLIEB and PHILIP GRAHAM, *Parallel Worlds: an anthropologist and a writer encounter Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 345 pp., US$17.00, ISBN 0 226 30506 6 (paperback).

JOY HENDRY, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology: other people's worlds*. London: Macmillan, 1999, 263 pp., £42.50, ISBN 0 333 74471 3 (hard covers), £13.99, ISBN 0 333 74472 1 (paperback).

ADAM KUPER, *Among the Anthropologists: history and context in anthropology*. London and New Brunswick NJ: Athlone Press, 1999, 224 pp., £45.00, ISBN 0 485 11536 0.

IOAN M. LEWIS, *Arguments with Ethnography: comparative approaches to history, politics and religion*. LSE monographs on Social Anthropology 70. London and New Brunswick NJ: Athlone Press, 1999, 184 pp., £45.00, ISBN 0 485 19570 4.

The books chosen for this review article show us less where the anthropology of Africa is going than where it has been. That is not to say that these are dead texts. On the contrary, the historical emphasis, especially of the British Africanist texts, traces the personal involvement of anthropologists in African experience over many decades. It is a proud history, if not without its sour moments, and it is a history to which most of the authors have made a positive and significant contribution. With that in mind, let us look first at where anthropology has been and at the end where it may be going.

---

ALAN BARNARD is Reader in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. He has done research among Khoisan populations in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, and is the author of *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa* (1992) and *History and Theory in Anthropology* (2000).

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2001.71.1.162 Published online by Cambridge University Press

## A TEXTBOOK AFRICA

Hendry's introduction is not specifically about Africa, but it is worth a look as an illustration of an anthropology, and in passing also an Africa, portrayed to first-year anthropology students. Hendry makes reference to the Ju/'hoansi or !Kung (on subsistence), the Ndembu (initiation), the Nandi (age grades), the Maasai (initiation and age grades), the Barotse and Tiv (legal processes), the Venda (spirit possession), the Shilluk (kingship), the Nyakyusa (bridewealth), the Fulani (jewellery) and several other African peoples. The Azande (witchcraft and sorcery), Nuer (lineage segmentation and transhumance) and Dinka (cattle, burial and religion) receive slightly longer treatment. Virtually all the examples are well chosen and well explained. However, Hendry's promised breaking of the mould of 'us' and 'them', 'primitive' and 'civilised', etc., does not come across as well as it might have in the African examples, chosen as they are to illustrate classic and well known cases. One has to look to the numerous discussions of Japan (her own ethnographic specialisation), Mexico (where she has also done field-work) and Britain to find discussions of 'contemporary' social issues and relativist comparisons to make the point that all peoples are strange to outsiders.

Contrast her treatment of Amba (Uganda) and English witchcraft:

> Witches, in an Amba view, exhibit an inversion of physical and moral qualities on human beings. They hang upside down, eat human flesh, quench their thirst with salt, go about naked, and, unlike the situation in the case of feuds, they take their victims from their own villages and share them with witches in other villages. [p. 138]
>
> It is difficult to say whether current witchcraft practices in England are related to any kind of crisis or social change, or, indeed, whether they have ever really abated over the intervening years [since the seventeenth century]. It is certainly true, however, that magic and witchcraft continue to intrigue members of the wider society, and practising witches are found among the most apparently staid and middle-class of professions [p. 140]

In fairness to Hendry, the contrast is less marked in other (especially non-African) cases, yet the detailed description of strange practices in the African example and vague generalisations in the European one are symptomatic of just the kind of 'them'/'us' dichotomy Hendry aims to avoid.

