

What is an Anthropologist?

The question of 'What is an anthropologist?' discussed by René Devisch in his address of the same name is an interesting one given that anthropology is the only fully comprehensive science of humankind. All the different disciplines are related to anthropology either directly or indirectly.

But in answer to Devisch's question the answer is that there are many kinds of anthropologists who study human cultures from diverse vantage points. What RD offers, however, is a specific description of the career of a postcolonial European cultural anthropologist who, in order to maintain the tradition of the colonial anthropologist in Africa, sees himself constrained to modify the traditional colonial paradigm vis-à-vis Africa. RD must first claim that his approach to his African research subjects belies 'the stereotypical image of the European by his daily and ordinary existence in the same village and his acceptance of the authority of persons of importance by his involvement in the building of his own «hut» and participation in hunts' etc.

RD also presents his liberal postcolonial credentials by arguing on behalf of the subjectivity of the ordinary villager (*gens d'en bas*) and his recommendation that Africans should now seek to place value in 'local and endogenous knowledge, those that were destroyed by colonialism and its aftermath'. He offers the examples of non-theoretical mathematics and geometry together with sacred sculptures, dance steps or drawings that village notables use for illustrative purposes. He also extends his recommendation to the mathematics embedded in the rhythms embedded in songs, etc. What we have here, it would seem, is but a slight modification of Lévi-Strauss's thesis.

This is all well and good but the problem with this postcolonial approach is that it suffers from the same criticisms that one could bring against the cultural ontology of the Western colonial enterprise with regard to African peoples, in that there is something essentialist about their beings and cultures. This would mean implicitly that technological development ought not

Lansana Keita
Fourah Bay College,
Sierra Leone

to progress in the same way that it did and does in other cultures.

Technological progress and development in other cultures such as those of Western Europe, China and Japan especially took place under conditions where they were rapid moves to assimilate forms of knowledge, both technological and otherwise, the lack of which placed them at a disadvantage in the perpetual conflict between the world's peoples in terms of technologies and other aspects of culture.

Technological development in China, for example, did not take place in the context of a dogmatic reverence for indigenous modes of knowledge – of which China carries a strong and influential tradition – but by seeking to absorb in modified fashion more developed technologies and programmes of social organisation under the sociological rubric of Marxism. The cultural template for this modernisation drive was indigenised under a version of Marxism-Leninism that became known as Maoism. This was a purely indigenous experiment employing a modified version of a modern developmental programme. This experiment was carried out under conditions of autarky and quasi-isolation from the rest of the world.

But after the first experiment was tried and its results evaluated, China set out on a novel path of development with the principles of modern technology firmly in place. The result is that China, all things being equal, is seen as a serious rival by the West in all dimensions of modern technology and economic production.

This modernising approach is not what RD appears to be recommending. What seems evident is that Devisch's paradigm is quite traditionally Western with regard to Africa in that his implicit assumption is that there has been very little of technological worth that has been produced by Africa's peoples since the dawn of humanity.

It is an admirable recommendation that the study of anthropology should set out on an intercultural path in the context of the multi-versity. There is the recommendation here for an equalitarian rather than a hierarchical cultural relativism. But the relativism espoused by RD is one in which Europe is viewed as the fount of logocentrism while Africa is required to bask in its vaunted humour and innocent gaiety.

Perhaps most telling is Devisch's referencing to the postcolonial research he and others carried out in the Congo during the postcolonial years. In this context he sees fit to mention the research of a Peter Crossman that he refereed in a number of African universities – research that fell into the same sociology of knowledge of African intellectuals such as Mudimbe, Ela, Mazrui and others. Yet, on this list there is no mention of the two African intellectuals whose works are foundational for contemporary African anthropology: Cheikh Anta Diop and Paulin Hountondji.

The Western anthropological stance towards Africa has evolved into a postcolonial anthropology that first posits an African essence that is anchored to its cultural products implicitly understood as preferably unchanged. It is the colonialist thesis of a dynamic Western logocentrism and a static, even primordial Africa.

But this approach is easily shown to be historically inadequate. Any accurate historical and anthropological study of Africa constitutes what could serve as a normative template for the African anthropologist. The key points in a proper historical anthropological study of Africa would yield the following: (1) for whatever contingent reasons humanity in the guise of *Homo sapiens* first appeared in the environment of Africa; (2) human technology, necessarily dynamic, first developed in the Palaeolithic up to the Holocene and beyond. This technological dynamism eventually produced the world's first truly technological societies in places such as Ancient Egypt, Kush and other parts of Africa. Writing, mathematics and the scientific arts have

been bequeathed to the rest of the world on account of Africa's cultural dynamic. We note too in this regard Africa's copper, bronze and iron ages as proof of an ongoing technological dynamism.

The formulation of an adequate anthropology of Africa would seem to require a paradigm that models itself after the comprehensive approach already established by Cheikh Anta Diop (see his *Civilization or Barbarism*; *L'Afrique noire précoloniale*; and *L'unité culturelle de l'Afrique noire*). The traditional Western paradigm of selecting a little group here and there, then deciding to go and live among its members to better study them, ought not to be the preferred *métier* of the African anthropologist. It is the study of the interconnectedness of Africa's populations and their historically

dynamic cultures that should be answer to the question 'What is an anthropologist?'

Also lacking in Devisch's analysis is any recognition of Paulin Hountondji's thesis in *African Philosophy: Myth or Reality* that the anthropology of Africa should not be interpreted as reflective of some kind of unchanging African essence. A discussion of such would have put in focus the kind of anthropology proposed by Diop and Hountondji.

The contemporary African anthropologist therefore has before him a task qualitatively different from that of the Western anthropologist only because of the different historical experiences of both. On the one hand, the Western anthropologist historically has been the subject while the African has been the research object. What is required now are

African anthropological studies of the diverse cultures of the West. There is also the important task of transforming anthropology into a genuinely scientific study of human culture by raising questions about the conceptual apparatus and terminology of a still extant traditional Western physical anthropology. This branch of anthropology is still beholden to its patently normative language, which includes terms such as 'Caucasoid', 'Negroid', 'sub-Saharan' and so on. These same normative principles have been transferred to modern genomic anthropology with language such as 'sub-Saharan genes', 'Caucasoid genes', etc. What is evident is that Devisch's question of 'What is an anthropologist?' is an important one but one that must be carefully parsed before answering.