

Ordering Africa: Anthropology, European Imperialism and the Politics of Knowledge

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Reviewer:

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When I was an undergraduate at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in the early 1980s, the School had a motto: knowledge is power. Students of a radical inclination would denounce this explicit evocation of the School's imperial origins, and evidently the criticism took its toll. A diligent search of the SOAS website suggests that the phrase has now been entirely suppressed, in favour of a cedar which is presumably supposed to make us think of flourishing and growing strong. Evidently, Francis Bacon's dictum, memorably echoed by Francis Reginald Wingate, former Governor General of the Sudan in his introduction to the first issue of *Sudan Notes and Records*, is no longer considered to be an appropriate summation of the role of British academe in relation to Africa and Asia.

This sort of embarrassment about the relationship between colonialism and academic study has particularly affected anthropology. Unlike the various other disciplines implicated in the production of knowledge about the subject other, anthropology was, as Kathleen Gough pointed out in the 1960s, very largely born of the colonial relationship in continental Europe, as well as in the UK. Almost as soon as it was established, its practitioners came under attack both for their complicity in a colonial order which was already in decline, and for producing studies of non-European societies which concealed, or at least understated, the dramatic impact of colonialism on the lives of ordinary people. Anthropology has, since the 1960s, been frequently forced into a defensive posture in the face of Bernard Magubane's fierce attack on anthropologists who 'believed not only in the inevitability but also in the rightness of the white conquest of the African', and a series of works have - as the current jargon would have it - interrogated the relationship between academic anthropology and imperialism.

This new collection, the product of a conference in 2000, returns to the debate. From the start, it would seem

that the editors of the work, and John Mackenzie in his role as series editor, wish to exonerate anthropology of the more serious charges laid against it. Historical analyses of colonialism, in Africa and elsewhere, have tended in recent years to move away from the vision of a totalising project which crushed all before it. Rather, they have stressed the limited nature of colonial power and the contingent and uncertain nature of colonial policies, as well as the profound role which nominal subjects played in shaping 'the colonial state'. *Ordering Africa*, despite its title, seems to fit largely into this disaggregating mode, questioning the ability of anthropologists to order themselves, let alone the continent of their study.

This reassessment of the complicity of anthropology pursues several different lines. Several of the contributions explore the metropolitan academic milieu, and here, as elsewhere, the real strength of a work with a broad European focus is apparent. British, French and German academic anthropologists feature not as scheming agents of empire but as bickering egotists, driven by national and professional rivalry and personal ambition. Further chapters remind us of the role of the African auxiliaries of linguistic and anthropological research, the people who gathered and supplied data to European 'experts' who often had relatively little direct experience of Africa. These studies do not support the implication that these academic subalterns shaped the production of knowledge, or subverted European ideas about Africa, but they do show how very limited was the evidential basis of colonial knowledge. Furthermore, they remind the reader that, in any case, the primary concern of these auxiliaries was the 'pursuit of localized personal and family objectives', rather than the promotion or remaking of colonialism. Finally Bruce Berman's and John Lonsdale's study of Kenyatta's venture into anthropology, while showing how it might be used as a political tool, also indicates how ineffectual this could be: before later events propelled Kenyatta into the limelight hardly anybody read *Facing Mount Kenya*, and of those who did few took it seriously.

If the relationship between European and African producers of anthropological knowledge emerges as one theme a second and more significant division, which comes very clearly out of this collection, was that between different groups of Europeans, notably between academic anthropologists (the emergent professionals of this nascent discipline) and the European administrators, missionaries and settlers who gathered ethnographic data as part of their work, or out of interest, or both. This distinction was an important one. Of course, Europeans tried to gather information about the people whom they were supposed to rule, manage or evangelise; but most of them did so in an uncertain and haphazard way, perhaps pushed along by the occasional questionnaire or the need to add some entries to the Political Record Book. As far as research questions or methods were concerned, they only had their preconceptions and prejudices to guide them. All of this was undoubtedly part of the colonial attempt to order and categorise, but it was rather different from the work of the professional anthropologists who were employed by some colonial governments - Condominium Sudan being probably the most enthusiastic of these - specifically to gather 'knowledge' about their subjects. As Douglas Johnson notes in his contribution to the collection, British officials in Sudan had argued the importance of such information right from the beginning of their rule, and they hired their first anthropologists in 1908. Yet despite this, and some rather half-hearted attempts to train future administrators in the art of anthropological research, the influence of professional anthropologists on the administration of Sudan was minimal. Edward Evans-Pritchard worked with Sudan government support to produce his classic works of anthropology; but as he himself insisted, these were of no real direct value to officials. Harold MacMichael, perhaps the leading administrator-ethnographer of Sudan, was clear in his views on professional anthropologists who 'sink the practical in the recondite'.

