Audience Research and Cultural Identity in Africa: An Anthropological Perspective

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Abstract
This talk addresses the theme of audience research and cultural identity in Africa from an anthropological perspective. Given the importance of the socio-cultural context and in view of the hierarchies that inform human relations, anthropological insights are critical for understanding the dynamics of persuasive communication and how audiences of different social backgrounds and positions relate to the media that target them. Using Africa as an entry point, this talk discusses the intricate interconnections between anthropology and communication, arguing that different forms of the one beget different forms of the other, and that the quality of audience research in any context requires paying closer attention this nexus.

What is communication?

Communication is the process of production of meaning, through symbolic action. It is possible for someone who suddenly appears, by some miracle or act of magic on a virgin island, to produce acts that are meaningful, to himself. But let us explore the limits of these meanings. For lack of a better example, let's name this man Friday, because the only book I have read that makes me think of this situation is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. When Friday and Robinson meet for the first time, they start foraging for mutual intelligibility. They realise that communication is public, that meaning is made in a social context.

Communication as a social act is the process by which negotiated or collective meaning is produced, circulated and consumed by social actors. Communication can take place interpersonally through the use of language or non-verbally – think of body gestures *à la* Charlie Chaplin and the silent movie tradition. Or communication can take place through various mediated forms where human presence is reduced or virtually eliminated through delegation to technologies.

Ideally, social communication should be democratic, that is if democracy is even realisable in important ways in our everyday lives. But let's not complicate things; let's assume democracy is possible and does indeed exist – somewhere in our world of inequalities, even if we need a heavy duty magnifying glass to detect it.

Unfortunately for democracy, society and the social are shaped by hierarchies of various kinds, hierarchies informed by but not confined to considerations such as gender, geography, race, class, status, age, and education. And democracy is tainted by the reality that the most privileged persons and groups within particular hierarchical orders maintain the hierarchies. And feel it their right – acquired by birth and inheritance or achieved through personal or

collective ingenuity or industry – to own and control the communication process, by determining who shall play what role in the social production, circulation and consumption of meaning.

The Fridays of society can continue to claim or aspire to have the voice and agency to activate their creative imaginations to the fullest, but if the Robinsons exercise the full extent of the power deriving from their ownership and control, the voices of the Fridays are reduced to deafening silence through various acts and mechanisms of domestication. By domestication I mean taming, or bringing the wild home to civilisation, through acts of conversion and obfuscation – in the manner we tame and train animals like dogs, cats, monkeys, lions, or elephants or discipline newly born human beings in the name of socialisation. Sooner or later the Fridays become perfectly in tune with their circumstances, the order of things, and what is expected of them in society and social relations. At least so it seems to the triumphant Robinsons who, in the words of Chinua Achebe, have the yam and the knife. Unequal communication suddenly becomes participatory, because the Fridays appear to contest nothing, even to the point of seemingly celebrating and encouraging their own subjugation, claiming their subservience and lowliness of status to be the one best thing ever to have happened to them. And here, we are still talking about individual societies and the power dynamics within them.

If we provide for societies, just like Friday, not being islands – given human capacity for mobility – a question arises as to what happens between societies interconnected by human mobility. What happens when one social system encounters another through various forms of mobility? The logic of hierarchies internal to each society does not disappear with such encounters. Like in a game of boxing or most other games for that matter, the winner takes all. Zero sum games and prioritisation of difference are the order of the day in the world we inhabit. Similitude and inclusivity are more dreamed and talked about than realised. Societies that come out victorious in such encounters – however transient their victories – impose their will, and with this, their own communicative order, drawing on repertoires they have perfected with time and the whims and caprices of victory, and on systems of representation and practice that have become second nature to its members.

Hierarchies introduced by agents of the mobile victor society either blend in with local hierarchies of the vanquished or captive society, or, in case of persistent resistance to the logic of force, create and encourage parallel hierarchies aimed at subverting and supplanting existing ones. A good example in this regard is the colonial encounter, where instead of foraging for mutual intelligibility on equal terms by promoting conversation, the colonising societies conversed by brute force and imposed their worldviews, representations and practices through the guise of benevolence and the sharing and globalising of supposed superior values of human civilisation.

