

Social Anthropology in Nigeria: A Bibliographic Survey

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This paper focuses socio-cultural anthropology, which, in the British and Commonwealth tradition, is sociology or microsociology, a bridge between sociology and anthropology. The author will attempt to provide a bibliographic overview of the field starting with historical antecedents. The aim is to provide an insight into the evolution of social anthropology over the past fifty years.

It is already well known that adventurer's travelers, traders, and missionaries who invaded the West African coast of Guinea from the 15th century described the exotic cultures and "primitive" non-western peoples that they encountered. The descriptions of these visitors were unsystematic up to the 18th and early 19th centuries. Of significance were the reports by Duarte Pacheco Pereira (1500-1506), Barbot (1699; 1746), Equiano (1786; 1967), and Baikie (1856), which describe the Bini, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ijaw, Igbo, Kwale and various others along the coast, rivers, and creeks. The employees of the Royal Niger Company and of other foreign companies also produced accounts of superficial and impressionistic nature on the coastal areas, and those on some of the peoples of Northern Nigeria. Two notable chroniclers at that time were Frederick Barm and Mungo Park. As expected, the reports of these observers did not produce acceptable systematic analysis of the social structures of the peoples concerned. They also lacked depth even though they satisfied the needs of their sponsors and writers because they provided information that guided movements, routes, economic resources and their seasonal availability.

By and large, three categories of pseudo anthropological works were produced between 1900 and the early 1940s. These were embedded in intelligence reports, missionary works, and

colonial anthropology. The intelligence reports established the basis of colonial anthropology. They usually contain ethnographic materials which incorporate a brief history of the indigenous polity or sociopolitical community concerned, the political structure and age grade system, linguistic characteristics, religious and moral aspects, economic activities and production, history from local resources, etc. The reports generally overlook the role of the intimidating police and military activities and the devastation and humiliations of various colonial punitive expeditions. The Intelligence and Assessment Reports focus on Kingdoms or groups of related villages of uncentralised systems throughout Nigeria. Works by Meek (1930), Main (1928), and Fellows among some others stand out in this regard.

Similarly, as background to proselytisation and their evangelistic activities, Christian missionaries began the study of traditional religion and religious practices in many localities and regions of Nigerian that they condemned in order to demonstrate the universalistic nature of the imported Christian religion. Like their political counterpart, they penetrated from the coast, sometimes preceding sometimes following the British colonial political officers. They were specialists in different fields of learning such as history, engineering, religion, and philosophy and had obtained training in linguistics and culturology notably at Oxford and London universities before coming to work in Nigeria. The works of Basden (1922), Hubbard (1948), Welch (1936) and a host of others are part of these proto social anthropologists.

Also of similar characteristics and even with more systematic training were colonial government officials with background in geography, classics, law etc. who obtained diploma or were exposed to short-term university courses in social anthropology. They were exposed to principles of applied anthropology between 1920 and 1950s. The concern with applied anthropology was linked to the instrumentalisation of anthropology as the most fundamental and comprehensive study of the colonised societies. The motive was not to promote the well-being of the natives

but to improve the general administration of the Nigerian peoples and to promote the interest of British colonial authorities. This was to be the basis of concern of scholars who were, and are still wont to raise the issue of objectivity in social anthropology and other social sciences, or the moot point concerning a value-free social science.

Some of the early writers were concerned with ethnographic surveys and socio-cultural mapping of ethnic pluralism (Talbot 1928; Leonard 1906; Forde and Jones 1950; Bradbury 1957). Other notable works were by Meek (1931), Jeffereys (1931, 1936) Tomas (1910; 1913) and by several others who merely spent a few days or weeks in one place or cultural area to qualify and be consulted as Africanists. This category of proto social anthropologists had respectable hearing in government circles because they provided documents, reports, and published books regarded as authoritative information and which helped the authorities to formulate and/or implement colonial government political and administrative policies and actions. Some of these early colonial workers later trained as social anthropologists.

Of far more importance in Nigeria is the group of formally trained anthropologists, consisting of both expatriates and indigenous Nigerian social anthropologists. Those in the first group were alien to Nigeria, but their training covered basically the same grounds as for Nigerian anthropologists. Nigerian anthropologists consist of those trained locally and abroad.

Foremost among the formally trained specialists in social anthropology who were Europeans were those hired by the International African Institute, London, founded in 1926 to study the ethnic groups of Nigeria, in the 1950s. Forde and Jones (1950) Bradbury (1957), Bohannan and Bohannan (1953) could be regarded as the first set of formally trained social anthropologist that came to Nigeria to work. The works of these researchers provided detailed ethnographic profiles on several of the peoples of Nigeria, including the Edo-speaking peoples, the Hausa, the

Ibibio, Igbo, Nupe, Yoruba etc. As stated earlier, the contents of their works are descriptive and they include the outline history, language, marriage, age grade, political structure, economic activities, rituals, religion, morals and various aspects of the totalities of life in different cultures in Nigeria.