From an Africanist perspective, overcoming this dilemma is not at all easy. Africa is more important to anthropology than anthropology is to Africa, and Africa has provided anthropology (especially British anthropology) with unparalleled case material on virtually every aspect of social life. The continent has contributed more than any other to the anthropological study of witchcraft, to the analysis and understanding ritual symbolism, to descent theory, politics and law in 'small-scale' societies, and so much more. Hendry's dilemma highlights the fact that anthropology's Africa is primarily both a traditional one and a classic anthropological one comprising several of anthropology's own great theoretical and stylistic writing traditions.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2001.71.1.162 Published online by Cambridge University Press

HISTORY AND COMPARISON

Goody's book traces the maturation of British social anthropology against a background of anthropologists' institutional and personal involvement in Africa. His account is itself a personal one, relying heavily on his own intellectual relationship with Africanist anthropology and the development of his ideas through the study of African societies. His vision of British anthropology is positive, and he represents the tradition as one of intellectual vitality and positive social criticism. The best parts of *The Expansive Moment* are those dealing with the personal histories of the key protagonists. J. H. Oldham's role in setting up the International African Institute, Evans-Pritchard's 'love–hate relationship' with America, his friendship with Fortes and antipathy to Malinowski, and Goody's own exploits in northern Ghana may not seem that interesting to everyone. Yet Goody's reminiscences and his comments on the juxtaposition of such elements of the history of anthropology make good reading, even for non-anthropologists. The issues of antisemitism in the British establishment and left-wing politics in (South African) British anthropology are given particular prominence.

One oddity in Goody's book which deserves comment is its lengthy attack on Henrika Kuklick's *The Savage Within* (1991), a book which covers similar ground. Kuklick argued that the images of Africa portrayed by British anthropologists could be translated into commentaries on British society, and that the rise of British anthropology was in part a response to its use in colonial administration. Goody seems to read this as a suggestion that anthropology was the 'handmaiden of colonialism' and points out that the internal 'colonialism' of United States–Native American relations was often worse than the British–African version. Read together, Goody's and Kuklick's opposing treatments of British anthropology add insights neither alone could do. Comparison with Sally Falk Moore's *Anthropology and Africa* (1994), which brings in French and American traditions, would of course add another dimension.

Kuper's *Among the Anthropologists* covers a rather larger time frame and has a wider scope. It is not a systematic 'history' like those of Goody, Kuklick or Moore but a collection of previously published essays on themes ranging from Darwin's early influence to Freud, Lévi-Strauss, Audrey Richards and Ernest Gellner, and to the death of Piet Retief in the light of the Sahlins–Obeyesekere debate (on the meaning of the death of Captain James Cook). My favourites among the essays are 'Postmodernism, Cambridge and the great Kalahari debate' and 'South African anthropology: an inside job'. The first encompasses the essentials of anthropological controversy today within a simple opposition between the traditional egalitarian hunting-and-gathering way of life of the Ju/'hoansi as portrayed by Richard Lee and the long-standing servitude of such people as portrayed by Edwin Wilmsen. Kuper puts himself in the picture, commenting on his own time in the Kalahari and some of the debates and personalities of his South African and Cambridge days. Thus what may seem a straightforward and simple opposition requires layers of interpretation; yet the rhetoric of

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2001.71.1.162 Published online by Cambridge University Press

postmodernism is eloquently dismissed as missing the point. Anthropology depends on learning what local experts have to say, engaging in debate with wider comparative issues and putting forward arguments which stand up against alternative arguments.

Kuper's essay on South African anthropology begins with the remark that the relation between anthropology and colonial policies in Africa is still poorly understood. The diversity should be obvious, with South Africa quite a different scene from elsewhere on the continent, but the historical trajectory and internal complexity of South African anthropology are in need of explanation too. Kuper, always with an eye to the structure of changing social relations (here among South Africa's anthropologists), points to differences between David Webster's move towards political activism and the ANC activist Mamphela Ramphele's move towards anthropology, and to Ramphele's rejection of the authority of established chiefs contrasted with IFP Member of Parliament Harriet Ngubane's acceptance of traditional political structures. The essay covers with great clarity university environments, cultural influences, and anthropology and the state at least from Smuts to Mandela. Although of course lacking the detail of Hammond-Tooke's (1997) recent book on the subject, Kuper's essay offers a more contextual and satisfying explanation of relations between anthropology and the political forces which have surrounded it.

