



Reflections on the Challenges of Anthropology







The African Anthropologist, Vol. 14, Nos. 1&2, 2007, pp. 101–107
© Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa,
2007 (ISSN 1024-0969)

Reflections on the Challenges of Anthropology in Contemporary Times and Future Prospects: The Douala Experience*

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Anthropology as an academic discipline was introduced in 1993 in the Faculty of Letters and Social Science under the Department of Sociology. It was immediately recognised as a salient component of academic training for students of other departments. The range of Departments that sought anthropology as a core course for its students included Departments of Philosophy-Psychology, Communication and African Studies. This department changed its name to Sociology and Communication until 2005 when it metamorphosed into the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. For the first time anthropology comprised 30 per cent of the academic programme in first and second year where it was offered within a combined context with courses in sociology. Students were offered the choice of specialising either in anthropology or sociology from the third year. In December 2007, a department of Anthropology was created. However, it was not until 2008/2009 academic year that anthropology courses dominated the academic programmes representing 60 per cent of courses. Presently, the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offer two specialisations: medical anthropology and political anthropology. The history of Anthropology as a discipline in the University of Douala, was also fraught with challenges mostly within its resident or host department. It was within this context that the teaching of anthropology took off in Douala as a more visible subject matter.

* Department of Anthropology is new at University of Douala having been established in 2008.

Nonetheless, anthropology remains perceived as important notably in ethnographic research and qualitative methods. Collaborations are still sought by other departments as well as national and international organisations especially within the context of operational health research. Contemporary trend indicates that the way forward for anthropology lies in its professionalisation and application in a practical manner in a real world and its collaboration with other disciplines.

Introduction of Anthropology as a Course

The history of anthropology in the University of Douala is intrinsically related to that of the decentralisation of the university system in Cameroon. Anthropology as an academic course was introduced in 1993 in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Letters and Social Science. Its pathway in the faculty was shaped by several factors, including personal ambitious, administrative, infrastructural and budgetary concerns. This was reflected in the frequent changes in the names of the main department within which it operated. At its onset it was called Section Sociology, which then changed to the Department of Philosophy-Psychology-Sociology. This all englobing department was primarily designed with financial considerations in mind. At this point there was about 4 full time staff. Students were to have several common courses at the level of first year. This structure was in line with that of University of Yaounde which for over three decades was the only university in Cameroon although there were specialised campuses in the other provinces. For example, the Advanced Institute of Language and Translation was located in University Centre, Buea while Douala had Advanced School of Economics and Business. With the decentralisation of the Universities in Cameroon in 1992, these university centres were raised to the status of Universities. Thus, four new universities were created in Douala in the economic capital, Buea in the South West Province, Dschang in the West and Ngaoundere in the North Province. Efforts at creating some sort of regional balance was apparent in their locations. Nonetheless, University of Yaounde for a long while continued to provide the blue print for new universities like the University of Douala. In addition, several of its lecturers sought to be transferred to some of the new universities. So there were massive movements of staff over to the new universities as well new recruitment opportunities. Over time, efforts were made to create specialisations on the basis of their locations and their socio-cultural and economic environments.

From the Department of Philosophy-Psychology-Sociology two distinct departments were carved: Philosophy-Psychology (Ph-Ps) and Department of Sociology (SOCI). From the onset, anthropology was immediately recognised as a salient component of academic training for students of other departments. The range of Departments that sought anthropology as a core course for its students then included Departments of Philosophy-Psychology, African languages and linguistics and Section Communication. As the Faculty grew, pressures emerged to introduce communication as a course. Neither the staff strength nor student population could justify the creation of a Communication Section or Department. Efforts to merge Communication with Philosophy-Psychology were unsuccessful. This department of Sociology had a very short life span. Shortly, communication became grafted on to the Department of Sociology and subsequently its name changed to the Department of Sociology and Communication (SOCO). By then, the teaching staff had increased to 6. Thus, three diverse disciplines, anthropology, sociology and communication competed for visibility in the teaching programme. Up to this time Anthropology functioned as a token subject rather than as a discipline. A sporadic response was to make Communication an autonomous section within the Department. This operated for about two years after which the system of common courses took over because of poor staff and programme over reach. The rationale of courses in the first cycle that is bachelor or undergraduate programme was for students to receive a broad base of courses from first to second year with specialisation in the third year.

