

### Classic ethnology and the socio-anthropology of public spaces: new themes and old methods in European African Studies

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## Classic ethnology and the socio-anthropology of public spaces New themes and old methods in European African Studies

This paper intends to contribute to a 'de-germanisation' of the recent debate in *Afrika Spectrum*. It describes some academic discourses that have been traversing European anthropology within African Studies for the last fifty years, and the ways in which certain German anthropologists engage in this debate.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, recent polemic surrounding the place of African Studies in Germany (Probst 2005) is characterized for the most part by a 'national' (is there a specifically German approach?) and 'disciplinary' (linguists vs. political scientists) framework of reference. However, a framework of this type does not take into account the deep internal cleavages (of a theoretical, epistemological or methodological nature). These, overriding national and disciplinary borderlines, have developed within the social sciences (African studies included), especially since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

How can we ignore the influence of Marxist and neo-Marxist paradigms in the Europe of the 1960s, for example? In Germany, a sociologist like H.-D. Evers and an anthropologist like Georg Elwert, among others, not only participated in the movement, but also enhanced it, while training many young researchers. Similarly, the systemic trend (of which Luhman represented an eminent German trailblazer) also influenced German African Studies to a certain extent (a reference to Elwert is justified once again). Another example is the rise of the feminist movement in Europe and the subsequent development of the new field of gender studies, with offshoots in ethnology and African Studies.

But the history and effects of these broad trans-national 'scientific ideologies' (of which Marxism, system analysis and feminism are of course obvious examples, but we might add methodological individualism, and even, culturalism, which we will touch upon in conclusion) have already benefited from ample scholarly discussion. Hence, I would prefer to focus instead on some fundamental movements that have evolved in recent decades, but which have come in for considerably less attention, are less familiar or remain unidentified: *the articulation between 'research themes' and 'research methods' and*

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1 I am grateful to G. Blundo and T. Bierschenk for their comments on the first version of this text.

*their change* and variations, with African anthropology in France and Germany as points of reference, viewed in an 'European perspective'.

A few preliminaries must be outlined at the outset:

- (a) The currents and poles identified here are ideal types: in actual fact the approach of some researchers show a combination of several positions or pass through successive positional changes.
- (b) My analysis here is quite limited: numerous scattered (at times remarkable) individual works, which do not fit into the rough and rapidly sketched framework outlined, are not taken into account.
- (c) It is a partial analysis to the extent that it focuses on a specific European current, namely the socio-anthropology of African public spaces. This is definitely not a dominant trend in any of the European countries concerned, neither in anthropology as a whole (which is still mostly concerned either with classic and neo-classic empirical approaches, or with post-modern or ultra-modern approaches), nor in the field of African Studies in particular.

### From classic and neo-classic ethnology to post-modern and ultra-modern ethnology

Around the 1950s, the leading trend in the discipline (at a time when the term 'ethnology' had not yet be displaced by that of 'anthropology'), reproduced a number of characteristics in the area of African studies. These were well established themes, which appeared to be exclusive specialities (kinship, rituals, myths, traditional political organizations, the production and circulation of goods, etc...) combined with a relatively firm methodological know-how, which was structured at two levels: an 'ethnic' (usually monographic) approach on the one hand, and the use of ethnographic field enquiries and participatory observation on the other hand.

This classic vision of ethnology is still predominant in Europe<sup>2</sup>. Owing to its themes, to its ethnic reference, and its fascination with picturesque sites of fieldwork, it unwittingly encourages a somewhat (to my mind totally deplorable) 'primitivist' and 'exotic' vision of the discipline. This trend is very much alive and imposes its dominant trademark and modes of recruitment. At its base is an easily identifiable, more or less blatant culturalist ideology (culture lurks behind the ethnic group...). Notwithstanding, classic ethnology has the

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2 See the European Association of Social Anthropology, which, open to the various currents of this discipline, bears witness to their relative importance as reflected in the major themes of its revue.

merit of sustaining and reproducing long-term field enquiry, a methodological heritage which is the heart and soul of this discipline.

