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Un-scripting African cultures

Historical tensions and contemporary possibilities for anthropology in East Africa

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As two long-term collaborative researchers from Kenya, we locate ourselves in the work of early anthropologists in Kenya, including the work of Evans Pritchard (E-P) and his study of several African communities such as the Luo of Kenya. We also explore the gaps and the aporias present in the work of anthropologists of his time. Such reflections continue to influence our need to interrogate the representations of communities, and our work on children and youth in the African region. We do not attempt to intervene in a revisionist sense in these representations and the weakness of such work. We instead engage with the question of what the early work of anthropologists in Kenya, including E-P, means for the people on the ground and for reflexive modes of knowing communities, and for re-centring local and indigenous perspectives.

Reflections on our research and the gaze of anthropology

Elizabeth trained as an anthropologist at the Institute of Africa Studies of the University of Nairobi in the 1990s, and the work of E-P influenced the learning at the institute. Students there grappled with the question of why they were studying anthropology, and with the aporias in the glaringly essentialist accounts of most of the 'classic' anthropologists, including the work of E-P. At that time Elizabeth, like her two hundred anthropology classmates, had no idea what anthropology was all about, and some neighbours said she had been enrolled to study 'bones of dead people'. This was what was known there about anthropology at that time, as was confirmed by authors like Onyango-Ouma (2006) and Ntarangwi (2002), who noted that anthropology was seen as a discipline that studied prehistoric cultures that people wanted to forget, and which was thus not 'useful' for the pressing problems of Africa.

Elizabeth only came to understand the famous script that anthropology is the 'holistic study of human societies across space and time' when she took her first class, 'Introduction to Anthropology 101'. Indeed, anthropology was not seen as important and one of the professors from the law department who taught the 'Introduction to the Legal Anthropology' course often wondered aloud why they were studying 'miserable anthropology'.[1]

At the Institute of African Studies, where the Department of Anthropology was housed, in addition to the work of other early anthropologists like Malinowski, Myers, Benedict and Radcliffe-Brown, was E-P's work around the Zande, Nuer and Luo. These were some of the 'classics' found in the one-roomed library located at the National Museums of Kenya. Some of these existed as books, while some of it were photocopies by the librarian. Col narrated how he would ask senior anthropologists what classic in anthropology they would save from the apocalypse were it to occur (Col *et al.* 2017:5). If they had played Col's game at the institute, E-P's work and that of other early anthropologists would be salvaged to save Elizabeth and her classmates from failing to graduate, as that was perceived as the most important thing anthropology could grant.

The apparent lack of utility in studying anthropology, especially the 'classics', was a paradox that students grappled with daily. However, it was at the Institute of African Studies that in addition to learning how to study other cultures, they also learned the imperative of critically engaging the dominant anthropology categories, assumptions, and treatment of the (non-Western) other. These included, among other anthropological fossils: Malinowski's savages, little animals, and inferior natives (Hsu 1979), E-P's 'primitive people' and other such representations. Indeed, these aporias were more accentuated for the young students because one of their teachers, Professor Mathu, who sadly died in 2020, would narrate his encounters with racism during his studies in the USA, when people would chant 'monkey' behind him on the streets. Such reflexivity travelled with Elizabeth even after she graduated from the University of Nairobi.

Auma studied Educational Policy and African Studies at Indiana University in the USA and is currently an educationalist and social policy academic at the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her teaching and research are animated by questions about

1 Legal Anthropology was an elective course.

power and social justice in trying to understand the place of young people and their families in social policy. Privileging epistemic diversity, she has built alliances with scholars in the region to nurture and mentor researchers, to amplify African voices and to anchor their writing in contextual realities and situated approaches.

A shared critical outlook and reflexivity towards the study of communities and cultures put Elizabeth and Auma on each other's paths. We first encountered each other in 2004 at the ISS-EUR, where Auma had taken up an academic position and Elizabeth was pursuing her master's studies. Our collaboration evolved from research assistance to research collaboration including Ph.D. thesis supervision and working together on several research and capacity-building projects. Drawing on her background in anthropology, Elizabeth had worked for several years with an organization that was leveraging local and indigenous knowledge to support childcare in Eastern Africa. She drew from her practitioner diary and decided to pursue her graduate studies and research endeavours around dominant representations of children and youth in Kenya.