The visibility of anthropology was limited to one course in the first year entitled, 'Introduction to Anthropology' which was subsequently changed to 'introduction to general anthropology'. As this was the sole course for all of first year it was invariably very crammed. The contents comprised the history of anthropology, elements of kinship and marriage, anthropological methods as well as applied anthropology. The rest of first year courses consisted mostly of introductory courses to sociology, psychology, communication (2), urban sociology, sociology of religion, research methods and statistics. The first year introductory course on general anthropology was widely sought by three other departments: Philosophy-Psychology, Communication and African Studies. Student registration for this course has ranged from one hundred, to nearly nine hundred in the past year.

Courses in anthropology continued to be conspicuously absent in the second year except within some of the contents of two courses: introduction to gender studies and social structure and stratification. The rest of the courses were also unequally divided between sociology and communication with the latter being the worse for this curious mix. The third year being one of specialisation reflected three diverse trends in each domain of specialisation: anthropology, communication and sociology. But then, these only featured in the second semester as the first semester still continued in the spirit of common courses. Each of the three sections (anthropology, sociology and communication) tried as much as possible to make up for the inadequacies in the number of available courses in the two preceding years prior to specialisation. Thus, elements of anthropology re-emerged within the specialisation of socio-anthropology of health. This specialisation consisted of three courses: theoretical and social context of health, gender and reproductive health and ethno medicine and modern therapies. As could be imagined, this last year in the undergraduate programme could hardly be expected to make up for the inherent shortcomings. It was, however, frequently argued that whatever shortcomings there were could easily be made up for in the post-graduate programme. Notwithstanding, the Department of Sociology and Communication was the first in the Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences to have maitrise students publicly defend their dissertation in 2001, two in socio-anthropology of health and one in communication.

Despite the poor visibility of anthropology, the Department was still solicited to make anthropological inputs in research design both at Faculty and at Central University level. This included the harmonisation of National University programmes in 2001 with the intention of facilitating transfer between Universities. National and International conferences were co-sponsored and organised within large inputs from anthropology section.

Visibility of Anthropology: Emergence of the Department of Sociology-Anthropology, 2005-2007

In 2005, as a result of a ministerial decision, the Department of Sociology-Communication underwent changes. Out of it emerged the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and a separate Department of Communication. Although this new department opened up the possibility for a more visible anthropology, it was also fraught with unforeseen challenges. In as much as its creation was welcomed, it created its own issues. Firstly, was the resistance of having combined courses in both

anthropology and sociology which some lecturers and eventually students perceived not only as being unnecessary, but also as redundant and encumbering. Several pedagogic and administrative issues were raised. Even as one department, should both sections be made autonomous right from the beginning, that is, from the first year? The argument for this was so as to produce properly formed students rather than a hybrid of socio-anthropology students who were neither ground in one or the other. Administratively, such a neat split had budgetary and infrastructural implications. Also, with combined staff strength of 8 with diverse qualifications and experience: three doctorates and three with the equivalent of M. Phil and two with master's degrees. After much wrangling and some turbulence, prolonged meetings and deliberations at Departmental, Faculty and extra-Faculty level, a compromise in administrative decision was reached. The new Department of Sociology-Anthropology (SOAN) would follow a combined teaching programme at first and second level. From the third year two distinct sections: anthropology and sociology would be given full visibility and autonomy. It was within this context that the teaching of anthropology took off in Douala as a more visible subject matter and discipline. Curiously, this in some ways represented a return to the very pseudonym by which the Department had been known in the late 1990s. With this was a change in the presentation of courses and for the first time anthropology comprised 30 per cent of the academic programme in first and second year where it was offered within a combined context with courses in sociology and a few complimentary courses from other disciplines. Students were offered the choice of specialising either in anthropology or sociology from the third year. The undergraduate programmes in anthropology offered two specialisations: medical anthropology and political anthropology, and these extend right up to the master and doctorate levels. First year courses included history anthropology, kinship and marriage. Cultural and African Anthropology, history and current anthropology were included in the second year.

