Escaping the Other: Postmodernism, Academics and Africa in the New World Order

David Cavers
McMaster University

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol3/iss2/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact kmarcha1@uwo.ca.
Escaping the Other: Postmodernism, Academics and Africa in the New World Order

**Keywords**
Africa, postmodernism, academics, global development

**Creative Commons License**
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

This article is available in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol3/iss2/2
ABSTRACT

Recently an increasing number of anthropologists have turned away from Africa as an area of research. This corresponds disturbingly with other developments globally, in Africa, and in academia. The end of the cold war has brought about shifts in power relations that have left Africa in a difficult situation. 'Aid', increasingly tied to political as well as economic conditionality, has been withheld from African states and redirected to other, more profitable, areas of the globe. In Africa, instability has increased while economies have collapsed. Post-colonial academics and governments have introduced challenges to 'Western' academic discourses relating them to imperialist agendas. In the 'West' postmodern and critical discourses have problematized the anthropological 'other', yet many anthropologists engaged in these discourses have concentrated on studies 'at home' (be that North America or Europe) rather than attempting to work abroad without exoticizing their research. This paper explores certain relationships between these recent occurrences.

This paper was originally presented at the North Eastern Anthropological Association conference at Lake Placid New York, April 1995.

In their introduction to Africa and the Disciplines, Bates, Mudimbe and O'Barr claim that anthropology is the only discipline in the social sciences and humanities that does not undervalue research in Africa (1993:xvi). It has been my subjective experience, however, that anthropology is progressively moving away from concerning itself with Africa. Departments that once employed several Africanist anthropologists, such as the one that I am associated with, now contain several ex-Africanists.

It appears that Africa is beginning to be abandoned by anthropologists whereas it was once a strong regional specialization. I am concerned about this because I feel that current political, economic and social conditions in Africa are becoming increasingly neglected by organizations and states. While troops are purportedly sent to states like Somalia to make peace when disruption gets out of hand, investment from Western countries is being re-directed away from Africa, particularly since the end of the cold war. An academic move away from African issues would leave these practices without critical investigation and assist in the further marginalisation of Africa.

For Africa, the end of the cold war has meant the loss of options. During the cold war, Africa had to deal with competitions between the super-powers that: 1. supported ruthless dictators who pledged allegiance to either the U.S.A. or the Soviet Union, 2. armed rebels in states allied with the other super-power, and 3. played a large role in the drastic destabilisation of, for example, Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mozambique and Angola.

One might expect that the end of the cold war would have allowed for a period of stabilisation with the removal of the U.S.A.-U.S.S.R. rivalries. In fact, African governments now find themselves increasingly dependent on a more unilateral 'world order' that has considerably less interest in their well being (their trump card is gone). While governments of the West continue to support dictators that welcome multinationals that extract resources from their countries at little cost and with little investment in African countries, those that do not support such extractive tactics find themselves peripheralized in the only economic and political game in town.

The end of the cold war has also meant a rethinking of global development concerns. Even before the end of the cold war, organizations such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) changed their policies toward engaging in development schemes that would be profitable to Canada and the U.S.A. respectively. This has meant the abandonment of localised, low intensity projects which are important in Africa. With the collapse of the soviet bloc, development projects turned toward supporting the integration of Eastern Europe and the ex-soviet republics into the capitalist system of the West. The concern for ensuring the success of this transition to democracy and capitalism in Eastern Europe led to the withdrawal of support for African countries which were of considerably less economic and political importance to Western states.

Lending policies have now been tied to harsh economic and political conditions. Without recourse to an alternative, African states have been placed under the thumb of the states of the West and the international organizations that represent them (or perhaps it is the other way around). Of course these policies are not applied evenly. It has been relatively easy for dictators on good terms with Western states (for example Mobutu in Zaire, Banda in Malawi, and Babangida and Abacha in Nigeria) to bluff about democratic reforms as long as they apply structural adjustment programs that drastically upset the stability of their countries. The implementation of such programs is usually accompanied by the use of brutal force against African citizens.