Lewis's collection is less disparate than Kuper's, and less challenging, but with a clear and well put theoretical line. He advocates a form of functionalism which gives special credence to indigenous explanation. Like Kuper (and probably like Goody) he rejects fanciful fashions, especially postmodernist ones. Although Lewis's overview of South African anthropology is decidedly simplistic in comparison with Kuper's, the remainder of his essay on 'History "functionalised"' presents a thoughtful overview of the modern British tradition which should be both reassuring to those in the mould and provocative to those outside it.

To me the most intriguing essay in *Arguments with Ethnography* is 'Frontier fetishism and the "Ethiopianisation" of Africa'. Here Lewis points out that pre-colonial Africa exhibited a variety of forms of political organisation, including culturally homogeneous nation states, non-state nations and heterogeneous states such as Ethiopia. He argues that the last type, not unlike (he says) the Hapsburg Empire, became the model for the 'frontier fetishism' of post-colonial Africa. He concludes, in opposition, to many Europeanists, that:

> nationalism is not a modern invention, nor necessarily connected with literacy, nor is it a monopoly of the oppressed—it may be exactly the opposite (as was historically the case with the Amhara and other imperialist groups): an ideology of domination. [p. 67]

Other essays cover such topics as nationalism in the Horn of Africa, spirit possession, shamanism and descent theory.

So what have these books got in common? An anonymous reviewer,

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2001.71.1.162 Published online by Cambridge University Press

believed to be among the authors discussed here, once puzzled over the fact that in *Anthropologists and Anthropology* (1973) Kuper, a social scientist, should have projected a 'great man' view of history. A review of *Social Anthropology in Perspective* (Lewis, 1976), by another of the authors discussed, was given the title 'Anthropology out of perspective'. Is this in-fighting or do we have more than one tradition here? Certainly the argument could be put that there are three British traditions—mainstream, Oxford and Manchester (none of them now what it once was). It may be equally meaningful to think in terms of two—Radcliffe-Brownian and Malinowskian—certainly with Goody and Kuper, if few others today, in the former. In the book reviewed here, more than in most of his earlier work, Lewis lays claim to a tradition of 'a substantive anthropology based on the comparative method in the analysis of ethnography' (p. 115). He pays tribute to functionalism but argues that the differences between the British and American traditions are less significant than is usually assumed. For my money, the comparative tradition, today utilising historical understandings and situated in a historical trajectory with classic African ethnography at its core, is the essence of British anthropology in a broad sense. Goody, Kuper and Lewis all qualify, but their anthropology does differ in many respects both from the American tradition and from the interpretive style of Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt.

## AMERICAN AND BRITISH INTERPRETATIONS

A comparison between the books described above and the aptly titled *Parallel Worlds* shows well the contrast between the British and American approaches at perhaps their most extreme. In Britain the legacy of functionalism is still stronger among Africanist anthropologists, like Goody, Kuper and Lewis, than among others. Indeed, in general British Africanists have resisted the vile taunts of postmodernist genres better than most. In America recent trends have led anthropology towards more literary approaches, and Gottlieb and Graham's book is a worthy example.

Fortuitously, in this case we have an anthropologist teamed up with a fiction writer. Not without good cause the earlier Crown edition of *Parallel Worlds* won the 1993 Victor Turner Prize, and, true to Turner's bold and eclectic dramatism, this book plays out a successful embodiment of the fieldwork experience for both fieldworkers and indigènes. Alma the anthropologist and Philip the fiction writer (they use their first names throughout) alternate sections within each chapter. Philip provides most of the experiential anecdote:

> 'Who stole the chickens?' Alma asked, ready to write down the names of the culprits.
>
> 'Everyone.'
>
> 'Everyone?'
>
> Kouakou nodded.
>
> Alma paused, worried that perhaps she had misunderstood. 'But why do all the people of Sangbé steal your chickens?'