Different types of relationships require different forms of communication. If one privileges hierarchies and inequalities – especially when these work in one's favour – the tendency would be for one to seek to reproduce, even by brute force

if necessary, these hierarchies and inequalities and one's advantages therein. One would instinctively distance oneself from any form of interaction that challenges, contests or seeks to mitigate this particular order of relationships, especially if one is able to calculate a priori or foresee the detrimental outcomes to one's interests. Communication for such a person, far from being horizontal, democratic and participatory, tends to be thunderously vertical, top down, dictatorial, directive and prescriptive (in the manner eloquently captured in Charlie Chaplin's film *The Great Dictator*), where there is a clear sense of autocratic authority and totalitarian legitimacy regarding who qualifies to initiate what manner of communicative act, and with what consequences. In such communication, there is no doubt where and with whom power lies. There is no equivocation about who can speak how to whom, or who can assume what posture when addressing or listening, representing or being represented.

Those lower down the hierarchy of credibility or authority and legitimacy are not expected, within this order of things, to initiate anything. They are meant to be passive recipients of communicative acts centrally conceived by or with the benediction of the authorities at the heart of the hierarchy of credibility in place. They are expected to enact prescribed directions of social action without question and in accordance with the rules and regulations at play. It is not their role to think and exercise their minds independently or to act, behave or deploy their bodies as if they were autonomous beings with freedom of imagination, however free they imagine themselves to be. The tendency in this model is to consider those targeted by persuasive communication as an essentially passive audience to be manipulated into compliance with the expectations or prescriptions of those who know best. People are treated as patients cuing up at a hospital to be injected by expert doctors and nurses who have diagnosed and determined their disease and its cure. The mechanics of communication are overly emphasised, as the role of the expert and the initiator of communicative content is dramatized to the detriment of specific audiences.

Indeed, those targeted by such highly centralised persuasive communication are supposed to posture themselves as passive receptacles of representations and gazes by the mightily powerful and not presume or purport to have counter gazes and representations of their own. Nothing worthwhile – not even inconsequential rumour and babble (never mind the famous 1984 speech of *"la vérité vient d'en haut, la rumeur vient d'en bas"* by Paul Biya, who has been president of Cameroon since November 1982 – i.e. for over 32 years)[1] – is expected to originate from those debased to the lowest rungs of humanity or human society – those we have the habit of fondly, patronisingly or condescendingly calling 'the grassroots and the laymen', 'ordinary people', 'the masses' and 'the working classes' (or those who hail from inferior races, places, spaces, cultures, genders, and generations or whatever bears the brunt of inferiority in a particular setting) – , even when these are the

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[1] see *Cameroon Tribune* No. 3080, vendredi 21 septembre 1984 for Paul Biya's "truth comes from above, rumour comes from below" speech; and for Henri Bandolo's argument in support of President Biya and the official media as privileged sources.

targets of particular communicative acts requiring them to imbibe and practice ideas of being human which we hold dear and are evangelical about.

Within these types of communication models (be they in politics, institutions or within scholarly circles), there is much *talking at, talking on, talking past, talking around and talking to, but little talking with* those targeted by the persuasive communication in question. Similarly, there is much acting at, acting on, acting past, acting around and acting on behalf of but little acting with those of interest and of whom much adaptation is expected by the prescriptive authorities and gazes. *Action on* is privileged to the detriment of *interaction with* those one considers, who are related to as if they were inferior and dependent. If the inferior stubbornly exude a capacity to act or react in unpredictable ways, it is upon themselves that they should exercise their sterile agency, because it is considered, a priori, out of the question – indeed an aberration – that such creative imagination should be directed upwards, to their superiors. Anger, contestation and the contemplation of alternatives are inimical to social reproduction. Superiors use communication to establish independence for themselves and confer dependence upon their inferiors. Any communication model that remotely suggests interdependence beyond rhetoric or lip service is savagely resisted.

