

Full Length Research Paper

Teaching undergraduate social anthropology: Approaches and options

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This is a critical view of the situation of the teaching of undergraduate social Anthropology in Cameroon. In this short paper we give a brief statement of what Anthropology is about, the broad traditions in the discipline, the relevance of Social Anthropology as a social science discipline, how the discipline at the undergraduate level is taught in some of the universities of Cameroon, and probable options if the present situation of its teaching may be improved upon.

Key words: Options, teaching, undergraduate, Social Anthropology, Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropology is the study of humankind. Of all the disciplines that examine aspects of human existence and accomplishments, only Anthropology explores the entire panorama of the human experience from human origins to contemporary forms of culture and social life.

In Europe, Anthropology originated in the colonial encounter between Europe and colonised peoples, as Europeans tried to understand the origins of observable cultural diversity. Today, Anthropology is a global discipline, and anthropologists study all types of societies. It is one of the few places where humanities, social, and natural sciences are forced to confront one another. As such, it has been central in the development of several new interdisciplinary fields such as cognitive science, global studies and various ethnic studies.

In the United States of America contemporary Anthropology is generally divided into four subfields that loosely describe the subjects that are treated, rather than their theoretical perspective. The subfields are Bio-anthropology, Archaeology, Linguistic Anthropology, and Social or Cultural Anthropology. These fields frequently overlap, but tend to use different methodologies and

techniques.

Bioanthropologists seek to understand how humans adapt to diverse environments, how biological and cultural processes work together to shape growth, development and behavior. In addition, they are interested in human biological origins, evolution and variation. They give primary attention to investigating questions having to do with evolutionary theory, the place of man in nature, adaptation and human biological variation. To understand these processes, bioanthropologists study other primates [primatology], the fossil record [paleoanthropology], prehistoric people [bioarchaeology], biology (for example, health, cognition, hormones, growth and development) and genetics of living populations.

Archaeologists study past peoples and cultures, from the deepest prehistory to the recent past, through the analysis of material remains, ranging from artefacts and evidence of past environments to architecture and landscapes. Material evidence, such as pottery, stone tools, animal bone and remains of structures is examined within the context of theoretical paradigms, to address such topics as the formation of social groupings,

ideologies, subsistence patterns, and interaction with the environment. Like other areas of Anthropology, archaeology is a comparative discipline; it assumes basic human continuities over time and place, but also recognizes that every society is the product of its own particular history and that within every society there are commonalities as well as variation.

Linguistic Anthropology is the comparative study of ways in which language reflects and influences social life. It explores the many ways in which language practices define patterns of communication, formulate categories of social identity and group membership, organize large-scale cultural beliefs and ideologies, and, in conjunction with other forms of meaning-making, equip people with common cultural representations of their natural and social worlds.

Cultural or Social anthropologists are concerned with human social and cultural diversity and the bases of these distinctions, be they economic, political, environmental, biological; social roles, relationships, and social transformation; cultural identity; cultural dimensions of domination and resistance; and strategies for representing and analysing cultural knowledge.

In Great Britain and the Commonwealth countries, the British tradition of Social Anthropology tends to dominate. In some European countries, France for instance, the preferred term for cultural or social Anthropology is ethnology and is essentially [the systematic comparison of different cultures].

We would indicate the nuance suggested by the qualifications of "cultural" and "social" which affect Anthropology of the United States of America and of continental Europe respectively. Cultural Anthropology is the comparative study of the manifold ways in which people *make sense* of the world around them, while social Anthropology relates to *relationships* among persons and groups (Tim, 1994). Cultural Anthropology is more or less suggestive of philosophy, literature and the arts while social Anthropology tends to sociology and history.

As an academic tradition Anthropology is holistic. That is, it pays attention to a society as a functioning whole. Humanity is a very diverse and adaptable species, and no matter what one's special interest, anthropologists try to relate the process or subject of their study to a broader framework of what it means to be human. The broad scope of Anthropology also makes it a convenient discipline to house social scientists who study anthropological subjects but not necessarily from an anthropological perspective.