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2001.71.1.162 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> 'Because they're allowed to.'
> Alma crinkled her face in puzzlement. Amused by her surprise, Kouakou added, 'But they can steal chickens only during one of our funerals. And we steal their chickens during their funerals.' [p. 98]

He also provides most of the deeper reflection:

> I still didn't know how this unfamiliar culture might engage my imagination or what within me might be drawn to it. I found myself less and less able to write, and the quiet keys of my typewriter presented a silent, untranslatable reproach. [pp. 99–100]

Alma, naturally, gives us more of the description, but more significantly raises the questions which run through every good fieldworker's mind:

> Philip and I watched the ritual unfold before our uncomprehending eyes and ears while I wondered if I would ever understand the speeches and actions that must mean so much to all those around us. So many of the anthropology books I'd read had presented information as if it had been offered by data machines that merely needed to be switched on. Yet the past two days had made it clearer than ever that no amount of coaxing or meddling would convince people to share with me that which they fervently wished to keep secret. [p. 110]

Gottlieb and Graham's 'Africa' is in reality a small village in the Beng region of Côte d'Ivoire. There are chapters on trespassing and transgressions, premonitions and metamorphoses, but none *per se* on witchcraft or kinship. Yet their village and those near by are brought to life in a way that is intelligible even to those who yearn for symbolic structures and other traditional forms of anthropological generalisation. The one is not a substitute for the other but a welcome complement. That said, the excellent analytical index provides readers looking for ethnographic facts with the means to locate them, within the narratives and interpretations, quite easily.

British anthropologists are used to thinking of Lienhardt, along with Evans-Pritchard, as the epitome of their own interpretive (or interpretivist) tradition. The *JASO* issue is, in fact, both a light-hearted tribute and a collection of seven previously unpublished talks by Lienhardt, written between 1957 and 1989. The tribute comes in the form of memoirs, poems and songs by Ahmed Al-Shahi, Gerd Baumann, Paul Baxter, John W. Burton, Jeremy Coote, Francis M. Deng, Eva Gillies, Jack Goody, Wendy James, Douglas H. Johnson, F. C. T. Moore, Ruth Padel, Philip Lyon Roussel, John Ryle and seven members of the Dinka community in Britain. Of the memoirs the most substantial and probably the most interesting to those not in the Lienhardt circle is that by Francis M. Deng, a US-based lawyer, diplomat and academic authority on the culture of his own Dinka people. He gives great insight into Lienhardt's world view and his own personal and intellectual background through the records of their interaction and of Lienhardt's mentoring spirit in the years 1962–93. Also of historical interest is Ahmed Al-Shahi's account of Lienhardt's

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2001.71.1.162 Published online by Cambridge University Press

year at the University of Baghdad, as well as his general biographical note and bibliography of Lienhardt. Gerd Baumann's reconstructions of conversations with Lienhardt give much insight into the wit and wisdom of the man.

Lienhardt's seven talks include 'The Dinkas of the Sudan', 'Plato and the Vailala madness', '"High gods" among some Nilotic peoples', 'Simpler societies in an industrialized world', 'C. G. Seligman and ethnology in the Sudan', 'Two great British social anthropologists: Sir James Frazer and Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard' and 'Anthropology and the view from afar'. Let me comment on the first and the last. 'The Dinkas of the Sudan' was a BBC radio broadcast for schools aired in 1957. Consisting of an imaginary conversation between Lienhardt and an unnamed Dinka, it comes close in style of presentation to Gottlieb and Graham's records of conversations between themselves and their Beng informants. Contrasts are revealed between British and Dinka customs of marriage and mother-in-law avoidance, and beliefs about cattle, rain and other things. A lot comes across in a few pages, and the scope for this style of presentation (though preferably spoken rather than written) is undoubtedly not lost on the editors, who chose this as the first of Lienhardt's pieces in the *JASO* issue.

'Anthropology and the view from afar' (the title reflecting Lévi-Strauss's 1985 essay collection) is rather different. Originally a lecture in a course on the development of anthropological theory, it is a commentary not on Africans but on anthropologists and a few critics and historians of the discipline. Unlike the first essay, this one offers little insight into Africa or anthropology. The anecdotes for which Lienhardt is famous are there, but the reader, like the students to whom the original was addressed, would be advised to read the texts along with, if not in lieu of, the lecture. The one important insight is a well put expression of doubt about the line pushed by contemporary American writers like Clifford Geertz and James Clifford that anthropology is (or should be) in a state of self-conscious crisis and disillusionment. Neither Lienhardt's classic interpretive writings on Dinka religion nor Gottlieb and Graham's more reflexive ethnography of Beng thought and action lend any credence to such a view.