Department of Anthropology, 2007

The end of 2007 heralded yet another turn in the pathway of anthropology. An autonomous department was created by another ministerial decree with 5 full time, and 4 part time staff, 2 of the latter are from the University of Yaounde I and the rest are professionals in their diverse areas of competence. However, since this move came during the 2006/2007 academic year separation of the two disciplines did not occur immediately. An administrative note demanded that the previous system

of combined courses continue until the end of the academic year for levels one and two. So these two levels were still SOAN. Level three and the post graduate programmes were already autonomous and therefore functioned as before.

Thus, the Department of Anthropology will in actual fact become fully functional, that is from level one from the 2008/2009 academic year. Out of 10 courses in level 1, anthropology comprised 55 per cent, 60 per cent in the second year and 75 per cent in the third year. The rest of the courses are made up of bilingual training and an optional course taken from other departments. The master programmes continue to function and the Ph.D. programme began last academic year.

The Master 1 programme comprises 5 courses in all: 2 compulsory courses in research ethics and methodology, 2 courses per specialisation and a seminar topic. The 2nd year is reduced to 2 courses: a compulsory one and the other optional according to one's specialisation and lastly seminar. The seminars are generally broad topics which permit the intervention of several speakers and as such give students a richness of backgrounds and approaches.

The doctorate programme involves two years of course work and the last year is meant to be consecrated to fieldwork and writing up.

Nonetheless, the insufficiency in the programmes of previous years translates to a deficiency of anthropological studies especially in the absence of a well furnished library. To this end, private collections and free publications mostly from international organisations, have been most helpful in efforts to keep students abreast with current trends. This year therefore, is the beginning of the training of full anthropology students. Third year students are compelled to begin field work with an exposure to ethnographic research.

Contemporary Anthropology and its Legacy

Even in contemporary times, anthropology is still very much perceived within the image of its use and abuse of the pre-colonial and colonial era and its initial focus as the study of 'primitive societies or cultures' and thus not having a place in 'modern, urbanising and developing society'. For example the specialisation in medical anthropology was entitled, 'Sociologie-Anthropologie de la sante'. This was because the anthropology component was deemed related to traditional medicine which the sociology with its focus on modern health therapies would help to create a balance between the old and the new. There is a constant debate and battle against this out dated notion of anthropology. Nonetheless an-

thropological methods were perceived as important notably, ethnographic research and focus group discussions. Collaborations were sought by the Departments of Geography and (Philosophy) – Psychology.

Anthropology and Research: National and International

Increasingly, the Department is being sought as an important arm of research by both national and international organisations especially within the context of cultural studies as well as operational research in the domain of health and gender.

It serves as a base for resources especially in the domain of systemic studies, ageing, gender based violence and more recently environmental and political issues.

Currently, the health research programme of the University of Douala is pivoted by the Department.

The Way Forward

Contemporary trend in the University of Douala indicates that the way forward for anthropology lies in its professionalisation and application in a practical manner addressing contemporary issues in a real world. There is much pressure towards providing support to diverse areas of interest with the hope of making anthropology more visible and also marketable thereby generating funds towards acquiring some degree of self sufficiency. Increasingly, there is much demand for short-term training programmes by a variety of people including those without the prerequisite or experience for academic training. These include professionals working on health related issues and see additional training in anthropology as providing them with qualitative research skills. Another category comprises those of questionable qualifications who perceive training in medical anthropology as legitimising their practice. The current focus on multi-disciplinary research especially as regards qualitative research methods and ethnographic field work in the domain of health, rural and urban studies as well as in production and editing of ethnographic films is increasing.

