Investigating the Investigator

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Reversed Gaze: An African Ethnography of American Anthropology
by Mwenda Ntarangwi

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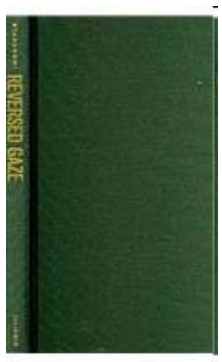
This is a fascinating and intimate study of American anthropology, challenging anthropologists to include the gaze of the subaltern in their anthropological discourses on cultures, and to be prudent about applying Western concepts and categories to their theorizing about other cultures. Drawing on his ethnographic research on American anthropology as a practice, Ntarangwi makes a series of thought-provoking participant observations concerning American anthropologists' experiences and their social interactions, both as students and as professionals. One of the aims of the book is to unsettle the postmodern critique that challenged colonial anthropology's representation of other cultures, known as 'the others'. While Ntarangwi regards the anthropologists' engagements with the others as a racially defined play of unequal power relations, he invites his readers to participate in American anthropology's ontology, where 'whiteness' is radically implicated with reality.

There have been rigorous intellectual debates during the last two decades on anthropology's traditional practice of studying small-scale, 'primitive' societies and the construction of anthropological 'others'. There has also been an urgency to do away with the artificial boundaries that have been created by the practitioners of colonial anthropology between the generalized Western and non-Western others, which produced ethnocentrism and racism. A significant part of these criticisms is geared towards eliminating racism and empowering the anthropologists' others to study their own cultures and perhaps Western cultures as well. With their interventionist ideology, they furthermore wanted to take the power from the colonial anthropologists and hand it over to their subalterns.

How has anthropology been successful in its effort to do away with the artificial boundaries it created between the West and the non-Western others, racism and ethnocentrism? How has it been successful in empowering the others? Based on his experiences of being an African anthropology student in an American university, his ethnographic research in Kenya, his extensive participant observations in the American Anthropological Association's meetings and his experiences as an African professor teaching anthropology to American students, Ntarangwi offers powerful analyses of American anthropologists' quasi-effort to decolonize the field of anthropology from Western scholarship both through time and space.



The book reflects on the dialectical developments in the field and examines the new developments in the postmodern phase of contemporary anthropology. For his study, Ntarangwi chooses Africa, the iconic continent which provides the most celebrated small-scale societies and 'primitive' others to its anthropologists. Ntarangwi is able to cast his anthropological gaze on both his own society and the Western world. He centers his ethnographic gaze primarily on the postmodern American anthropologists of the 1990s who were critical of their predecessors in the creation of the artificial boundaries between the West and the others. Ntarangwi's choices of arguments include not only the postmodern critiques, but also the behavior of the researchers, which reveals the underlying motivation of the anthropologists who level those criticisms challenging the authority of the anthropologists of colonial era in quasi-defense of anthropology's others. Thus, Ntarangwi begins his inquiry with the very dynamic phase in the discipline of anthropology in general and American anthropology in particular.

As a graduate student at an American university, Ntarangwi observes the inconsistencies in the discipline's reflexivity in the classroom dynamics. For him, having a self-reflexive practice does not necessarily change the colonial paradigm established in the field. The central core of anthropology's grand narratives has not changed since the time of colonial anthropology, despite the self-reflexive assertions of the anthropologists of the postmodern era. Although postmodern reflexivity challenged the authority of ethnographic representation of social reality by earlier anthropologists, or of white feminist project's' insensitivity to the plight of women of color, the grand narrative and its logical elaboration continue both during the postmodern phase and in the contemporary era. Hence, the tenets of postmodern reflexivity are nothing more than self serving narrative strategies and writing styles, which essentially mask the inherent power differences between observers and the observed, and it ignores the engagement between race and knowledge production.

The book is divided into six potent chapters. In each chapter, Ntarangwi positions himself between two worlds (Africa and North America) as he examines aspects of American anthropology and the behavior of its practitioners. In Chapter Two, for example, he focuses on whether anthropologists are genuinely interested in other cultures, or whether the other cultures provide them with the opportunity to develop their careers. What happens when one culture becomes the focus and is scrutinized by an outsider? Reflecting on his experiences conducting fieldwork for class projects, teaching about American culture to American students, and interacting with anthropologists in the American Anthropological Association (AAA) gatherings, he provides us with multifaceted and contradictory answers to these questions.