Within this frame of interconnecting global and local hierarchies of communicative power and relationships, technologies of communication, however promising and democratic in principle and in abstraction, tend to work to reproduce these patterns of inequalities and inequities. It is true that humans and technologies are increasingly interdependent, and that the capacity of humans and technology to act on each other shapes society and social relations significantly. However, the agency of communication technologies is dependent on human enablers. Technologies are only as powerful as human volition allows them to be. Information and communication technologies or ICTs enhance one's toolkit, allowing one to develop new initiatives and responses. They become an extra layer of armour in the uncertainties of negotiated hierarchies. While they can be used to enhance dominance, they may also be used to resist or reject, if only temporarily, marginalisation in society.

Reconfiguration of the social does not imply its overhaul, but a mobility of its structures and agents, guided and limited by a reconstitution of the political economy of information exchange. In some cases and under extreme relationships of inequality (such as slavery, colonialism and apartheid), certain humans have been reduced to things, subhumans, machines or technologies of production by and for the gratification of others – usually very powerful and laying exclusive claims to superiority and/or humanity – who consider them property, things or commodities to be acquired, used and abused at will. This possibility cautions against an a priori confinement of technologies to machines or things, as people are not disinclined to enhance themselves by debasing others.

What is Anthropology?

Anthropology brings intellectual and academic curiosity to bear on human beings as socially cultivated and cultivating agents. Its primary focus as a discipline is on the processes of creative innovation of humans as social beings. A central assumption in anthropology is that relationships are central to human action and interaction, and that society or the social would not be possible if every person were to live their lives in splendid isolation. Indeed, anthropologists would argue that without relationships and sociality, there is no humanity. John Donne must have spoken for anthropologists when he wrote: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. […] any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."[2]

A basic tenet of anthropology is that it takes more than biology to make human life possible, sustainable and meaningful. Nature matters as nurture in human matters and for the human to matter. It is in this sense that many an anthropologist makes an extra effort to qualify themselves with prefixes such as social or cultural, to emphasise the point that while nature is important, nurture is critically significant in the production and reproduction of the social. Culture would not be possible without the capacity in humans to embrace and transcend nature simultaneously. In his seminal essay, *Idea of Culture*, Bernard Fonlon (1965) defines culture as that which brings the growth of humans "under the control of right reason" and guides that growth "according to sound knowledge" in the interest of the perfection sought by humans (p.10). He argues that human beings are not simply contented with being, as they must exercise their power of becoming. "Driven by… need, and helped by observation and experiment, the human mind – the supreme architect of culture – elaborates a system of thought laying down a method of using the external world to satisfy that need" (p.13). Fonlon likens culture to cultivation, and uses the analogy of tillage in agriculture to explain tillage in human culture. Both in terms of cultivation in culture and in agriculture Fonlon writes:

> "Thanks to tillage, therefore, thanks to the purpose, the knowledge, the labour and the skill of man, that which would have been wild becomes *tame*, that which would have been scattered at haphazard is set *in order*, that which would have been stunted attains its *plenitude* and a yield that would have been lean becomes *rich* both in quality and in quantity." (p.6)

While cultivation of plants is limited to agriculture, the cultivation of humans is the exclusive preserve of culture where the human being is both tiller and tilled in that "each human being cultivates himself, cultivates his faculties, takes an active and essential part in his own education", and just as "some human beings cultivate others, the generation that goes before educates that which follows after" (p.8). The ultimate intention of culture, Fonlon argues, is to procure for the

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human being a "happiness of a higher nature, first by a thorough, deep and balanced development of his faculties, that is, his senses, his feelings, his mind and his will, and next by supplying each faculty with the nourishment for which it hungers: truth for the mind, goodness for the will and beauty for sense and feeling." (p.8) Human beings have got to actively participate in their own cultivation. Human culture grows from age to age, as each generation draws on "the cultural legacy that it has inherited from the past, and enriches this legacy further with new discoveries of its own in science and philosophy, new creations in art" (p.9).

Culture and cultivation in the Fonlon sense is central to anthropology as a discipline anchored on the social shaping of nature. Over the history of anthropology, various metaphors have been used to describe this process of culture and cultivation of nature. We have become accustomed to terms such as enculturation, socialisation, habituation, assimilation, collectivisation, indoctrination, and civilisation, as processes aimed at producing culture (through the internalisation and embodiment of certain representations and practices consecrated as legitimate within a given context informed by particular relationships).