In terms of ethnic subjectivities, Auma is a Luo from Siaya, which falls into what E-P in his research called Kavirondo Gulf or what was labelled Nilotic Kavirondo in the colonial era. Elizabeth is a Kamba from Eastern Kenya, who married in western Kenya, or what was known during the E-P era as part of Bantu Kavirondo. Though linguistically distinct, Luhya and Luo have similarities in some cultural practices, and within the ethnic imaginaries in Kenya they are often seen as bastions of tradition.

We therefore continue to be connected with these spaces, writing and researching as insider-outsiders, and from standpoints that we perceive as ontologically marginalized. In these spaces we frequently encounter the fossils of anthropology: the exoticization of the culture of these communities. Our main area of research interest and focus is on children and youth, and how cultural and other shifts affect and influence their well-being and citizenship. In our shared quest for knowing the 'other' differently, we have engaged in the representation of communities and cultures in Africa.

Alongside supervising Elizabeth's Ph.D., Auma was also one of the cultural interlocutors providing linguistic and socio-cultural insights for her thesis on the experience of poor and vulnerable children among the Luo of Siaya. We also co-conduct research initiatives, including an auto-ethnographic study in which we are putting together the subjective memoirs ('*mama memoirs*') of our mothers to generate layered accounts of the tensions and complexities of childhood and girlhood in Kenya through time, space (pre-, colonial and post-colonial) and intergenerationally. Srinivas (1997:23) argues that anthropologists have no choice but to study other cultures through the prisms of their own culture. He also adds that such research ought to be done by researchers from two different cultures to enable a clash of subjectivities.

We have also reflected on the nebulous boundaries of inside-outside, and what it means to study one's own community as an insider-outsider. Studying these two communities, which have a lot of cultural and other diversities, including gender and the influences of external forces and shifts, has made it clear to us how thin the line is between insider and outsider and native and non-native subjectivities.

Re-encountering E-P among the Luo of Kenya: further tensions in anthropology and our work

E-P is credited as the first anthropologist to study the Luo of Kenya professionally, undertaking pioneering sociological work with them (Campbell 2006; Morton and Oteyo 2009; Musandu 2012). He reportedly earned a Leverhulme grant to study Nilotic groups in Africa (Morton 2020) but could not continue with his onward journey to Sudan because he fell ill. He therefore settled among the Luo in Kenya in the 1930s, where he interviewed Luo mission converts in English (Musandu 2012:542). It is notable that, after being in Kenya for only six weeks, E-P wrote 'Marriage customs of the Luo of Kenya' (1965a) in which he focused on courtship as well as wedding ceremonies. He noted that for this piece, he only interviewed one pastor, Ezekiel from Alego (ibid.; Morton 2020:199). His other works are 'Ghostly vengeance among the Luo of Kenya' (1950), a two-page article in which he focuses on ghosts in relations to ill(well)-being, and 'Luo tribes and clans' (1949), which focused on the people and their culture, as well as their social structure.

Anthropology in Kenya from the 1930s to 60s was seen as the preserve of those who were scientifically trained, and E-P is reported to have lamented the scientific laissez-faire identity of anthropology in Kenya, which according to him had been left in the hands of individuals who did not rely on theory or even knowledge of field methods (Sutton 2006:298). Although the work of E-P has been seen as a break from the prejudiced accounts of missionary anthropologists, it does not escape the critique of a gendered, masculine, male-gaze of most anthropologists' work at this time. For instance, in his key reliance on male informers, seen as custodians of culture and its treatment of women.