Introductory Anthropology has become an established part of the university curriculum. Through this course our profession communicates with a large and diverse undergraduate audience. Members of that audience differ in experience, academic concentration, and career aspirations. For those students considering Anthropology as

a major, we need to provide [among other things] a vision of the future, a view of anthropological work to be done in the public domain as well as within *academia*. For them we need to provide some answers to the question, "What can I do with a degree in Anthropology?" For students majoring in other areas, such as Business, Engineering, Education, Psychology, or Medicine, we need to address the question, "How can anthropological insights or research methods help me understand and solve such problems?" If we can provide such a service, we increase the likelihood that students will find creative solutions to the professional problems that await them, and we brighten the future for Anthropology majors by underscoring the usefulness of an anthropological perspective in attempts to solve the practical problems of today's world.

Over the years we have found that many introductory texts do little more than include a chapter on Applied Anthropology at the end of the book. This suggests, at least to students, that most of Anthropology has no relevance to their lives. Such treatment also implies that the application of anthropological knowledge is a mere parenthesis or postscript – at best an additional subject area, such as kinship or politics.

We disagree: we believe that the applications of Anthropology cut across and infuse all the discipline's subfields.

METHODOLOGY

Anthropological inquiry is guided by cultural relativism, the attempt to understand other societies in terms of their own cultural symbols and values. This project has become the field of ethnography. As a methodology, ethnography is based upon long-term fieldwork within a community or other research site. Anthropological research is typically conducted by the use of immersion within the community or context under study. The process of participant observation can be especially helpful to understanding a culture from an *emic* point of view.

It is important to distinguish between "culture" and "a culture." Whereas "culture" refers to the general history, processes and abilities that allow humans to acquire patterned, repetitive ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling and acting, "a culture" is the actual blueprint held by a particular group of people. One can thus refer to the "Basaa culture" or the "Igbo culture."¹ One can also refer to the ability of a human being to acquire a "culture."

Since our culture shapes the way we understand biology, culture becomes doubly important. One's own view of the environment is continually simplified and generalised. We constantly impose our own constructions and meanings on our surroundings. For simplicity, we call the constructions and meanings which characterise our culture our world-view. A world-view is a major feature of human biology, shaping how we perceive and use information.

Anthropologists study cultural practices all over the world in their attempt to understand the similarities and differences among

¹The Basaa people and the Igbo people are Bantu-speaking peoples in the vicinity of the Bight of Biafra on the coast of West Africa.

human beings. In *Social Anthropology* specifically, we are mostly concerned with the institutions and social structure of small-scale social entities.² For a given group we consider the rules which are generally accepted and the social forces which support these rules. The structure of social units and their maintenance processes, as well as the way institutionalised activities and symbols promoted collective impulse and a sense of group identification are central to the social anthropological approach to the study of society. The interactions of individuals are described and analysed in order to bring out the functional (or dysfunctional) contribution which these activities conveyed to the total system.

Since we are largely interested in the way societies are very different from those of the industrialised worlds of North America, Europe and Russia work, we sometimes try to picture what these were like before they became radically transformed by influences from outside.

In the purview of the wider aim of our discipline, namely, that anthropological studies would lead to a reflection on the nature of man, on resemblances and variety in the human kind, and on some explanation of the latter, the need to study these societies seems to be the more urgent considering the rather frenzied pace at which they are changing. Supposing that all could get transformed and that the world would become one in kind,³ it would do that these societies are studied now when they still can be studied so that unique structural variations would be conserved albeit in literature for how useful they would be in our efforts to attain greater insights into the nature of human society (Evans-Pritchard, 1980).

The anthropological perspective has additional relevance for those parts of the world which used to be under colonial domination: in new arrangements, groups with vast differences in world-views, collective representations and customs, comprise what we would call "states" in the modern sense. It necessarily would take a good knowledge of as much of the world-views of the entities which comprise a modern multi-society state and that these differences are taken into account in policy formulation for the state to have some orderliness and harmony among its people;⁴ this would apply *a fortiori* in schemes of policy implementation as has been revealed when many a change-directed scheme [development projects] which involved participatory kits have been appraised (Chambers, 1992).