The economic minded among us would be right to consider culture and the identities that cultures make possible as the stock in trade of social and cultural anthropologists. And among anthropologists thinking on culture has come a long way. There used to be a time when it was common currency for anthropologists to think, relate to and research culture as if culture were a birthmark. Cultures tended to be defined and confined to particular races, particular geographies, particular classes and social categories, and particular groups of people. It was assumed that once born into and cultivated within a given culture one was literally confined by it. So one had elite, middle class, working class or popular culture at birth and for life, regardless of how much effort one invested in outgrowing or complementing the cultural confines of their birth and upbringing. Culture was like a sort of imprisonment for life in a maximum security prison with barbwire and electric fences so tall and so dangerous that no prisoner, however desirous or daring could want or be allowed to covet the world and attractions of life beyond their solitary confinement.

Such suffocating ideas of culture presented individuals as hapless victims or hostages of the collective consciousness of the societies or cultural communities into which they were born and cultivated. Societies, large or small, were treated as bounded, self-contained, inward looking and navel gazing entities or organisms, where history and progress were possible only as internally induced and utterly autonomous processes. Every culture, every people, according to this idea of culture, lived their lives in splendid isolation, like Friday did. Robinson Crusoe could do very little to convert and domesticate him into the English language, Christianity and the Civilisation he mediated. There was no mobility across cultural boundaries, which were purportedly heavily policed, to discourage traffic in contraband ideas, values and the things of others. Purity was the aspiration or

expectation, and anthropologists often conducted themselves and their studies as if such aspirations or expectations were reality.

Anthropology as Communication through Mobility

Culture or cultivation is impossible without communication, and communication entails mobility – physical and social, individual and collective, of people, things and ideas. To transmit is to mobilise and activate through relationships. Factoring mobility or immobility into our thinking on collective identities (be these articulated as "tribalism", "ethnicity", "nationalism" or otherwise) helps us understand the rise and fall of certain currents in anthropological thought and the suffrage enjoyed by certain communication models within those systems of thought. It is fascinating the extent to which mobility is at the heart of anthropology – starting from the early days of Edward Tylor, when cultures were perceived to evolve from one stage to another, and difference in culture was seen to be much more due to the different stages of a unilinear progression than an attribute of the race, place or biological configuration of the various peoples living particular cultures.

Mobility of humans, ideas and material things entails encounters and the production or reproduction of similarities and difference, as those who move or are moved tend to position themselves or be positioned in relation to those they meet and to one another. While every cultural community is dynamic or mobile within itself, technologies of mobility make possible movement between places and spaces where particular cultural configurations predominate. Thanks to mobility, cultural encounters informed by interconnecting hierarchies are possible, and have been throughout the histories of encounters. It is also thanks to mobility that anthropology as a discipline is possible. Even armchair anthropologists depended on accounts harnessed by some kind of mobility to make possible their representation of those they sought to understand.

Anthropology in many regards is about privileged and underprivileged mobility. Who gets to move or whose mobility is privileged shall determine whose version of what encounters is documented, disseminated, consumed and reproduced as ideas and in the form of symbolic and material representations. According to a popular African saying, until the lion has the opportunity to tell its own story, the history of the hunt shall always favour the hunter. Applied to communication and anthropology, until the dominated or subaltern, sometimes referred to as the voiceless, have the opportunity to document anthropologically and communicate their own experiences and relationships, the anthropology and communication of their realities, however sophisticated and purportedly democratically and empathetically rendered, shall always favour the insensitivities and interests of the dominant forces in their lives.

Anthropologists have for long been more mobile than those they study. Or rather, they have tended to foreground, in their scholarly communications, their own mobility much more than the mobility of those they study. They carry on about their "fieldwork trips", so central to anthropology. They carry on about the

people (others) they study, assumed to be "immobilised" by frozen traditions and customs and confined to particular geographies and spaces. Because the mobility of the anthropologist is privileged over and above the mobility of those he or she studies, the anthropologist arrogates to him or herself the status of omniscient mediator of cultural identities and encounters. The anthropologist enjoys the prerogative and luxury of freezing the subjects and objects of their study outside the local and global historical contexts that give them meaning and relevance. Many an anthropologist also underplays the power dynamics that favours their perspectives or interpretations of their encounters with the immobilised or frozen subjects.