The 1970s witnessed the emergence of a currently active, « neo-classic » approach: *while retaining the classic themes and methods, it has considerably revitalised approaches and interpretations, by resorting to 'constructionist' or 'transactionist' perspectives* (see among others Barth 1975, 1981) and shying away from culturalist presuppositions. Various works on ethnicity and collective identities apparently subscribe to this neo-classic ethnology, remarkably illustrated by C. Lentz, in the case of German African studies (Lentz 1988, 2000; Lentz & Nugent 2000). Other studies have contributed to the modernization of a longstanding tradition concerning techniques or material culture (Spittler 1991, 1998)

Under the influence of intellectual trends towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (mostly post-modernism) classic ethnology has been violently lambasted all over the world. As far as I am concerned, these refutations are exaggerated and make the mistake of putting everything in the same bag. From a methodological standpoint, they have had the perverse effect of leading anthropology away from the «field», that is from serious and in-depth fieldwork, in favour of impressionistic overviews, epistemological provocation, or subjective complacency, while still holding on to the culturalist base of classic anthropology.

The post-modern trend, in reaction to certain (very real) positivist excesses of classic ethnology, has done some damage in Europe and much more in the United States, by its caricature of classic ethnology, highlighted as an enterprise of political, intellectual and symbolic subjection (of which the use of observation is, purportedly, the trademark; see Fabian 1983). Further, it has abandoned classic methods of enquiry, suspected of being objectivist and reified, in favour of reflexivity and self-analysis, with the ethnologist featuring as a hero(ine) in his/her own eyes (Kilani 1994).

In the same vein, in reaction to the regrettable disinterest classic ethnology displays for new themes related to modernity, and fascinated by the conceptual mirages of 'globalisation', certain colleagues have reneged empirical approaches. They have been replaced by 'essayist' and superficial perspectives on modernity (or of 'ultra-modernity'; Augé 1994), sometimes by most futile aspects and most anecdotic themes (airports, bedrooms or Disneyland...). Research in Europe on Africa has not suffered to the same degree from these reactions, and/or the damage has been less radical. Hence, Africa remains a privileged site for classic or neo-classic ethnology.

But we have yet to describe the emergence of a renewed socio-anthropological approach within African Studies to complete the panorama. It has no qualms about borrowing themes from neighbouring disciplines (like sociology and political science), and has made fruitful use of the productive aspect of the methodological heritage left by ethnography or classical ethnology

(namely, field enquiry), to the exclusion of its less productive elements (ethnic groups, and the culturalism it disguises). Two stages of this reform can be identified: firstly, the focus on development-related social phenomena (generating a 'new development anthropology'); and secondly, a widening of perspective embracing the various modes of delivery of public or collective wealth (leading to a 'socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa').

## The new development anthropology

During the 1950s and the 1960s, studies by the British Manchester School on southern Africa (see Barnes, Mitchell & Gluckman 1949) introduced a number of major innovations regarding classic ethnology, by reckoning with new realities linked to the modern political and economic context (rural-urban migrations, mine work, and the 'colonial situation') in general. These new research themes, evolving in a more 'sociological' direction, made room for the abandon of the 'ethnic' and the classic 'monographic' approaches. They made their first appearance on the methodological scene within African anthropology and included themes like interactions between actors belonging to different social worlds (Gluckman 1971), the analysis of social networks (Mitchell 1969), and the study of conflicts (Gluckman 1956). The Manchester school of thought was diffused in France by Balandier (1963). He thus allowed a fraction of French anthropology (mainly oriented on Africa) to elude orthodox structuralism, which at that time held hegemonic sway. In fact, Balandier's disciples observed an essentially Marxist orientation for two decades (roughly between 1960 and 1980), under the major influence of C. Meillassoux (1964, 1977). This informal Marxist economic influence in anthropology spread, moreover, to other European countries like Belgium (Pollet & Winter 1971); Holland (van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985 ; Geschiere 1982) and Germany (Elwert 1973, 1983; Elwert & Fett 1982).