Indeed, in her article 'Daughters of Odoro: Luo women and power: re- examining scripted oral traditions', Musandu (2012) engages with the gender-scripted work of anthropologists as well as cultural historians among the Luo from 1938–50. These scripts, she argues, were collected from men by other men and have specific assumptions about gender and the role of women in society. Within this context, Musandu's study illuminates and puts in further context E-P's work and reliance on missionary anthropologists and men. Such missionary accounts, she

argued, tended to represent the customs of the Luo as primitive and the Luo as victims of these traditions. She also argued that both E-P's work and that of other scholars tended to present Luo women as powerless and as victims of tradition, with no regard to, and obviating the fact that, Luo women were centres of power (Musandu 2006). She explains the central power position that Luo women held, albeit one that the men only tacitly acknowledged, and also points to the problem of only relying on the narratives of men. For example, by drawing from Malo's book, *Luo Customs and Traditions* (2003), she presented a narrative of how the husband to a 'daughter of Odoro' would not admit that his wife had wrestled him to the ground:

> when the daughter of Odoro was beaten by her husband, she would take hold of him with great anger and trip him and throw him on the ground. Then she would boast, saying, 'Have you seen the daughter of Odoro?' Her husband would reply, 'What daughter of Odoro? Can't you see that it is the shoes that tripped me.'
>
> (cited in Musandu 2012:556)

Morton (2020) confirms this and argues that a portion of E-P's work based on his 1955 Fawcett Lecture, 'The position of women in primitive societies and in our own' (1965b), was seen as sexist because of the way he questioned the benefit of the changed position of women in England through comparison with the situation of women in communities he had studied, including the Luo. We have retraced some of E-P footprints, especially around the experiences of the widows among the Siaya, who are known as *chi liel* (Evans-Pritchard 1950:140) or wives of the grave, for their own perspectives on marriage rituals and customs among the Luo.[2] This is especially interesting given the way they position themselves around the protective role that graves were meant to play. This kind of layered and nuanced analysis is something that has not been given a lot of focus in other discussions, which tend to focus more on aspects seen as 'wife inheritance'.

It is not only foreign anthropologists like E-P who are targets of such critiques. John Mbiti, the prolific scholar (who was also Elizabeth's neighbour), who in his seminal work *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), critiqued foreign representations of religion in Africa, was himself challenged for his patriarchal orientation in understanding marriage in Africa (Verstraelen, 1998). In another example, among the Luo, Ogot (1967), claimed a native's representation of accounts of Luo in Kenya and Uganda by cross-checking with the clan leaders. His accounts were however seen as male and elitist, as he uncritically accepted the claims of the elders who were seen as custodians of culture and history (Campbell 2006:81).

The work by anthropologists in Africa and among the Luo at this time was also said to be represented as static and timeless, and not to consider cultural shifts. Indeed Morton (2020:201) argued that E-P's article on 'Luo tribes and clans' did not acknowledge the role of colonial or missionary influence on Luo social or political life, and only gave a cursory reference to the way land conflicts were enhanced by European rule. Nyoka (2019:175) supports this assertion, and argued that anthropology as a theoretical discipline could not account for change, and therefore continued to focus on the primitive, erotic and exotic 'other'.

Adding to the critique of foreign anthropologists, including E-P, Fashina (2008:65) questions the presumed absence of theory in Africa, and provides a perspective on the prevailing scholars of African tradition, such as poets and court officials, who were not appointed by formal universities or were not ethnographers. He claims that these were 'the unacknowledged sociologists and anthropologists of the African space of their time' whose knowledge has provided modern day researchers with records for these communities.

These critiques connect with the commentary that anthropology was a twin (and we add, 'brother') to colonialism in Africa (Elie 2006). This is already well understood, and early British social anthropology is over-represented in this context with its love of 'primitive' societies. One remembers all too well the iconic speech by President Kwame Nkurumah of Ghana, 'The African Genius', during the opening of the Institute of African studies in Ghana in 1963, in which he noted that African studies both in Africa and the West, were influenced by these same colonial assumptions and that African knowledge, arts, dance etc. were seen as curious or grotesque (Nkrumah 1963). Similarly, Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya and a famed student of Malinowski, in his book *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), saw anthropology as a discipline that was monopolizing the mind of Africa by speaking for her.[3]

In Kenya, Sutton (2006:287) seems to excuse some anthropologists like Huntingford, referred to as a plodding disciple of the British school of social anthropology mentored by E-P, and Louis Leakey, with his prehistoric archaeology work in Kenya. He argued that even though both were British and therefore products of their era of colonial anthropology, they were not colonial administrators. He presented their occasional 'errands' for the colonial government as volunteering 'their wisdom' about 'native