The emphasis in many an anthropological circle on the "ethnographic present" means many anthropologists study culture outside historical perspective, which leads to easy associations and problematic correlations. Without a historical perspective, it might not be possible to fathom the full extent to which the ethnographic encounters of the present are productive of culture. Certain manners of doing and communicating anthropological research could be productive of culture – that is, giving birth to what is not, from how the anthropologist re-presents what is. In this regard, anthropologists are far more powerful than they imagine or present themselves. The fact that the ethnographies they produce can have limited circulation makes it possible for anthropologists to *talk at* and *talk on* – at exclusive conferences for example – but hardly *talk to* or *talk with* those they study. If an anthropologist's representations are endorsed by their peers or other instances of legitimation, a new cultural baby is born, baptised and confirmed. The people re-presented shall be known as this or that – not so much according to how they define and relate to themselves but according to what the anthropologist has successfully sold at the marketplace of ideas.

There is much more to the identities of people, places and spaces than anthropologists document or have to say about them. There is such a thing as Who, What, Where, When, Why and How the people, places and spaces are, with or without an interpreter, intermediary or interlocutor for the outside world. It is unfortunate that anthropology seems better known as a handmaiden of colonialism and for producing or reproducing radical alterity than for its contribution to the study of identities as contested, flexible and fluid. Anthropology's uncritical reproduction of the hierarchized and differentiated world of those with ambitions of dominance has left it with little suffrage in Africa as a discipline.

Persistent negative perceptions of anthropology mean that exciting new developments within its ranks are going unnoticed by its critics outside the discipline. For example, the idea of "mobile natives" (with some degree of freedom, as opposed to bounded mobility as slaves and indentured labour) is very recent in anthropology, and with it, the idea that field trips need not necessarily imply going away from home. One needs not leave the metropolis to study ethnic identities and cultural differences in a truly interconnected and entangled world, just as one does not have to be an outsider in the classic anthropological sense to study a given community or sets of relationships. This calls for an approach to

doing and communicating anthropological research that is increasingly subtle, contextual and nuanced in how people, places and spaces relate and interrelate, an approach that is as curious about what is *apparently* familiar as it is about the *obviously* strange. Such positive developments are yet to be better communicated and promoted within anthropology as well as among its critics who continue to think of its excesses under colonialism and as a foot soldier for neoliberalism and the penetration and domination of the rest of the world by the West.

The mobility of cultures does not immediately translate into *mutual* cultural influence as such influence is often dependent on power relations that characterise encounters and shape whose perceptions, however problematic and contested, shall carry the day. One might imagine anthropologists among the most culturally adaptable, flexible and nimble of creatures – in the manner of a salesman who uses his own product, or a preacher who practices his preaching –, given the much touted participant observation method of cross cultural conversations and meaning making. But alas, we, like other humans, are very much cultural leopards. We hardly change our spots. Paradoxically, we expect those we study to make sense to us on our own terms! Wittingly or not, we are itinerant evangelists or salesmen and women for certain forms of rationality even when we preach cultural relativism. It is not enough to argue in favour of place and space for all cultures, without making an effort to go native in a real way, to understand the thrills and challenges of living the life of another in a context of skewed and unfavourable power relations.

Fonlon reminds us that "the world of things gives rise to the world of thought and the world of thought engenders the world of verbal expression," adding that "[n]ext to thought, language is the first cultural necessity, the first cultural invention" of humankind. To Fonlon, "There can be no culture without language, no language without culture. Culture and language, or expression, are one" (p.12). Herein lies the intimate interconnection or inextricable entanglement between anthropology and communication. A good anthropologist is difficult to envisage without the attributes of a skilled communicator. Anthropology and communication are like Siamese twins. Paradoxically, interest in communication studies is yet to become mainstream in anthropological circles, just as interest in anthropology is yet to have a commanding presence in communication studies circles.

Clifford Geertz (1973) is one of the anthropologists who recognises the centrality of communication and cultural context of knowledge production in anthropology. He argues that culture as socially established structures of meaning is public because meaning is public (p.12). He advocates an approach to anthropology where interpretation of symbolic action is privileged over explanation. To him, the study of rules and regulations in abstraction is hardly enough to understand the workings of any particular society or cultural system. In his words, "Behaviour must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behaviour – or, more precisely, social action – that cultural forms find articulation" (p.17). He adds: "The ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which

exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be consulted" (p.19).