The more that is known about the dynamics and organisation of societies, at all levels, the more it is possible to ensure that particular groups are not excluded or disadvantaged by planned

²Until quite recently it was still fashionable to refer to Anthropology as the study of primitive societies – "primitive societies" meaning, societies which do not have a system of writing, which did not use machines and which apparently *had no history*. For its derogatory imports and because in twentieth-century thought it was associated with societies which were close to a hypothetical state of nature, the term "primitive" is in dis-use now. Many studies since the birth of Anthropology on these so-called primitive societies have revealed complexity and sometimes cultural sophistication. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1967: 32, 46) would in this regard write that there are no "*peuples enfants*," and that Australian Aborigines, who apparently seemed so primitive had a family organisation for instance, which was so complex that that in western societies appear as quite simple. The so-called primitive societies are disappearing. Primitive societies have been greatly affected by western technology and values such that their original and specific order, modes of thought and beliefs which used to be the object of research by anthropologists have been completely transformed.

³We would have said, with the implication of some sort of disappearances.

⁴We are not saying anything new here: this had been the practice of British indirect colonial administration of dominated peoples. The British, to some extent took account of deep knowledge on the customs of native peoples they derived from the studies of expert anthropologists, for them to be able to manage them.

change [development]. Although one does not need to be an academic anthropologist to obtain this information, it seems immediate to us that understanding what questions to ask is primarily an anthropological skill.

So much on what our discipline is about, on its methods, and on its relevance in a world of rapid change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Inserting a discipline in a system of training is one of the surest guarantees of its development and of the widening of its audience. However, reflection on the methods of teaching as much as on techniques and general knowledge of the discipline seldom features in themes of scientific fora among researchers and academics. In Cameroon (UNESCO, 2007), in particular, it is left to the initiative of some *specialists* around entities in government departments charged with learning, which in turn and in the name of the pedagogical autonomy of universities and juries, consider that the manner of teaching a teacher opts for is his responsibility and his alone. Well, let us consider where this has led us to.

Efficiency in any domain arises from one's mastery of his art: every experience of difficulty in the practice of any discipline, and more so in the practice of an academic discipline ultimately varies in acuity and urgency with the resources the practitioner himself constitutes in the practice of his art. This always begins with the tradition in which he was trained and the very quality of the training he has.

For the purpose of orientation, we began with a statement on what Anthropology broadly deals with and its relevance as a social science discipline: all problems as may be encountered in the teaching of undergraduate Anthropology would be a function of the amount of Anthropology a purported teacher knows, and of the tradition in which he was trained.

It is our thinking that a fairly good grasp of what Anthropology is concerned with and what would be the objective of a university *cursus* in the discipline should be the starting point of any brainstorming on the teaching of Anthropology. This would serve as an ideology as it is always required for any reasoned and orderly action.

Anthropology has come to us in a number of forms. In a notable form it may be simply Archaeology and History. It may also be related in African Studies and Development Sociology. Otherwise, it has in some places taken the form of Art History, Folklore and some discipline related to Linguistics.

For our universities in Africa the major form of the discipline relates it to the social sciences – hence our Anthropology would be *Social Anthropology*. Although it involves plenty of knowledge and methods culled from the natural sciences, even Bioanthropology has very close links with the social sciences. To a large extent it boils down to the study of anatomical and physiological

mutations caused by, for some living species, the advent of social life, of language, of a system of values and, to talk in a more general manner, of culture.

For every section in the academics, it is hoped [expected] that the faculty agree on what kind of Anthropology that they teach or on various dosages of the various types they wish to have in the *cursus* for Anthropology.

Supposing that in the university every section has a coordinator, it would be hoped that in the distribution of courses among those who teach in the section, consideration be taken of the content of the Ph.D. degree or other certificates the teachers who are variously assigned hold. The objective teachers of Social Anthropology set for themselves would seldom be attained if the distribution of courses is randomly done. In our experience we are acquainted with instances where the teacher assigned to teach a course of mainstream Social Anthropology holds a degree the content of which is deficient [if not bereft] of what it should contain for the holder to be a competent teacher for the given course; cases of *teachers* of Social Anthropology whose acquaintance with the discipline is not better than acquaintance with rudimentary Social Anthropology as one would find in an ancillary course in some *cursus* like a diploma in Social Work, Social Studies, Theology, Women's Studies and things of that sort.