However, more details were documented in by other specialists who focused on Kingdoms and social structures in the normal social anthropological fashion of socio-cultural empire building. For example, the Igbo are associated with Jones (1957; 1963) and Green (1964); the Yoruba with Lloyd (1955: 1964) and Morton-Williams (1960) etc. Forde (1964) worked among the Yako, Bradbury (1957: 1973) among the Edo-speaking peoples and the Bini Kingdom with Lloyd also studying a section, the Itsekiri peoples. Bohannan (1954) studied the Tiv, Boston (1968), the Igala, Cohen (1967: 1971), the Kanuri, Smith (1955: 1960), -the Hausa, while Stenning's (1957) research focused on the Fulani and pastoralism. Lastly, Nadel (1942) studied the Nupe.

The reports of these researchers that cannot be extensively reviewed here are no doubt classics. They analyse the political and social, such as sacred kingship and Government among the Yoruba (Lloyd 1960) or conflict in Kanuri hierarchical systems (Cohen 1962), and the Hausa system of social status (Smith 1959). A number of themes run across them as can be seen in Lloyd's (1964) contribution on traditional rulers and Cohen's (1965; 1996) articles on the kola nut trade and cattle market which had chains of politico-economic agents and networks of kin and non kin traders and businessmen connected together from several but mainly Hausa, Yoruba ethnic groups.

Subsequent reports by the non-Nigerian anthropologists deal with issues underlying modernization and development. Of importance is the work of Van den Berghe (1973) on ethnicity in the University of Ibadan (U.I.) that he gave the pseudo name -University of Ilosho (U.I) and Cohen's (1965) classic work on the Sabo Hausa immigrant organization in Ibadan.

The early practice of social anthropologists to study other cultures, a title of Seattle's (1964) excellent book on social anthropology, came under close scrutiny at the emergence of Nigerian social anthropologists. The insider-outsider researcher issues were raised with special reference to objectivity, in-depth knowledge, ability or incapacity to decode idiomatic language and symbols, etc.

The indigenous social anthropologists were trained in Europe and America, and, unlike their expatriate predecessors, as indicated above, identified with their own anthropological societies and studied them extensively. They studied their own ethnic groups and produced what may be referred to as "sociological anthropology" to borrow a concept from the Manchester School. Following the dislike for indigenous social anthropology especially by politicians because of its colonial origin, use, and abuse, many of the indigenous social anthropologists refer to themselves as sociologists or, to put it differently, many of the first and second generations of Nigerian sociologists actually trained as social anthropologists.

Nathaniel A. Fadipe, was the first formally trained Nigerian social anthropologist, with a Ph.D. in sociology of the University of London in 1939. Okediji edited his work on the sociology of his people, the Yoruba, and Okediji (1970) and it became the first authoritative ethnography on them. Other formally trained Nigerians in social anthropology include Nsugbe (1974) who worked on his own matrilineal people of Ohafia Igbo and Nzimiro (1974), among his people, the Igbo. Uchendu (1965) also studied his ethnic group, the Igbo, while Onoge had been preoccupied with poverty, the exploitation of socioeconomic inequalities and rural indigenous peoples, and other related issues in the Nigerian social structure. Otite's has spent most of his professional life studying his own people, the Urhobo. His research spans traditional social anthropological issues, - Nigerian marriage systems (1991), age

grade organization (1972), the concept of the Nigerian society (1971), social history (1982), and ethnic groups and ethnicity including the interaction between class and ethnicity in Nigeria (1990).

Onwuejeogwu specialized in social anthropology and archaeology, established the Odinani Museum at Nri, carried out research and produced a detailed work on Nri Kingdom and civilization (1981). Besides, his *The Social Anthropology of Africa* (1975) is an excellent book on the social anthropology of Africa. His anthropological society is his Igbo people among whom he has worked and produced works on aspects of their socio-political structure, social and cultural history, and sociolinguistics.

Dike also worked among his Igbo people with special reference to the culture and social history of Awka and Nsukka (1983: 1985) and on rural development (1987) while Andah studied two major aspects of anthropology, focusing on general African anthropological issues, namely, African development (1982) African anthropology (1988), oral tradition and African cultural history (1990), Nigeria's indigenous technology (1990), and the ethnography of the Efik, his own people, and other ethnic groups in the Cross River Basin (1988).

Ekejiuba who read Geography and Mathematics before her training in social anthropology produced anthropological works on women studies and movements (1986), "Igba Ndu" (1973), and other aspects of the anthropology of her own Igbo people, namely, Aro trade system and social history, social change and continuity in Aro society (1976). On the other hand, Awogbade read archaeology and history before specializing in social anthropology. The thrust of his work is on nomadic societies, ecology, Fulani pastoralism (1979; 1983) socio-cultural aspects of traditional animal husbandry (1981), grazing reserves in Nigeria (1987) institutional interventions in cattle reproduction (1987) and rural development planning (1990). Oyedipe was an expert in development anthropology with special interest in adjustment to