2 A research project done by Elizabeth under Auma's supervision.

3 Ntarangwi (2002) notes that even though Kenyatta had a background in anthropology, he did not champion the its study at the tertiary level during his presidency. The first cohort of anthropology students were only admitted to the university in 1986.

customs' and mentality whenever inexperienced officials, insensitive settlers or zealous missionaries encountered distrust or open protest. Mwenda Ntarangwi, a Kenyan anthropologist, who was based in the USA and currently works in the continent, engages the colonial tendencies of anthropology. In in his book *Reversed Gaze* (2010), he chides anthropologists for their love of alterity and troubles the unequal power relations embedded in the discipline. As an 'outsider within', first as an African student of anthropology and then immersed as a professional anthropologist, he is able to have a 'reversed gaze' in his re-examination of the construction and becoming of anthropology in America.

We would be naïve to dismiss the work of E-P and the company of like-minded anthropologists entirely on the basis of the 'sins above'. Some of the critique may seem passé given more recent engagements with anthropology, including what Elie (2006) calls a compromised acceptance of 'postcolonial insurgency' within the ranks and the feminist post-modernist critiques of anthropology. Some authors have seen this positioning of anthropologists who worked within the era as inevitable and as a product of a specific time its contexts (Myers 2017:8–9). However, we agree with Bonila (2017:24) that there is need for continuous reflexivity 'around these and other Anthropology aporias'. Such reflexivity has been the basis of our scholarship and knowledge activism.

We are aware, like E-P, of the labour and the obstacles that have gone in producing such texts (Owusu 1978:326), and our commentary is not to intervene in these debates. We instead now turn to our own work in Eastern Africa, to show how one can study other communities while being aware of the shortcomings of knowing the 'other'. Drawing on these critiques, but also superseding them enables us to understand how we can indeed do anthropology differently and in ways that are beneficial to the societies we study, that is, as anthropology with cultural and political commitment. In our work and together with like-minded Africans and Africanists, we are particularly concerned with the forgetting or marginalizing of local ways of knowing. These were earlier often represented as a barrier to development and were exoticized (and continue to be so), but we now explore how they pertain to the pressing issues of childcare and well-being in the continent.

Research around local knowledge of childcare

Our reflexivity around representations of local knowledge, including customs, arts, oral literature etc. started in 2008, when we started a movement leveraging local knowledge to improve childcare in Africa. We carried out one year of ethnographic research on how indigenous knowledge systems can be brought to bare on the growth and development of children (Okwany, Ngutuku and Muhangi 2011:40). This was a collaboration of three researchers, Auma, Elizabeth and our colleague the late Arthur Muhangi from Uganda, who sadly and suddenly passed on in 2013. We also worked with several organizations in Kenya and Uganda. This study was carried out among the Luo and the Bukusu of Kenya, and the Baganda in Uganda. Aware of the burning questions around the role of ethnography for its own sake, we wanted to avoid voyeurism into the lives of people and we thus presented ethnography as relevant to the practice and theories of childcare in Africa. In addition, we were also aware of the assertion by Pence and Nsamenang (2008:34) that early childhood development practice (and policy) in Africa has been based on 'extrapolated evidence'.

We noted that the Luo and Luhya communities (our research sites) have been the target of various research within the context of HIV/AIDS. Many of these studies have attributed the high HIV prevalence rates in these communities to their 'retrogressive cultural practices' around marriage. We were therefore not only wary of the singular narrative, but also, by placing these cultures within a larger context of the dominant understandings, we asserted that the narrative was not only colonial but was too unitary, too white, too exotic, too stuck in the past, and in some cases too androcentric. Through this research, we also wanted to engage the Victorian imaginaries that children are supposed to be seen and not heard, which curiously became the lens for imagining Africa's childhoods, and the case where Africa was imagined through the lens of the mistreatment of children. We therefore called for dialogue between different epistemologies and questioned what Soares (2019:10) would call 'exogenous discourses, exogenous categorizations, and ethnocentric epistemologies'. In his bold piece about 'Divining the future of anthropology' Nyamnjoh (2012:67) rightly points out that ethnographic representations of Africa are often crafted as 'delicacies without rigorous, systematic dialogue with the Africans in question'. In our work we have strived to respond to this epistemic injustice, by foregrounding situated and contextual accounts of children and caregivers and writing ourselves as speaking subjects in childcare-knowledge production in Africa (Ngutuku 2018; Okwany 2016; Okwany and Ebrahim 2015, 2019).