A teacher must earn the prerogative to teach others. On the specific question of the traditions in which teachers of Social Anthropology acquired their training, of primary importance should be the nature of the academic award which the teacher claims to hold: a teacher for undergraduate Social Anthropology – one who may be assigned to teach courses of the mainstream and especially courses which relate to the nature of anthropological data and explanation in Anthropology – should have had definite field experiences and done a thesis [in the traditional sense of the term] as fulfilment of requirements for admission to the degree he claims to hold. Whenever a teacher whose training is known not to have involved a sufficiently deep immersion in the philosophy of our discipline as it should be done in a formal university *cursus* on graduate Social Anthropology [a Master's degree with a thesis] is assigned to teach courses of the mainstream, his work must be closely monitored by his supervisor and necessarily *repeated*⁵ by another teacher whose academic profile suggests a more consistent and adequate training as would enable one to truly be a teacher for Social Anthropology in a university. Within the departments, teachers may be grouped according to related domains of specialisms and organised to teach groups of courses together. In the various groups

the teachers would in the years rotate in the teaching of the courses. This would enable the sharing of experiences and perhaps improved instruction at a personal level, for those teachers with insufficiencies in their admissions [academic training].

We would not disregard concerns which relate to insufficiencies in the preparedness of candidates who enrol for Social Anthropology prior to their enrolment for the Bachelor's degree programme [*programmes de Licence et de Maîtrise*] in Social Anthropology. Up till 1968, Anthropology in some countries of the northern hemisphere was an option open only to those who had had at least two years of higher learning in the context of certain vocational training or museum activity, and to postgraduates wishing to be initiated into research. Sometimes lectures in Anthropology and Sociology were associated and according to the case, mandatory or optional lectures in Anthropology were offered. Otherwise some form of introduction featured in various social science disciplines⁶ at various lower level certificate examinations. In the designing of the undergraduate *cursus* for Social Anthropology – if there must be one, and why not – designers should be mindful of the insufficiency we named above as teachers are expected to calibrate their teaching accordingly. We would specifically *disrecomm*end the practice in which a teacher alone would as he wished, decide and water down the constituted contents of the course he was assigned to teach and teach it just like that – the teacher may formulate questions of some aspects of Social Anthropology and give some guide on how to answer them as examination questions or purely and simply give his own answers and encourage his students to memorise them. Criticisms from some quarters have sometimes likened our activity to some folklore! This would explain the events of final year students and graduates who are still unable to tell even generally what Anthropology is about, or recognise it when they meet it. Once, in a general conversation in a bus,⁷ a graduate in Anthropology from one of our universities [Cameroon] said that she decided to take a degree in Anthropology because “it seemed the easiest of options for the English-speaking. The degree programme turned out to be, it seemed to her, very much like some crash event of scanty seminars” on some so-called anthropological issues. She could barely give a sketch of its content: it [her knowledge of Anthropology] seemed so bland that she wondered whether she “learned anything at all.”

Grades of attainment aside, a graduate in Social Anthropology should really be one; he should have sufficient knowledge on the subject matter of the discipline and on how the Social Anthropologist works. It may have been thought that the usual length of time of

⁵This may be achieved in arrangements of tutorial encounters in which students are specifically guided on how to think and work and write as Social Anthropologists.

⁶Human Geography, Social Studies, Sociology and such others.

⁷We were travelling by the same vehicle from Bamenda to Yaoundé.

three years it takes to do a general degree is insufficient for an undergraduate *cursus* in Social Anthropology considering the fact that there had been no acquaintance with the discipline before candidates began in the undergraduate degree programme. If there must be an undergraduate programme we would propose a re-consideration of the content of the current degree programme to rid it of adventitious and *para*-Anthropology entities, and core courses of greater consistency obligatorily taught for more than one semester. Alternatively, introductory Social Anthropology courses could be submerged in accommodating Sociology courses in addition to a fairly “thick” “Introduction to Social Anthropology” as it normally should feature in a general degree programme in Sociology. Full courses of Social Anthropology would be reserved for the graduate class.

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