There are similar examples from other territories, not discussed in *Ordering Africa*: when MacMichael left Sudan he moved to Tanganyika, another colonial territory, which experimented repeatedly with professional anthropology and where an administrator and an anthropologist co-operated to produce a book on the uses of anthropology (Hutt and Brown's *Anthropology in Action*). But there too administrators, preferring the product of their own research, found it hard to make use of the kind of knowledge produced by anthropologists. On the whole, it would seem that, as Helen Tilley puts it here, 'anthropology needed empires far more than empires needed anthropology'.

This will not be surprising to many readers. In our search for research grants many of us, not always disingenuously, have argued the relevance of our proposals to some pressing issue, suggesting that by

adding to our understanding we can contribute directly to the shaping of policies which improve the human condition. But as anyone who has been involved in such research will know, the application of research-based knowledge to policies is not always simple, and the relationship with policy-makers can be a fraught one. Academics, encumbered by their pressing sense of the complexity of human societies, tend to be reluctant to offer straightforward policy suggestions; policy-makers have no time to read the cautiously crafted prose of scholars. I have, for the last few years, been involved in running what is, I suppose, a modern equivalent of the colonial summer schools of the 1930s: an intensive course taught by academics, for the employees, mainly, of development agencies working in Sudan. The pupils are a willing lot but, as they freely admit, it is not always possible for them to see how exactly the experience of the course will change the ways that they do their jobs. This is especially true of the parts of the course which discuss the anthropology of Sudan, which most seem to find confusing. This kind of information does not empower them; they are already sufficiently empowered by their knowledge of the international bureaucracy of development, which pays them well and gives them budgets to spend, vehicles to drive, and influence over governments. For these individuals, as for their colonial antecedents, ethnographic knowledge about the people among whom they work is a decidedly uncertain and unwieldy tool. Indeed, it might be argued that in the colonial context and now, real anthropological understanding is as likely to be subversive of power as constitutive of it staying the hand of policy-makers by adding layers of complexity to situations which had appeared simple and giving reason for second thoughts. To offer again the current example of Sudan, the only direct effect on policy which I know to have resulted from the 'knowledge' imparted on the course has been the dissuasion of the UN from a plan to use helicopter gunships to chastise pastoralist raiders; a restraint on power, rather than the creation of it.

It is left to the final contributor to *Ordering Africa* to try to restate the argument for the role of 'ethnology', as he calls it, in sustaining colonialism, and to shift the argument away from the immediate usefulness of any particular piece of 'knowledge' to the idea that knowledge in itself is a project of power. Writing of France's African territories, Gary Wilder describes a world of colonial ethnology in which continuities were much more important than divisions, with 'most colonial administrators' (really?) attending the École Coloniale and diligently absorbing the works of academic anthropologists. His approach centres not so much on the assertion that 'knowledge is power', but rather on the Foucauldian concept of power/knowledge. It is not that the one produces the other, but rather that the processes through which power is made and exercised are intricately involved with the processes through which knowledge is created. This neatly sidesteps the empirical discussion of whether or not officials were able to make practical use of information, emphasising instead that the very act of studying, of gathering knowledge, defined a colonial relationship and legitimised the subordination of the subject. Those who are studied must naturally be ruled and directed by those who study them; the most fundamental ordering comes from this simple divide, which is marked by the process of creating knowledge.

This is a point which Archie Mafeje made many years ago; anthropology offered a service to colonialism not through particular acts of 'collusion', but through the 'ontology of its thought categories'. Seen thus, the partial, jumbled nature of much colonial knowledge about subjects is really irrelevant; anthropological knowledge does not have to be accurate in any empirical sense to bestow power. Nor does it matter if such knowledge is too complicated to be applied in any direct way to administration; that is not really what gathering anthropological information is about. Rather it is the process, through which studied and studier repeatedly rehearse their respective roles, which makes power. The elaboration of anthropology as a distinct discipline was important, not because it created a distinction between professionals and amateurs and divided the discipline, but because it legitimised and rationalised this knowledge project and so effectively empowered colonialism. Administrators may have found professional anthropologists irritating or obscure, but they took comfort and moral strength from the idea that they and the anthropologists were working together to understand and improve those whom - naturally enough - they ruled. The argument here is rather out of step with the rest of the collection and, on the whole, readers will leave this book with the sense that the internal combustion engine and the breech-loading rifle were more useful to colonialism than were anthropological texts; but Wilder offers an effectively discomfiting reminder that anthropological knowledge may, after all, have quite a lot to do with power.

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