Interpretive or symbolic anthropology, as Geertz's approach has come to be known, focuses on meaning and understanding within a particular cultural context – a sort of cultural logic. Interpretive anthropology assumes research is an inter-subjective process of meaning making and calls for the researcher to be aware of meaning not only as contextually specific but also as open to constant negotiation and renegotiation. It is an anthropology that privileges events and social action and the different layers of meaning they assume and, therefore, rigorous and systematic observation of how things unfold on the ground in a layered and nuanced manner. It calls for a distinct style of fieldwork involving copious field notes detailing events and interactions and use of all the five senses. Geertz uses the metaphor of "Thick Description" for interpretive ethnographic writing. Thick Description is "interpretive of […] the flow of social discourse; and the interpreting involved consists in trying to rescue the 'said' of such discourse from its perishing occasions and fix it in perusable terms" (p.20), such that a practice or phenomenon might pass away or be altered, but its ethnography as a document remains. To him, Thick Description has to be "microscopic" which "is not to say that there are no large-scale anthropological interpretations of whole societies, civilisations, world events, and so on" (p.21).

Through the example of his Balinese Cock Fight, we are invited to contemplate the possibilities implicit in avoiding the obvious when we do fieldwork, both in the questions we ask, and where and how we look for answers to these questions. To settle on cock fights – something rendered illegal, by a ban by Dutch colonial authorities, and therefore largely invisible – is not exactly obvious for a researcher who sets off with a clear research project informed by a definite conceptual framework and a set of questions around well-defined hypotheses. Yet, it is that unintended encounter with cock fighting that led Geertz to open the world of anthropology up not only to cock fighting as a metaphor for masculinity, status and prestige among Balinese men, but also, through engaging Jeremy Bentham's notion of "deep play", to introduce the idea that apparently irrational behaviour is best appreciated through a deep understanding of the cultural logic that underpins it, than through a rationality of universal enlightenment and its utilitarian values. In other words, there is much more to irrationality than meets the eye – one person's cultural meat is another's cultural poison. There is sense in madness and nonsense. Therein lies the famous cultural relativism that we talk so much about.

Geertz's interpretive anthropology is useful for studying specific cultural systems with dominant cultural logics. Given increasingly flexible mobility for people, ideas and material culture and the imperative of constantly renegotiating meaning, how do we creatively and critically re-appraise and re-orientate the assumptions of culturally specific logics central to interpretive anthropology? How does one reconcile the need to contest essentialisms with the critical recognition that cultural contexts and logics matter in the production of meaning?

Anthropology has progressed from functionalist models of evolutionary change through binary oppositions of structuralism, to an understanding of culture and the social as dynamic and constantly renegotiated with everyday social interactions, equal and unequal encounters at local and global levels. What new configuration do such flexibilities and fluidities bring to interpretive anthropology as an approach that privileges cultural particularism and its logic to universalism and its euro-centric modernisation epistemologies? To what extent are current flexibilities and fluidities a reflection of more horizontal forms of power among differently and differentially located cultures and anthropologists in their encounters?

There is a lot more to claims of mobility and encounters than meets the eye. The culture with the power to enforce its ambitions of dominance defines itself and the less empowered cultures it encounters. And participant observation is seldom engaging enough or with adequate equality in encounters for anthropologists to confront and contextualise the rhetoric of cultural relativism. Unequal power dynamics continue to reinvent themselves, which means that even when cross cultural influences are evident in the lives of people, the tendency remains to want to define and confine such influences in very narrow terms – calling them melting pot, multiculturalism, hybridity, or rainbow nation. Such resilience of bounded notions of culture, which are clearly socially and politically produced, are at the service of vested interests in defining and confining.

Communicating Anthropology in the Age of Technologies of Freedom

Nyamnjoh is the king of doom and gloom – he loves complicating things, and wouldn't acknowledge even what the blind can see! We could do with a bit of optimism, some wishful thinking, call it false consciousness if you like, as long as we can access it from time to time. People do not live by doom and gloom alone. How can Nyamnjoh not notice the difference advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have made to how we go about the business of doing and communicating anthropology in the 21st century? Gone are the Malinowski days of fieldwork, which involved arranging one perilous form of transportation after another to a "remote" locality and transporting stationery, a typewriter (if one could afford one) and enough subsistence and medication for months away from kin and kith.

