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Editorial

Resurgence of Anthropology at African Universities

Over the last two decades, there has been a growing interest in the study of anthropology. More and more departments are being established in African universities. The forced withdrawal of African and Africanist anthropologists from aggressive anthropological research and teaching was reinforced by the nationalist movements of the early independence days of the 1960s, and further enhanced by the intellectual ferment of the 1970s. This certainly slowed down the continuous ethnographic exploration of Africa. The first conference of African scholars and intellectuals, held in Algiers in 1973, called for the banning of anthropological research. According to that meeting, anthropology was a colonial discipline and a smokescreen for neo-colonialism. However, the discipline was revived, as more and more Africans began to show intellectual interest in the nature of African society and culture. By the end of the 1980s, the discipline witnessed a surge in interest.

It is against this background that a group of African anthropologists met recently in Bamenda, Cameroon to assess the situation and look critically at the teaching and practice of the discipline. These scholars who came from all over Africa, where they have witnessed the resurgence of the discipline, attempted to answer the following questions: Is the postmodernist perspective of anthropology offering alternative responses to the quest for sustainable development? Why is the discipline attracting many students today? What are the best ways to give anthropology a new image? How can courses be designed to avoid problems of neo-colonial discourse and practical redundancy often levelled against the discipline in Africa?

In recent years, cultural diversity and/or cultural relativism have been rediscovered, and the signing of the UNESCO convention on cultural diversity gives a sense of purpose to the work of anthropologists whose discipline has always attempted to address this central theme in a more constructive way. The age-old debate of cultural relativism (Malinowski) and absolutism (your way or our way) has been brought back on today's agenda. There is more to culture than just ethnicity. In

fact, we cannot define culture in terms of ethnic boundaries only; there are other parameters too. In this regard, one may speak of corporate culture (rules of engagement – shared values, interaction) and cultures are not contested (it is their custom, we cannot contest it).

One needs to continually undermine the stereotypes which hinder our understanding of various cultural phenomena. There is need for empirical research documenting precisely these internal dynamics. Ethnography, which was once the soul of all anthropological work, seems to have been relegated to the backseat, leaving cursory ethnographic data collection as the norm. It must be emphasized here that a good understanding of cultural diversity lies in the once critical area of ethnography which must become the hallmark of anthropological discourse again. Students of anthropology must be taught to do good ethnography, understanding the different voices in order to rationalise or deconstruct intellectually the messages that such ethnographies carry from past generations.

The Pan African Anthropological Association (PAAA), which publishes this journal in conjunction with CODESRIA, was established in 1989. Its creation was against the backdrop of a virulent discourse on the nature of the discipline in the postcolonial era. In other words, the PAAA and its journal (*The African Anthropologist* – TAA) aim at interrogating the notions and directions of the discipline and at the same time providing avenues for critical interchange and exchange amongst anthropologists and other scholars on the continent and beyond. Without doubt, before this period, most anthropologists had gone “underground” and taken refuge in the departments of sociology. Anthropology was considered figuratively as “dirty” and embedded in neo-colonial discourse. The inaugural PAAA conference which took place in 1989 in Yaoundé, Cameroon, was organised around the theme “The Teaching and Practice of Anthropology”. The Bamenda meeting organised by the Pan African Anthropological Association, in collaboration with UNESCO, had as its main objective the identification of the theoretical, epistemological and methodological strengths of the discipline in an effort to ascertain its status in some African universities.

It was clear from the discussions that enhancement of the teaching of cultural anthropology in African universities was required. Recent publications (Nkwi 2006, Ntaranga 2006) show that the discipline is vibrant and very much alive on the continent. The most recent evidence of this can be seen in CODESRIA’s reflection on the discipline using the Devisch discourse as a case in point (2008).

Some fundamental issues on the teaching and practice of the discipline have been raised in a recent book *Anthropologies of Africa* (2006) edited by Mwenda Ntaranga. Alongside the need for a continuous stock-taking, the essays published in this volume revisited the very nature of the discipline and the challenges it faces in the 21st century.

In this issue of TAA, six papers attempt to address these issues. These articles demonstrate the determination of African anthropologists to place the discipline in its rightful place among the social sciences in Africa.

We hope that the views which these articles have so convincingly argued will provoke further debate and enrich anthropological conversations in forthcoming issues.

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