Development anthropology, of a fundamentally African focus, represents another step forward since the 1980s. It is linked directly or indirectly to the Manchester school<sup>3</sup>, and was generated partly by the depletion of Marxist theory and partly by a general 'return of the actor' in European social sciences. It is no secret that in Africa more than elsewhere development is an omnipresent theme and the inescapable context of collective action even in the remotest village. German anthropologists played an important role in this new development anthropology (see the pioneering work directed by Elwert &

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3 N. Long is situated at one of these poles of development anthropology with APAD (Long 1989, 2001) and is among the last representatives of this school.

Bierschenk 1988). A formal network like APAD<sup>4</sup> provided African and European researchers with a regular forum, thus overcoming the established division between European and African scholars in African Studies. Numerous publications, examples of which exist in most European countries<sup>5</sup>, bear witness to the vitality and productiveness of an empirical analysis of social phenomena linked to development. Indeed, in an area like development, saturated with moralistic and normative viewpoints ('pro' or 'anti' development) this new development anthropology, of an unquestionably European and trans-national origin, places the optimum priority on field enquiry, and avoids moral or ideological presumptions as far as possible. It calls upon the usual range of ethnological methods of fieldwork in its simultaneous study of development institutions and of the populations they target. These include the interactions between 'developers' and 'developed' and the strategies deployed by actors belonging to a variety of life worlds, placed in relation with each other by development practices and policies.

This new development anthropology is of course not the only scientific posture concerned with relations between anthropology and development. Other trends in anthropology are coping with development. Development anthropology, in the broad sense of the word, taken at the global (and therefore essentially Anglophone) level, is in a state of confusion. On one hand, it is characterized by a profusion of 'applied' studies in relation to development institutions (including booming expertise and consultancy), very diverse and devoid of any common paradigm. On the other hand, it is marked by a significant degree of theoretical and epistemological conflict. With the help of a little simplification, it is possible to identify three distinct conceptual approaches to this melee (see Olivier de Sardan 2004 a): (a) the 'discursive' approach to development, of a 'deconstructionist' type (it is very ideological and non empirical; see Escobar 1995); (b) the 'populist' approach (which is also very ideological and debatable, but methodologically interesting in certain conditions (see Hobart 1993); (c) the 'entangled social logics' approach (which is non ideological and resolutely empirical). The last has two independent European poles, that of Wageningen, revolving around N. Long, and the APAD

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4 Euro-African Association for the Anthropology of Social Change and Development (its headquarters formerly at Stuttgart, are currently in Marseilles: apad@ehess.vcharite.univ-mrs.fr)

5 See for Germany Bierschenk 1988; Lachenmann 1990; for Belgium Laurent 1997; for Finland Gould 1997; for France Chauveau 1982, 1985 ; Lavigne Delville 1991 and 1994; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Olivier de Sardan & Elhadji Dagobi 2000 ; for Switzerland Blundo 1995 and 1998; Jacob 2000; for Denmark Lund 1998 ; not to mention various other « trans-national » works : Jacob & Lavigne Delville 1994 ; Bierschenk, Chauveau, & Olivier de Sardan 1999 and 2000. For a general presentation see Olivier de Sardan 2001 and 2004a ; Bako Arifari & Le Meur 2001.

network, which is of a more reticular and diffuse character. Together they constitute the 'new development anthropology'.

## The socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa

The socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa is certainly one of the major achievements of the new development anthropology. It has managed, little by little, to work out a broader perspective, embracing not only institutions but also development policies and actors. These include associations (the famous 'civil society'), local administrations and their relations with users, the everyday workings of the local state, new private and public sector professions, etc. A major role at the forefront of the push for wider perspectives and for the emergence of what we can call a 'socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa' was played by Bierschenk in Germany. The use of the expression 'socio-anthropology' highlights the importance that these researchers attach to bridging the gulf between anthropology and sociology, the sociology of the Chicago school, in particular, i.e. 'qualitative sociology' (Strauss 1987), which has long since opted to apply ethnographic methods to themes at the heart of American modernity. Henceforth, these classical methodological tools must tackle the task of exploring African modernity, and in particular the aspects surrounding public space, administrations and the para--public sector, forms of collective action, and relations between public interest and private interest. This needs to be carried out without relinquishing methodological vigilance, through the systematic and rigorous practice of empirical field research.