resettlement (1983), the ethnography of New Bussa peoples, the impact of man-made Kainji Lake (1976), water resources planning (1977), and nomadic movements (1980). Ademola's interest in social anthropology lies in the study of aspects of the social structure of his own Yoruba people, -Yoruba traditional political system, economic activities, households, marriage and divorce, markets, agriculture, land tenure (1982; 1990) etc. while Tseayo studied his own Tiv people with special reference to rural development (1990) and the phenomena of conflicts and incorporation in Nigeria (1974). Oke's work is mainly in the area of medical anthropology, a vital aspect of social anthropology. His contributions span social epidemiology, kinship, diseases such as diarrhoea among children, and ethnomedicine (1982: 1986). Oke's *An Introduction to Social Anthropology* (1984) is a worthwhile book for beginners in the subject, Although Yusuf's research interest is in legal anthropology (1981: 1983) he also has to his credit articles on (a) capital formation among his own Hausa people (1975); (b) Hausa rural and urban continuum (1974); (c) Udoji Review Commission and unification of the judiciary; (d) dress forms among the Kano Hausa (1979); (e) Argungu festival; (f) the Nigerian legal traditions and dimensions of law reform; including (g) sociological novels, memoirs, and poems (1978). Anikpo's work spans his Igbo ethnic identity in historical perspective and the rituals of group solidarity among Igbo villagers (n.d.).

There are younger sociologists with knowledge of social anthropology in Nigerian universities. For example, Mode's interest is in religious tolerance, relocation, and resettlement anthropology with special reference to New Maradun peasants around the Bakolori dam (1986), river basin development and social change (1985), and rural and livestock development.

It is self-evident from the foregoing that many areas of learning and research come under the banner of social anthropology.

In addition to normal studies and publications on kinship, marriage and divorce, age grade and defence organizations, religion and rituals, culturology, language and dress forms, other areas/themes like social history, law, medicine, Marxism, ecology and nomadism, festivals, and political and economic structures and activities are covered in Nigerian social anthropology. Contemporary students and graduates in anthropology combine a lot of sociological courses with the result that the traditional anthropological concerns, namely, theories and methods appear somewhat diluted in the process, and very few, if at all, social anthropologists are now knowledgeable on the classics which were published in the 1940s -1950s on the field. Indeed, many sociologists now claim and function as (social) anthropologists and vice versa. This development may have derived from lack of preference or from downright neglect of anthropological contents in matters of political and economic development planning of Nigeria. Yet, it must be emphasised that anthropological insights in social and politico-economic structures are vital to successful development planning at the national and local levels.

The future of social anthropology in Nigeria has something to do with the institutional establishments for its teaching and research. The Universities of Nigeria, Benin, Ife, and a few others established combined Departments of Sociology and Anthropology while the University of Ibadan, Ahmadu Bello University and many other Nigerian Universities established Departments of Sociology. However, these departments have varying contents of each of these disciplines. For example, Ibadan had, and still has, using new subject titles, a large number of courses in social anthropology, taught by specialists in social anthropology.

There is no Nigerian University Department of Sociology (and of course of sociology and social anthropology) that does not offer a few social anthropological courses. It was only recently, in the 1980's that a full-fledged Department of Archaeology and Anthropology was established at Ibadan. This is the only so-called

in the Nigerian university system. Archaeology is offered as a specialization in the Department of History at the University of Nigeria. All the 38 universities (i.e. twelve State and twenty-six Federal universities) offer courses in one or more areas of social anthropology within or outside regular departments of sociology or sociology and Anthropology.

Overall, it may be observed that the academic and professional descendants of Nigerians, who had formal and systematic training in anthropology, are products of hybrid or eclectic departments in which they teach and conduct research. The future of this diluted content of social anthropology may continue to veer the discipline towards what was previously referred to as sociological anthropology. Consequently, not only will social anthropology become more sociological, it will also be more closely related to political science, economics, psychology, and history while still attempting to identify and maintain its relevance in the development process in Nigeria.

Concluding Remarks

Both expatriates and Nigerians have contributed to the emergence and development of social anthropology in Nigeria in theory, scope, and methods. Its applied form was intentionally dominant during the colonial period, although it was, and is still relevant to both Nigerian and foreign social anthropologists. Technological successes in development planning and projects have been known to fail where the input of social anthropologists is ignored. For example, Cohen (1961) found this to be the case among Kanuri Magumeri District in Borno State where the wrong super-phosphate fertilizer was recommended for use in peasant farming.

The more complex Nigerian societies become as a result of structural differentiation arising from democratisation processes and political and economic development, the more questionable social anthropology as a uniquely holistic science of humankind

and society becomes. However, its various parts continue to work together, cross-fertilize, and enrich one another in providing the socio-cultural content and context for archaeological findings as was the case in the research on Igbo-Ukwu and Nri (Shaw 1968; Onwuejeogwu 1972; 1974).

Social anthropology has encountered a bad press and bad politics, labelled as a “child of imperialism” and as an instrument for categorizing societies and cultures as inferior or superior to others. Also, it was allegedly used to support inequalities and exploitation not only in Nigeria but also in other non-western societies. However, social anthropology has held its important place amongst other academic and professional disciplines among Nigerian scholars. Its later development has shown that social anthropology has an important place whenever there is need to fully understand Nigerian societies and cultures as part of the process of development.

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