In seeking to recentre narratives of the role of culture and custom, we drew from the Bukusu proverb 'every mother dances her baby'. The literal meaning of this proverb is that the size of the baby does not hinder the parent/caregiver from nurturing it, while the underlying meaning speaks to the distinctive, valued, indigenous ways of childcare that all communities have and that have been passed down intergenerationally. We also rallied around Okot p'Bitek's metaphor of a pumpkin (1996) in defence of traditional epistemology and the embeddedness of local knowledge. He exhorts that 'the pumpkin that grows in the old homestead must not be uprooted'. In his commentary on the pumpkin, as used by p'Bitek, Fashina (2008:71) argues that:

> The 'pumpkin' in the Acoli tradition carries ethereal significance, not just as a leguminous crop, edible and rich in vitamins necessary for good health. Rather, the pumpkin has a pictorial, ritual and archetypal significance, as a denizen of the forest and a co-habitor with man and ancestral spirits in the homestead and lineage. The pumpkin of the homestead is history, and it is a databank for understanding the people's cultural epistemology. The pumpkin is an elaborate figure and icon of power, tradition and magic. It is a character in its own right and its presence evokes the principle of 'presence' as against 'absence' from the process of negotiating existence within the cultural ideology of the homestead and clan.

We were aware that we should not continue relying on foreign anthropologists as 'unquestioned guardians of Africa's collective memory' (Owusu 1978:326)'. In this endeavour we found inspiration in the African proverb that 'until lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunters'. We therefore not only wanted to become historians for the lions in Africa, but also to enable the communities to become their own historians. We note that we were not actually the first historians of the lions, and our accounts are no truer than those of earlier studies of these communities. However, we are also particularly aware, as earlier discussed, that these tales of the lion are gendered, classed and told by adults, and that we, therefore, also wanted to include the voices of the young people, as well as women, who are often marginalized in accounts of the 'other'.

We also reminded ourselves, as E-P (1976) once noted, that 'one owes a debt to posterity'. This debt is, however, not just to our future students in far off places, eager to understand local cultures through epistemes of 'primitivity'. It is for Africa herself, where most of our ways of life and philosophies are in large part preserved within human libraries. In this research we also rallied behind the inspiration of the late Malian philosopher Amadou Hampâté Bâ, who noted that 'each time an old person dies in Africa a library burns down' (Okwany, Ngutuku and Muhangi 2011:40). We therefore worked with three generations of caregivers to explore not only the shifts, but also the generational and gendered perspectives in childcare in these communities.

To enhance conviviality in knowledge production, we worked with mothers, fathers, elders, cultural and linguistic historians and other interlocutors, including teachers and midwives. The oldest of these libraries was a 102-year old man, who died soon after we completed our research. Culture emerged as useful for childcare, but the cultural shifts were also not seen as loss but instead as a source of rejuvenation.

Among other aspects of childcare, we focused on proverbs which codify and embody the conceptualization of childhood, care and the place of children in society. For example, the Luo proverb '*nyathi ok ma ngetane*', which translates as 'a child must not be deprived of their play seed', is illustrative of the processes of cultural shifts. The word for 'play seed', *ngeta*, was no longer common parlance, so in order to interpret this proverb we started group discussions around meanings of the unfamiliar words in it. This was followed by a collaborative analysis of its underlying meanings. Many third-generation participants were not aware of the proverb and those aware of it gave its literal meaning, of denying a child their play toy. Discussions with second- and first-generation study participants as well as cultural historians revealed the deeper meaning as mandating a bundle of rights and entitlements a child is owed. These range from the right to play and includes the right to be nurtured, to guidance and to protection, security and identity (ibid.:103; Okwany 2016).