France, which has long maintained its colonial presence in West Africa through pegging the currencies of its ex-colonies to the franc, as well as a continued
military presence, has severed the former vestige of colonialism that stabilised the currencies of the CFA countries. While this move allows these countries a degree of independence from France it occurs at a time when the territorial, economic and political integrity of these states is being seriously threatened by regional warfare and severe practices on the part of the organizations of international capitalism. Such a move jeopardizes the ability of French post-colonies to check international pressures through recourse to an alternative source of support. Countries such as Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Cameroon are literally going through processes of disintegration as a result.

One alternative taken by some African countries has been to turn to the support of international Muslim organisations such as the OIC. While this may alleviate some of the pressures on African countries, it may also lead to hostility between them and Western states fearful of Islamic militancy.

The results of these changes in international relations are just beginning to be seen in countries throughout Africa. Destabilisation and poverty are on the increase in Africa, while its limited influence in global politics and economics is being consistently attenuated (Mazrui 1994:6–7).

This situation corresponds with developments that have led to a decrease of interest in Africa in universities. The African Studies program of York University exemplifies this situation. Despite increased student enrollment, funding has been cut for the program as a result of government interests in other areas, and with it, jobs and courses have been cut. It appears that, at present, this program, which is one of few of its kind in Canada, is beginning to be phased out of existence (Anyinam 1994; Bastine 1995).

The current funding climate has led both Canadian and American universities to strategically down-size their departments. The will to remain competitive in an international economic system that has recently caused increasing strain on Canada and the U.S.A. has led to the questioning of programs that do not appear to be working toward the benefit of their countries (see Givens & Maheney 1994; Cormnan 1995). Furthermore, tax payers and corporate sponsors are beginning to question the worth of programs that do not seem to contribute to their own well-being. Thus academic agendas have begun to shift in the directions that international development agendas did before them. That is, toward investing effort only in projects that are profitable for 'Us' (seen in national or corporate terms).

Anthropology, as a discipline that is unsure of itself at the moment, and as a relatively peripheral discipline, is among those facing a struggle to maintain its presence in universities. In order to keep anthropology competitive, departments have shifted toward concentrating on issues at home and in areas of strategic importance (for example, the Pacific Rim and Eastern Europe). Africa, seen as an overly troubled and stagnating continent, is not viewed as a worthwhile location for research in a funding climate that insists upon returns for one's home country.

Adding to the institutional pressure not to concentrate on Africa, anthropologists must confront personal challenges to studying in Africa. One prominent aspect of doing research in Africa, which many Africanists have to worry about, is personal safety. Personally, I have recently considered abandoning Nigeria as a locale of fieldwork due to the conditions in that country at present. Rampant crime in which peace keeping authorities are active participants, oppression by a military dictatorship worse than any Nigeria has seen before, as well as economic and political turmoil make work on ethnicity and nationalism in Nigeria a very hazardous sport. This sort of situation is not atypical in Africa, and I am certain that it has influenced both anthropology students and established Africanist anthropologists to consider locales of fieldwork outside of Africa.

The post-colonial period has brought about a great many changes for anthropology as a whole. One of the significant changes for anthropologists working away from home is that important locals now have the opportunity to engage in dialogue with, and confront, anthropological work in their countries. Africans have been particularly critical of anthropology's role in the colonial endeavour. For this reason anthropology departments remain quite scarce in African universities and governments are wary about letting anthropologists study in their countries. African academics have been quite successful in their challenges to non-African studies of Africa and their reformulations of Africanisms away from views which favour Eurocentric visions, such as those that informed Negritude (Miller 1986:128). In Nigeria, for example, the Ibadan school of History has reacted to ahistorical anthropological work by tracing the long history of African peoples prior to colonial rule. Rather than engage in dialogue with these academics it appears that many Africanist anthropologists have avoided their work (Ekeh 1990) even while moving toward more process and "invention of tradition" oriented work on, for example, identity, social fields and ethnicity (Moore 1994:129). The creation of new discourses on African issues has been accompanied by a strong opposition to continued studies of Africa by non-Africans. Stanley Diamond for example states (as quoted in Owomoyela 1994:95):

