

SHORT TAKES

Misconceptions about anthropology as a discipline and ethics of student care in Kenya

W. Onyango-Ouma¹

Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi

Introduction

Anthropology as a discipline in public universities in Kenya has a unique relationship with the first two presidents of Kenya. Jomo Kenyatta, the first president, was an anthropologist who had his training under none other than Bronislaw Malinowski at the prestigious London School of Economics. Kenyatta went a head and wrote an ethnography of his own people, the Kikuyu - *Facing Mount Kenya 1938* - with an introduction by Malinowski. Ironically Kenyatta did not make attempts to introduce anthropology as a discipline of study at the university level in Kenya. It was Daniel arap Moi, the second president of Kenya, with no background in anthropology who in 1986 asked the local university to develop a course that would take into consideration different cultures in Kenya. Moi was interested in university graduates taking up employment in public and private sectors being able to understand and appreciate national cultures. The Institute of African Studies of the University of Nairobi, which was hitherto a cultural research institute, naturally became the home of anthropology.

Misconceptions about anthropology as a discipline of the past

Anthropology is currently taught as an autonomous curriculum leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology at the University of Nairobi. However, anthropology is yet to get its rightful place among the social sciences where students perceive it as a subsidiary rather than an equal to its sister disciplines of sociology and political science. There is a misconception that anthropology only deals with past issues such as prehistory, archaeology and those traditional cultures that

people would want to forget. According to this view anthropology is not capable of dealing with contemporary issues in national development.

There is still limited public knowledge in Kenya on what the subject matter of anthropology entails which further perpetuates the myth that the discipline deals only with the past. There seems to be a lot of visibility on the part of archaeology while social/cultural anthropology is invisible. The National Museums of Kenya and the British Institute in Eastern Africa have established a good infrastructure for conducting archaeological research over the years. Conversely, in the universities, teaching overshadows research in social anthropology hence its invisibility.

Students admitted to study anthropology are often not aware of what they are going to study. Once they join the university they try as much as possible to shift from anthropology to other disciplines. In 2001/2002 academic year out of the 138 students admitted in the anthropology programme at the Institute of African Studies, 38 did not report, 55 sought transfers and only 45 remained in the programme. The same trend can be deduced from 2002/2003 admissions. Of the 189 students admitted, 59 did not report, 62 sought transfers, and only 68 remained in the programme. The beneficiaries of the transfers are mainly economics and sociology departments in the same university. The department of sociology, for example, had a first year student enrolment of about 600 in the 2002/2003 academic year.

The desire to shift from anthropology to other disciplines continues even after the end of first year. I once came across a student who wanted to shift from anthropology after one year of study despite the condition of going back to year one in the course he wanted to move to. The student was interested in joining

¹ Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, P.O. Box 30197, Nairobi

economics department because according to him economics offered good career prospects. Most of those who transfer to other disciplines see no good career prospects in studying anthropology. Such students are convinced that anthropology has very little to offer in a limited and competitive Kenyan job market. They lack information on career prospects that lie in studying anthropology and hence consider the discipline to be of very little relevance to current issues.

The misconception that anthropology as discipline of study only deals with past issues could be attributed to lack of advocacy on the part of pioneer anthropologists in Kenya. This could partly be explained by Mafeje's argument that the nationalist governments in post colonial era banned anthropologists as "peddlers of tribalism" which made the few African anthropologists to go underground for a long 30 years up to 1991 (2001:24).

The general public including employers is in dire need of what one would call "public anthropology". This would serve to inform the public on the subject matter of anthropology as a discipline and its relevance to current issues in national development. Such efforts would prepare high school students in choosing a career in anthropology while employers would be enlightened on the knowledge base of anthropology and hence pave way for easy absorption of graduates in the job market.

Presently the role of anthropologists in Kenya is mostly recognized by international organisations and some local NGOs. Such agencies would for, example, specify in job adverts that they need an anthropologist. This move to recognize anthropology is not unique to Kenya but is all over the developing nations where economists and sociologists have taken a firm grounding but often failed to deliver useful results. Anthropologists, for example, have made significant contributions in biomedical research in Kenya in areas such as malaria (see Nyamongo, 2001; Nyamongo, 2002) and health communication (see Onyango-Ouma, 2003; Onyango-Ouma et al., 2004).

Ethics of student care

Teaching in public universities in Kenya is not a well paying job when compared with what other organizations offer for the same level of expertise. This has adverse effects on the quality of service. As the saying goes – 'if you are reluctant to pay people well they will be reluctant to work for you.' The net result is that lecturers have to find alternative means to sustain themselves outside the university. The most common alternatives include research consultancies, and teaching in private universities. Those who fail to find these alternatives resort to income generating activities completely different from their training. This group suffers from what Paul Nkwi (a Cameroonian anthropologist) has ably termed "brain haemorrhage" – engagement in non-academic activities to supplement one's meagre income. Engagement in such diverse activities make it difficult to concentrate fully on any one of them and lecturers end up "moonlighting" here and there in order to meet deadlines. This has negative impacts on both the quality of teaching and research. Contributions to theory and methods through research and publications are hard to come by.

The quality of teaching in delivering the curriculum is critical to an ethic of student care. Anthropological teachers have an obligation to teach/mentor their students according to established standards in the discipline. In other words, they have a duty to continually strive to improve their teaching/training techniques and conscientiously supervise, encourage and support students' studies among other things (AAA 1998). Being gatekeepers of the discipline, lecturers should ensure that their students as future anthropologists are well grounded in theory and method, for example. Where these are compromised through engagement in other activities lecturers stand accused of violating the ethics of student care.

Conclusion

The misconception that anthropology is a discipline of the past has led to the development of a negative attitude among students enrolling into the anthropology programme at the University of Nairobi.

Students may also be discouraged from studying anthropology in the absence of ethics of student care. However anthropology, given its holistic nature, is better placed than any other discipline to address contemporary issues in national development.

References

American Anthropological Association (1998) *Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association*.

Kenyatta, J (1965 [1938]). *Facing Mount Kenya: The tribal life of the Gikuyu*. New York: Vintage Books.

Mafeje, A (2001) Anthropology in Post Independence Africa: End of an era and the problem of self-redefinition. *African Social Scientists Reflections Part 1*. Nairobi: Heinrich Boll Foundation.

Nyamongo, IK (1999) Home Case Management of Malaria: An Ethnographic Study of Lay Peoples' classification of Drugs. *Tropical Medicine and International Health*, 4 (11): 736-743.

Nyamongo, IK (2002) Health care Switching Behavior of patients in a Kenyan Rural Community. *Social Science and Medicine*, 54(3): 377-386.

Onyango-Ouma, W (2003) Children as Partners in Health Communication in a Kenyan Community. *Anthropology in Action*, 10 (1): 25-33.

Onyango-Ouma, W, J Aagaard-Hansen & BB Jensen (2004) Changing concepts of health and illness among children of primary school age in western Kenya. *Health Education Research*, 19 (3): 3260-339.