The variety of avenues to enrich contextually grounded childcare research, policy and practice within the region has been undermined and marginalized by the prevalence of African research agendas being conceptualized, developed, funded and driven by researchers in the Global North. Our scholarship-building has responded to this injustice by privileging epistemic diversity and Auma, for instance, has built alliances with scholars in the region to nurture and mentor researchers, so as to amplify African voices and anchor their writing in contextual realities and situated accounts. The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (Codesria) is a key hub of knowledge production for the social sciences in Africa that is dedicated to building African scholars through research, networking, publications and knowledge dissemination. In 2015, Auma was co-director of the first ever Codesria Child and Youth Institute, focusing on children 0–3 years old, an age group that has received marginal attention in scholarship and policy because their well-being is often subsumed under that of their mothers. Elizabeth was one of the fifteen scholars from South, East, West and Central Africa who participated in the institute. The outcome of the institute is the edited volume *Early Childhood Care and Education at the Margins* (Ebrahim, Okwany and Barry 2019) with chapters from the fifteen African scholars. Drawing on the quest by Odora-Hoppers (2010) for cognitive justice, the institute provided space to the scholars to interrogate, investigate and innovate through the kind of reflexive and responsive situated research that is traditionally relegated to the margins. The volume is a testimony to the importance of building a cadre of emerging scholars in the region, who can engage within and against dominant accounts of childcare issues from a cultural perspective, and can address epistemic injustice through their writing, practice and knowledge activism.

Our numerous research collaborations are rooted in and extend these initiatives.

We have also been reflexive about the way the 'exotic lens' of earlier anthropologists may frame the way 'native' researchers' material on indigenous culture is read. For example, during the publication of our book *The Role of Local Knowledge and Culture in Child Care in Africa: A Sociological Study of Several Ethnic Groups in Kenya and Uganda*, though the internal reviewer gave a good review, they started by apologizing for the negative aspects of African culture (despite these featured in a few cases, when showing how communities were using resources to engage in aspects of culture that were seen as regressive). The reviewer then added that despite these, 'there are however many positives'.

It is also worth mentioning that the title of the book itself was contentious, and there were shifts in the wording: from initially including the role of customs to eventually only retaining the term culture. One of the titles proposed was 'The role of a mother's instinctive knowledge in the development of young children: how indigenous knowledge systems shape African child rearing'. We were strongly opposed to the first part of this title, preferring a focus on 'The role of local knowledge in childcare'. In the emotionally charged discussions amongst ourselves and with the editors, we thought that the use of instinctive took us back to the dark past early anthropologist's 'exotic' 'primitive' accounts and their associations of African cultures with the world of animals who rely on instincts. The reasoning given by the editors was curious, as they noted that they were guided by the need to cater for 'cultural differences between North American, European, and African ideas' and therefore 'instinctive knowledge' rather than 'indigenous knowledge' as the main title would enable librarians to place the book properly'[4]. We sat for hours trying to negotiate with a sense of veritable rage and thinking, together with Odora-Hoppers (2008), of the possibility of our book being scandalously 'museumized' into a ghetto of 'African knowledge' only to be valued for its exotic aesthetics.

In this venture, we have been cautioned by editors of journals and books that we should not be polemical. We were careful, as warned, to avoid belligerence and not to present our quest as an endeavour to replace one epistemological orthodoxy with another. At the same time, we wondered if there was not a space for respectful polemics in anthropology (Clifford 1997), where we can engage in dialogue that does not stop thought. We have also been cautioned not to romanticize the knowledge of our communities. Here we have wondered if a more dominant knowledge was the norm, and the more valued comparator, to which all other knowledge is indexed, so as to be understood (Okwany Ngutuku and Muhangi 2011:53).

4 Communication with editors in 2011.

Conclusion

Our work has been guided by the imperative to enhance conviviality in knowledge production about other cultures, including our own. While our location as 'native' researchers has given us a unique standpoint from which to examine our cultures, we have not done so innocently, and our quest has been imperfect. We are aware that we might not have escaped the same critiques levelled against anthropology ancestors, like E-P, because researching about the 'other', even within our 'own', given our location in the Global North, is still laden with power, and can also be perceived as colonializing knowledge. Such aporias do not imply impossibility in representation of other cultures. We continue to be guided by the need to do ethnography in ways that are reflexive and beneficial to the communities within which we do our research.

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