With the proliferation of possibilities through internet and social media, the pressures of publish or perish have abated, as anthropologists can now explore blogging and other dissemination channels, which include self-publishing and print on demand publications. The cell phone has revolutionised communication in the field and between the field and the outside world. With the availability of internet connectivity and the cell phone, no village seems too remote to be accessed or to stay in touch with the rest of the world. The digitally enhanced possibilities of networking have multiplied beyond contemplation, not only for anthropologists in and out of the field, but also for those they study. The native is no longer as acutely technologically disadvantaged or inferior as was the case when Malinowski conjured up and instituted fieldwork as an approach to knowledge production. So how can

Nyamnjoh address us in apparent ignorance of these developments? What is even more perplexing, how can he not draw on his very own research on the impact of these technological advances and how they have transformed anthropological communication?

My response is simple: I hear you. So let's dream together.

How I wish anthropology and communication scholars alike could avoid modernisation pretentions – or assumptions that those they study need social change – and that they and their disciplines are best placed to bring about that change. Research driven by such evangelical zeal seems to focus on the *effectiveness* of the techniques of persuasion, diffusion and adoption of innovations (à la Rogers 1962; 1973). I know just how eager some of us are to indict the social structures and traditions of those cultural beliefs and practices we consider desperately need abandonment in the interest of what we extravagantly love to call "development" or "modernisation". Those of us who are disciples of this current of thought tend to see tradition in terms of impediment to development and the traditional power elite as gatekeepers against modernisation. When we seek to understand the social structures of the societies we study, it is to determine how best these structures could be replaced by so-called "modern" ones.

We have convinced ourselves that tradition has little or nothing to offer, while modernity has everything to offer. The one is an eternal hell of darkness, the other an eternal paradise of enlightenment. We refuse to repent from an idea of anthropology and of communication where salvation comes from superior others (be these development experts or academics) situated (most preferably) outside the societies or social categories we pretend to study. We develop and force-feed our students and unsuspecting others what Peter Golding has aptly termed theories of "exogenously induced change", which theories suggest that some societies are "static" and that such "static societies are brought to life by outside influences, technical aid, knowledge, resources and financial assistance and (in a slightly different form) by the diffusion of ideas" (Golding 1974:43).

Such exogenously induced social change type of research often stresses efficiency and practicality, is mostly atheoretical and ahistorical in nature, hardly relies on well-formulated or tested hypotheses, and is usually aimed at resolving a precise policy or commercial problem. Hence, it tends to be more concerned with rapid appraisal or slash and burn surveys than with conceptualisation, and more with description than with analysis. It is piecemeal in approach, scarcely integrated, and does not emphasize continuity. The researchers in this tradition hardly bother to redefine the research problem brought to them by governments and other agents of development, and their research tends to serve the interests of those who pay for it and who find it useful in maximising their economic, cultural, political or hegemonic interests.

An obvious way to proceed in our research is to disabuse ourselves of claims of expertise and superiority, which we often cannot demonstrate scientifically or objectively. If we proceed with the understanding that we do not know more than those we study and could be their students, very mediocre students at that, then we

would not be so averse to the idea or suggestion that we collaborate, co-produce and co-author with those we study.

What if we stopped treating research and knowledge production as zero sum games, where there can be only one winner – the professional researcher or academic? What if we consider knowledge production as a never ending process of the negotiation of meaning? Such collaborative knowledge production calls for more decentralised and more representative anthropology and communication. And for the re-socialisation and reappraisal of approaches we have either ignored or simply never really thought of, overwhelmed as we are by our modernist pretensions. We must increasingly question basic assumptions, conventional wisdom, academic traditions and research practices, which we have uncritically and often unconsciously internalised, and which remain largely ill-adapted to the contexts and predicaments we seek to comprehend.