African political anthropology is a case in point. For a long time it did not venture beyond the analysis of 'traditional' structures of power (such as kinship systems, chieftaincies, more or less sacred kingships etc....), leaving the analysis of the modern State and its institutions to political science. The result is a huge amount of literature on the State in political science (we could note, among others: for France, the crucial works of Médard 1991, and Bayart 1989; in Germany of Tetzlaff, Engel & Mehler 1995). However, political science research is rarely the fruit of empirical enquiry. Moreover, it is unable to carry out an intensive ethnography or sociography of the modern State, even in the case of an explicit intention of this kind. Bayart's perspective on 'grassroots politics' ('la politique par le bas', Bayart 1981) is a good example of this failure. To the contrary, the socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa has risen to the challenge, through enquiry into the forms of modern power, via themes like

corruption, decentralisation, local powers, the health system, the legal system, and so on...<sup>6</sup>

The strange thing is that in its attempts to draw closer to the specific objects of political science, the socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa has not always received a warm welcome from political scientists. Instead of paying attention to the innovative aspects of this approach and of engaging in a real dialogue across disciplinary boundaries, they have been keener on demanding proof of allegiance to the problematic or erudite literature of their discipline.<sup>7</sup>

The themes of the socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa, whose primary focus is on the delivery and management of public or collective goods and services in Africa are intellectual stakes, which generate academic or erudite discussions. But these are also social stakes. A research theme is *per se* an intellectual stake, owing to the fact that the research object is constructed in a given theoretical context within a given problematic: it takes part, directly or indirectly, in a scientific debate, virtual as this may be. Besides, certain themes *also* have a second dimension, to the extent that, at times, they intersect with social stakes, i.e. they participate, directly or indirectly, in an ongoing or emerging public debate, over and beyond their contribution to scientific debate. Public debate represents specific social constructions, which differ in many respects from scientific debate. The problems of the construction of a sustainable State, governance, the structuring of a public space, the quality of the public service administrations are public debates (even if they are also scientific debates). They not only constitute the heart of the matter of development in Africa, but concern, moreover, Africa's social, economic and political future. Of course, in African Studies as elsewhere, not all academic themes are social stakes; not by a long shot. Many themes are constructed according to scientific procedures that make them good 'food for thought' (i.e. intellectually interesting). An inventory of the topics of doctoral theses on African issues in Europe would easily provide a clear indication of the difference between subjects that are (merely) 'intellectually interesting' and those that are (simultaneously) intellectually *and* socially interesting.

However, the originality of the socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa not only resides in the 'intellectually *and* socially interesting' themes it

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6 See Blundo 2000 and 2001; Blundo & Olivier de Sardan 2001; Blundo & Mongbo 1998; Jaffré & Olivier de Sardan 2003; Laurent 1995; Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1999 and 2003; Tidjani Alou 2001; Olivier de Sardan 1999 and 2004b.

7 See, for example, *Politique Africaine*, n° 96, in which Darbon's position is that of someone handing out wisdom (Darbon 2004). Perhaps owing to their closeness to centres of decision, economics and political science tend to be arrogant vis-à-vis the other social sciences. The sharp reaction of Polly Hill (1986) against the way in which economics assumed hegemonic rights over questions of development, remains relevant.



tackles. One of its characteristics is that these themes are neither treated in an ideological manner, nor in a militant or normative light. Instead, a high priority is placed on serious enquiry and on the avoidance of populist deviations and outcry.