As an African student studying anthropology in the West, Ntarangwi's gaze naturally straddles two worlds: the world from where he comes, and the world in which he studied anthropology in the West. Situated between these two worlds, he powerfully brings his experiences in Africa and America to his ethnographic gaze, both as a student in classrooms and as a professional anthropologist studying American anthropology, through an African cultural framework and training. For him, anthropology's interest in studying others and the pursuit of the exotic cultures constitutes anthropologists' distinctiveness from other related fields such as sociology, history, and philosophy. Although the pursuit of the exotic others is motivated and shaped by multiple and intersecting interests of the individual anthropologist, the main determining factor in this pursuit is the whim of the funding agencies that define, for the most part, what should be studied.

Western anthropology is dominated by the study of the exotic others but the discipline provides a powerful platform for anthropologists (both Western and non-Western) to understand themselves. Ntarangwi demonstrates this point with personal experiences of returning to his own society. During his return visits to Kenya, Ntarangwi notices how living in America for two years and the courses he had taken in anthropology changed his 'worldview and social sensibilities', and how he became more aware of social class, gender issues and the political realities in his own society. From this perspective, anthropology can become a genuine cultural critique. Anthropologists can probably use their research experiences to engage in a deep analysis of their own cultural assumptions, theories, and concepts, as well as their own politics. Such analysis has the potential to fundamentally transform the anthropological project

and do away with the asymmetrical relationship that exists between the West and others. Furthermore, the same technique can be used to gain an understanding of AAA, 'which is a cultural phenomenon in itself' (p. 102).

Ntarangwi's fascinating book is no ordinary ethnography, but rather an important meditation and logical elaboration on the practice of anthropology that is racially defined, which is probably what all anthropology should strive to avoid. He asserts that anthropology is, if nothing else, all about others – including the seeming untranslatable cultural practices, although how earlier anthropologists made sense of other people's cultures was a very contentious and complex issue in the postmodern phase of anthropology. Ntarangwi, for instance observes that most presentations at AAA meetings consisted of presenters talking to themselves about themselves, using quasi-theoretical language, which defines the sophistication expected of anthropologists at the expense of obscuring the cultures of others.

At the end of this important book, Ntarangwi invokes the late Archie Mafeje's assertion about anthropology being a racially motivated colonial project based on 'alterity that is racialized'. Embracing Mafeje's point, Ntarangwi sees anthropology as 'a piece of a larger Western epistemological grand plan that was grounded in Eurocentric regard and understanding of the world' (148). He drives this point home through a powerful description of his experiences as an African anthropologist at AAA meetings where a 'sea of Whiteness dominates' the crowd, reminding the few racial minority anthropologists and anthropology students of their otherness. This otherness becomes exacerbated by the cliques of White students roaming in groups, hanging out with white movers and shakers in the discipline.

Reversed Gaze is a thought-provoking book on the cutting edge of the critique of anthropological practice. It utilizes a well-established participant-observation methodology, showing how anthropology continues to be a racially dominated field, where Western anthropologists study others. Although anthropology has seen many changes during the postcolonial era, it has not done away with the divide that colonial anthropologists had created between themselves and others. As a whole, Ntarangwi's book succeeds in bringing together the important developments and theoretical concepts of imagination and experience and interaction between anthropologists and their engagements with others, in thoughtful and insightful ways. His work demonstrates how colonial mentality and practice mutually inform one another in the practice of ethnography in contemporary anthropology.

Overall, the book is an important contribution to the existing literature on the critique of anthropology. In a way, this book helps us to understand how others are reconstituted during the colonial, postcolonial, and postmodern phase of anthropology. Ntarangwi seeks to demonstrate the continuity in colonial attitude during the postmodern phase of anthropology and evaluates their rather empty patronizing critiques of the colonial anthropology. Yet, it is disappointing that he fails to ask the hard questions: What were the possible hidden underlying reasons for postmodern anthropologists in challenging colonial anthropologists, and in turn asserting their own authority and power? How successful were the postmodern anthropologists in their assertion to empower the others in representing their own cultures? What will be left of anthropology if others are empowered and succeed in representing their own cultures? Moreover, if the others study their own cultures, will the Western anthropologists remain as anthropologists occupying tenured positions in Western universities and develop their careers?

All in all, Ntarangwi's critical examination of American anthropology as a discipline is revealing and extraordinarily contextualized. His arguments are persuasive and indicate the overall internal politics and tensions created over power relations between older and younger generations in the postmodern anthropological thinking. In this respect, the postmodernists' assumptions of empowerment of others are a familiar construct no different from the interventionist strategy of colonialism. Ntarangwi has written an illuminating exposition of American anthropology's world-view and the way in which these ideas and ideals provided motivation for the postmodern critiques. He provides arguably the best account of the postmodern movement in anthropology.