Africa...has been a laboratory for too many American careers; too many papers and books are simply status symbols in the social system, the social struggle of the domestic academy, shaped by that system and couched in its limited and evasive language.... African Studies has been careerist or merely fashionable; concern has been less with the subject of study, with the condition, needs and potential of African people, than with the abstract problems that qualified a student as an academic expert or Africanist; the latter

http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol3/iss2/2
African issues. Criticism about studies outside of one's own group is currently quite evident in North America. Some presses in Canada will now only publish works on native Canadians written by native Canadians. White anthropologists applying for positions or funding for research on African contexts must be prepared to answer why white people should be allowed to study African issues. The zenith of such hostility toward representation of others is evident in the reaction to the Royal Ontario Museum's "Into the Heart of Africa" exhibit. This exhibit which was supposed to self-reflexively "critique the 'ethnocentrism and cultural arrogance' of the Canadian colonialists in Africa" (Mackey 1995:405) led to boycotts by Toronto's black community and considerable debate over its racist representation of Africans. During the period of controversy over this exhibit, one spokesperson for the protesters stated that any black person, regardless of whether or not they had ever been to Africa, was better equipped than a white Africanist anthropologist to teach about African issues. The anthropologist that organised the exhibit was eventually pushed into leaving her teaching position and the exhibit closed without going on its planned tour.

The "Into the Heart of Africa" exhibit also demonstrates another shift in the relationship of anthropologists to Africa. "Into the Heart of Africa" belongs to a trend in anthropology that has moved toward the concentration on ourselves and our representations of others following post-colonial and postmodern critiques of anthropological practices.

It seems to me that one of the reasons that anthropology has historically valued research in Africa while other disciplines have not, relates directly to the roles that anthropology has traditionally played in the social sciences and to the current decline of interest in Africa. Michel-Rolph Trouillot claims that "anthropology fills a preestablished compartment within a wider symbolic field, the 'savage' slot of a thematic trilogy that helped to constitute the West as we know it." and that "[a]nthropology's future depends much on its ability to contest the savage slot and the thematic that constructs this slot" (1991:18).

As long as anthropology was primarily concerned with 'savages', Africa and other exotic locales were the heartland of anthropological work. In the current theoretical climate in which practises of essentialization of others as 'savages' are being criticised from within the anthropological community it is interesting to find that many anthropologists are turning toward studying the West. On the one hand the focus on the contestation of the savage slot has led to a considerable amount of work on how anthropologists and Westerners represent people of other areas of the globe. On the other hand the move away from studies in Africa and the move toward studies of locales in Europe and North America suggests to me that some anthropologists may be looking at these places because it is easier for them to deal with the abandonment of the 'savage slot' by focussing on areas where they do not expect to find savages. I want to make it clear that I am engaging in speculation at this point. Yet this is not wild speculation. Students of anthropology I have known have commented to me that I was still doing traditional anthropology simply because I happened to be studying Nigerian politics rather than Canadian politics. My suspicions are also fueled by incidents such as a colloquium I participated in 1994. The colloquium was entitled something along the lines of "the ethnography of complex society: bringing anthropology home". When I first met the organizer of this colloquium she told me that she did not consider herself to be an anthropologist because she studied complex societies (she might have said modern society). I replied that I studied complex society as well, and did not see why that would exclude her from being considered an anthropologist. Her point was that she studied dominant North American culture whereas I was interested in Africa. Evidently, she found it unproblematic to consider Canada and the U.S.A. as complex societies, while excluding Nigeria from this category. It seems to me that while, as Rabinow has stated, "Occidentalism is not a remedy for Orientalism" (1986), some anthropologists have found studying the West to be the easiest way to avoid confronting the challenges of the representation of others. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing states (1993:13):

Anthropologists have... [Among other things] turned toward the long-neglected study of dominant culture in Europe and the United States. Yet many of these admittedly rich responses retain one of the most problematic features of colonial discourse: the fantasized gulf between the West and its Other. The responses turn from the study of the Other to the study of the West, but they continue to ignore the complexity of cultural production within the interactions of colonizers and colonized.