It is true that the socio-anthropology of African public spaces is not the only research orientation that is interested in public, para-public institutions and collective institutions in Africa, approached from the perspective of field enquiry. Many other anthropologists have approached the study of the modern State from an empiric perspective, but usually via the extension of classic ethnologic themes whose implications and ramifications concern modern forms of power (themes like witchcraft, see Fisyi & Geschiere 1991, Geschiere 1995 and 1996; Muslim brotherhoods, see Copans 1980; protestant sects, see Laurent, xx and 2003; illness, see Fassin 1992; ethnicity, see Lentz 2001 and 2003). Perspectives of this kind obviously complement the ethnography of the State, of its administrations and of development actions launched by the socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa.

But the originality of the socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa is not limited to a combination of tried and proven methods (field enquiry, a legacy of the classic ethnography and of the Chicago School) and of new themes (more or less imported from sociology and political science, at least in the case of Africa). To this we must add the methodological innovations it has introduced, while maintaining the essentials of classic field enquiry. These innovations include phases of collective enquiry alternating with phases of long or medium term individual enquiry and the priority placed on in-depth teamwork both for the elaboration of the problematic and the interpretation of results (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1995 and 1997). This represents a break with the highly individualistic ethnologic and anthropologic tradition. On the other hand, the multi-site enquiries carried out inside social spaces (like administrations or professions) that the standpoint of classic ethnology will consider as unusual or incongruous, are a definite departure from yesterday's village monographies (but it is not an epistemological revolution as is sometimes claimed in exaggeration (see Marcus 1995; Gupta & Ferguson 1997).

## Conclusion: refusing culturalism

Over and beyond normal caution and reservations, I would like to underline what I take to be one the major characteristics of the new development anthropology and of the socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa, namely its refusal of culturalism. In fact, culturalism is currently a pervasive scientific ideology in the field of anthropology (and French and German African Studies are no exceptions to the rule). This ideology is also (alas!) almost an integral part

of its identity, not only in the eyes of other disciplines but also in the eyes of many anthropologists. This is not to say that the concept of 'culture' should be thrown out with the bathwater of culturalism. A prudent and minimalist definition of culture remains indispensable for the description of a range of representations and/or behaviours common to any given set of social actors, and it is necessarily on the agenda of research in the social sciences. However, this pragmatic and inevitable use of 'culture' easily deviates into ideology, with its attendant burden of misconceptions, facile over-interpretations and preconceptions projected unto the research object. Culturalism assumes that all the relevant representations and behaviours of a social group are necessarily held in common, while ascertaining which representations and which behaviours are shared and which are not is a problem that confronts empirical research. Culturalism assumes that shared representations and behaviours are shared at all times regardless of the context, whilst empirical research aims at ascertaining which representations and which values are shared in which context, and the contrary. Culturalism assumes that shared representations are based on values held in common (not to mention the same 'world view') defining group identity: yet assumptions of this kind have no empirical backing to vouchsafe or validate them, owing to the vague and ideology-saturated nature of 'value' or 'identity' as a concept.

By making preconceived assumptions about what is shared, and by interpreting 'shared values' in essentialist terms (or in terms related to identity), culturalism pollutes data production and interpretation. Moreover, culturalism tends to keep company with other tenacious old demons of classic ethnology like 'traditionalism' or 'ethnicism'. Lastly, culturalism helps to perpetuate oppositions between 'us' and 'them', between sociology for developed countries and ethnology for under-developed countries, between themes that are fine for the North and others that are fine for the South. That is, it maintains a whole range of oppositions, which have lost all relevance and serve only to block the progress of social sciences studies on Africa and in Africa.

Yet there is no reason to amalgamate anthropology and culturalism. This fact is demonstrated by the socio-anthropology of public spaces in Africa, and by many other types of research. Classic ethnology has, nevertheless, produced irreplaceable working methods, and also some useful knowledge, despite scientific ideologies of the past with which we must break. What is needed here, as in other social sciences, is a calm and rational inventory of the legacy of the past, one that avoids both an exaggerated reverence for founding fathers and a systematic contempt of achievements.

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