## TOWARDS AN AFRICAN ANTHROPOLOGY

African introductions to social anthropology are even rarer than British ones, but two examples come to mind: those by M. Angulu Onwuejeogwu and by Angela Cheater. Onwuejeogwu's (1975) introduction was a superb blend of British structural-functional theory and African ethnography in its full richness and complexity and, importantly, also in historical and comparative context. Although a quarter of a century old, it remains detailed and comprehensive in its coverage of traditional anthropological themes: twenty-three chapters on everything from the idea of 'primitive society' to Zulu religious movements, though very little on social change, let alone Marxism, reflexivity or indigenous voices.

Cheater's (1989) 'alternative introduction' was written specifically

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2001.71.1.162 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for her own students in Zimbabwe and emphasises not only 'social change' but also the relevance of anthropology to issues such as industrialisation, land reform and access to political power. In some ways Cheater succeeds better than Hendry in portraying an Africa which is comparable to the European imagination of Europe itself. Yet Hendry's is the introduction I would recommend, with due reservations, to my Scottish and English students, because it illustrates better both the enormous variety of human cultures and the richness of culture itself, in the abstract. Herein lies a pedagogical paradox: does Europe need one kind of introduction to anthropology and Africa another? I would like to think the answer is 'no', but I would not be disillusioned if it were 'yes'.

As Paul Nkwi (1998) has so eloquently pointed out, anthropology was suppressed and driven underground in many African countries, among other reasons because even within Africa it was dominated by non-Africans and because its agenda simply did not fit in with the demands of the first generation of post-colonial African leaders. Shahid Vawda (1998) has argued that African anthropology needs greater critical engagement and, in consort with the trend especially in South Africa, the avoidance of the over-reification of culture. Peter Rigby (1996), in a more pessimistic vein, warns of implicit racism within anthropology itself and urges a critical praxis involving both anthropologists and the communities they work with.

All these attempts, especially Nkwi's, move us towards a truly African anthropology. In them there is a growing consolidation of views which, together with the development of teaching and research programmes, lies set to place African anthropology on the world stage, along with British, French, American and other long-standing (Africanist) traditions. Africa has already given anthropology its data, its models and indeed many of its best anthropologists. I have little doubt we can look forward in the next decade to African texts, ethnographies and commentaries comparable to the Africanist ones reviewed here. It is only a pity that the time has not quite come.

## REFERENCES

Cheater, Angela. 1989 (1986). *Social Anthropology: an alternative introduction*. London: Unwin Hyman.

Hammond-Tooke, W. D. 1997. *Imperfect Interpreters: South Africa's anthropologists, 1920–90*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

Kuklick, Henrika. 1991. *The Savage Within: the social history of British anthropology, 1885–1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kuper, Adam. 1973. *Anthropologists and Anthropology: the British school, 1922–72*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1985 (1983). *The View from Afar*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel and Phoebe Hoss. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lewis, I. M. 1976. *Social Anthropology in Perspective*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Moore, Sally Falk. 1994. *Anthropology and Africa: changing perspectives on a changing scene*. Charlottesville VA and London: University of Virginia Press.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2001.71.1.162 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nkwi, Paul Nchoji. 1998. 'An African anthropology? Historical landmarks and trends', *African Anthropology* 5 (2), 192–217.
Onwuejeogwu, M. Angulu. 1975. *The Social Anthropology of Africa: an introduction*. London, Ibadan and Nairobi: Heinemann.
Rigby, Peter. 1996. *African Images: racism and the end of anthropology*. Oxford: Berg.
Vawda, Shahid. 1998. 'Power and representation inside anthropology', *African Anthropology* 5 (1), 7–32.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2001.71.1.162 Published online by Cambridge University Press