The challenges to working in Africa are multiple. Yet I suggest that with the turn toward studies of transnational cultural flow and the postmodern condition, studies of African conditions are important to resisting the description of the postmodern condition as a uniform global phenomenon. I do not mean to suggest that Africa does not partake in postmodernity, rather, as studies of the current political, economic and social conditions in Africa demonstrate, the postmodern condition means very different things for Africans than it does for Americans, Europeans or Japanese. If explorers of postmodernity concentrate primarily on the West and other places where highly articulated
communication systems create interesting opportunities for rapidly accelerated cultural interchange, they run the risk of creating a vision of postmodernity that neglects the very vast areas of the globe that are marginalised by, yet are peculiarly integral to, these systems. Tsing differentiates her work on Kalamantan from other postmodern works writing (1993:9-10):

I join many other contemporary scholars who are interested in cultural heterogeneity and the trans-communal links through which "communities" are forged. Unlike much of this work, however, this book describes the kind of out-of-the-way terrain familiar from classic ethnographies, rather than focussing on urban centers, mass media, and the latest technological developments. Too often, generalizations about modern and postmodern cultural processes rest on surprisingly unfurnished stereotypes of primitive, traditional enclaves...

Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to current African predicaments as "post-modernization" rather than postmodern (1992:152). In my reading of this term, post-modernization stems from a realisation of the failure of modernization theories and the projects of creating nations out of colonially created states.

Africa presents a twist to Clifford and Appadurai's deterritorialized world of transnational cultures (1993:424), the study of which has centred on living in Western cities with ambiguous links to homelands (Appadurai 1993:424; Clifford 1992, 1994). For many Africans, deterritorialization is not a result of travel to other continents, or identification with cosmopolitanism and diasporic communities, rather it is a result of the collapse of states and their structures which leaves Africans (perhaps moving about locally to find refuge or work) in confused and disarticulated conditions in which state boundaries become increasingly meaningless.

Robert Kaplan's article in the Atlantic Monthly of February 1994 vividly describes some of the worst symptoms of a worsening crisis in Africa as a worrisome prediction of "what the political character of our planet is likely to be in the twenty-first century" (Kaplan 1994:45). He writes (ibid.:54):

Africa's immediate future could be very bad. The coming upheaval, in which foreign embassies are shut down, states collapse, and contact with the outside world takes place through dangerous disease-ridden coastal trading posts, will loom large in the century we are entering.... To understand the events of the next fifty years, then, one must understand environmental scarcity, cultural and racial clash, geographic destiny, and the transformation of war.


Mbembe and Roitman state (1995:324):

This "immediate time" and "present duration" are defined by the acute economic depression, the chain of upheavals and tribulations, instabilities, fluctuations and ruptures of all sorts (wars, genocide, large-scale movements of populations, sudden devaluations of currencies, natural catastrophes, brutal collapses of prices, breaches in provisioning, diverse forms of exaction, coercion and constraint) that make up the fundamental experiences of African societies over the last several years.

Mbembe and Roitman see kleptocracy, extortion, dissolution of authority, extraordinary anxiety, sense of loss, and dominant images of "abandonment and general decomposition" (328) as typifying the conditions prevailing in Cameroon. While postmodernists in the West may be excited by transnational communication systems, African countries are losing their communication, transportation and commercial infrastructure, leaving large segments of their populations without regular electricity let alone systems of international communication.

Work which centres on the more wealthy areas of the globe fails to be able to deal with this type of situation that is every bit as postmodern as the world of fax machines and cyberspace. While it is true that anthropology needs to be critical of the savage slot, anthropology has long had an important tradition of acting as a critical foil against the other social sciences that have a tendency to generalize about the conditions of humanity from Western experience. If postmodern anthropology continues to centre itself around the study of the West, it runs the risk of going along with dominant theories developed and extrapolated from Western experience.
REFERENCES


Bastine, Nicholas 1995. Personal Communication, York University, Toronto, Canada.