To study social change meaningfully, if such is our ambition, we cannot understand social action mainly in terms of individual beliefs and attitudes. Individual attitudes and beliefs may be the product rather than the cause of economic conditions and power relationships. Good anthropological research resists temptations of simplistic psychologism and foregrounds social and political dynamics as well as interconnections between the local and the global. Good anthropological research evidences relationships between ideas and actions, between culture and social structure, and pays reverence to both explicit and unexpressed nuances within them. Good anthropological research is cognizant of the fact that not all that counts can be counted, and not all that can be counted counts. Structural factors matter even as individual agency counts.

Anthropology has the credentials to excel at reconfiguring itself, if taken beyond lip service. One such credential is anthropology's investment in participant observation as a method that provides for long periods in the field seeking to understand, in detail and multifacetedly, social relationships and institutions. Prolonged familiarity and interpersonal face to face relationships and communication with those of interest should amply provide for participatory research, co-production and negotiation of meaning in a convivial manner.

Asking the right questions and building science entails carefully and critically situating the object of study within existing knowledge by drawing on and feeding back into it in terms of theory, methodology, issues and debates. As anthropologists we need to continually listen to, draw on, interact with and edify the work of peers. We must understand the local context and involve beyond rhetoric and tokenism those researched in the production of knowledge about their realities and predicaments. We must resist the syndrome of *talking at, talking on, talking past and talking around, but hardly talking to or talking with* the very grassroots, ordinary or lay people we claim our scholarship is about, and for whom we tend to arrogate to ourselves the status of spokespersons. As anthropologists can we see ourselves as instruments of quality social research, rather than as all powerful theatre or film directors and celebrity superstars working with "local actors" in philanthropic gear? Can we be bridges – bridging understandings of realities and

power dynamics and linking the past and the present in the making of the future? How do we make these considerations and sensibilities about situation, dialogue, and participation rule of thumb in research and scholarly writing and thus in the debates that animate the work and representations brought to the marketplace of ideas by anthropologists?

I would like to end my talk at this point, but that would be unfair to the reality of the world we leave in. I cannot wish inequalities away, much as I would like to. As a writer of fiction I sometimes dream extravagantly. In social science we are required to dream with our feet firmly on the ground. So, let me conclude with where I started, the unequal encounter between Friday and Robinson, and the latter's insistence on conversion en lieu of conversation.

Call it the controversial Nyamnjoh at his provocative best. I would like to reiterate what I started off with. Power and privilege do not yield easily to blackmail, and extracting concessions from them is like squeezing tears from a dog. The challenge to bring about greater participation in knowledge production and consumption processes is more easily stated than met, much as we would like to imagine our underdogs of society like agentive stubborn rottweilers savaging their way out of invisibility, marginalisation and victimhood. *Why?* Partly because of the vertical and dogmatic power dynamics that characterise knowledge production and circulation, in a world of local and global interconnecting hierarchies informed, among other things, by race, place, culture, class, status, gender and age.

The fate of ideas and anthropological research findings, however compelling, often boils down to the race, geography, culture, ethnicity, class, status, gender or age of the anthropologist involved, as these factors largely determine participation and attitudes at professional anthropological gatherings and in other scholarly processes in the not so democratic marketplaces of ideas. It is true that anthropologists have to publish or perish. But an anthropologist can all too easily publish and perish, and not always because of the mediocrity of his or her ethnography. Sometimes the reception of exquisite ethnography is impaired by considerations such as the race, geography, culture, ethnicity, class, status, gender or age of the author, in addition to the status and location of the publisher.

Who here present would not agree that these factors often weigh in more than the scientific content of material subjected to peer review? We all know stories of notoriously popular, frequent flyer, evangelistic and guru-like scholars – well situated in terms of these parameters –, who impose themselves over and above peer-review mechanisms and whose texts assume the status of the Bible or the Qur'an in lecture halls and amongst fellow academics dwarfed by the bulk and magnitude of their superstardom. They tend to think they are doing you a favour publishing in your journal or, as kings, kingmakers, princes, princesses, dinosaurs, gurus or whatever they choose to call themselves or are called, that the peer review process does not and should not apply to them. Peer review, they have grown to convince themselves, is for lesser others – those with the wrong (call it inferior) race, geography, culture, ethnicity, class, status, gender or age.

Am I being too difficult, too controversial, too provocative, too Nyamnjoh, yet again?

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