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LANGUAGE AS A FACTOR IN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

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Modern ethnographic research has been carried on by two distinct groups of scholars: One is represented by the native scholars who may be labelled the insiders; the other by the foreign observers who may be labelled the outsiders. In this paper the differing perspectives of the insider and the outsider will be discussed. Since I come from the cultural matrix of the *Akan*, in this paper I will utilize both my cultural background and my formal educational training to analyze, interpret and to evaluate some ethnographic works done on African societies especially, works on the *Akan* (the *Twi* Speaking Peoples of Ghana).

My main concern in this paper is to evaluate the writings of anthropologists and native ethnographers in the Akan cultures of Ghana. What are the perspectives between a native scholar and a stranger doing ethnographic research in Africa? For example several other important questions come to my mind. First, are the outsiders familiar with a number of cultural subgroups of importance to their study in *Akan* world? What do they know about the *Ashanti*, the *Bono*, the *Fanti*, the *Akwapim*, the *Kwahu*, the *Akim* and other *Twi* speaking peoples inside and outside Ghana? Are these outsiders able to discern easily *Akan* culture as it was in the past? Are they able to gain an insight into the dynamics of oral tradition, aesthetic outlook, Akan Societal relationships and village organizations, and the effect of colonization and social change on the culture? And what about the understanding of African morals, supernatural belief systems, and their linguistic habits?

Writing a television program for the BBC on "Civilization", Kenneth Clark decided to write on cultures he understood. He omitted areas such as China, India, Persia and other Islamic Worlds because he was not familiar with those cultures. With healthy attitude he openly declared "I have the feeling that one should not try to assess a culture without knowing its language; so much of its character is connected with its actual use of words; and unfortunately I do not know any oriental languages" (Clark 1969: XVII).

The limitation of the outsiders understanding of a culture is illustrated in Akan expressive culture especially proverbial sayings. To the Akan, a stranger who is also an outsider can visualize what it is to be Akan but cannot know how it is to be *ǫkanniba*. *Ǫkanniba* is a person of Akan descent, a person, who not only speaks the *Akan Twi* language, but is also well-versed in Akan culture. From a traditional perspective this concept is well illustrated in an *Akan* proverb. *Ǫhǫhoǫ ani akɛsɛɛ akɛsɛɛ na nso ǫnhunu kuro mu*. Literally meaning "A stranger has big eyes yet he does not know his whereabout in town". This proverb illustrates the problems people face in communities different from their own. A stranger may stare with wide open eyes; he looks but does not see; sees without perceiving and hears without understanding what is going on around him. Hence, an outsider mistakenly might interpret "seeing" as perceiving and "hearing" as understanding.

The issue expressed in two other Akan proverbs: *Ǫhǫhoǫ nto mmara*, literally meaning "A stranger does not break laws", and *Ǫhǫhoǫ tɛɛ abofra*, meaning, "A

stranger is like a child", (that is, a stranger, like a child, does not know right from wrong and therefore needs to be taught and protected). When outsiders to Akan society break certain norms they are not held responsible. Prohibitions such as "no one may receive things with the left hand from a elder"[1], or "a menstruating woman must not visit the house of a chief or a deity, would be considered non-serious violations when committed by a stranger; only indigenous people would be punished for breaking them. Thus the outsider is treated with leniency within the law, at least when he or she breaks it for the first time. Another important *Akan* proverb illustrating the role of the stranger in *Akan* societies is: *Okwantuni nim asemka, na onnim asekyere* "The traveller knows how to say but does not know how to explain the meaning." This conveys the idea that a stranger passing through may say all he has seen on his journey but he cannot explain its meaning[2] because he does not fully comprehend.

Although this paper will be a study from the insider's point of view, the author's formal education outside is likely to influence his interpretation. However, the problems encountered by outsiders in ethnographic interpretation shall be avoided. As an insider in Akan language and culture, the author hopes to combine the outsider's techniques with the insider's knowledge and understanding to present a scientific, point of view.

As early as the 1880's E.B. Tylor (1881. p. 140) warned against cultural ethnocentrism in interpreting foreign cultures. He addressed the problem in these terms:

> *...communities, however ancient and rude, always have their rules of right and wrong. But as to what acts have been held right and wrong, the student of history must avoid that error which the proverb calls measuring other people's corn by one's own bushel. Not judging the customs of nations at other stages of culture by his own modern standard, he has to bring his knowledge to the help of his imagination, so as to see institutions where they belong and as they work.*

Addressing the same interpretation issue, Bronislaw Malinowski (1922, p. 25) stated that "the final goal, of which an ethnographer should never lose sight is briefly, to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to 'life' to realize his vision of his world."

Hasan El-Shamy (1978, p. 211) in his article, "African World View and Religion" points out some of the spiritual components of an individual's world view in African society, which might have impact on the interpretation of his culture. He writes:

> *...the world view of an individual is composed not only of intellectual, cognitive knowledge but of emotional, effective components as well. When these emotional components are added to cognitions or knowledge, a tendency to act or behave in a certain way arises. These three components, cognition, emotion, and action tendency, make up what is called an attitude.*

Frank Kermode, (1979, p. 16) writing on the interpretation of narrative describes some of the problems encountered in explaining the meaning of a story to an audience from a different culture. The reader of a narrative necessarily makes inferences about the culture from which it comes. He writes,

> *It is true that outsiders also interpret; the most naive reading of a text, that treats it, for example, as a transparent account of reality, and picks up only the clues that enable it to satisfy the most conventional expectations, say of coherence and closure, is an interpretation.*

Recently, works such as Ward Goodenough's (1972) "Componential Analysis", (1972) William Sturtevant's "Studies in Ethnoscience," and Gary Gossen's (1971) "Chamula Genres of Verbal behavior," have addressed the problem of "culture-bound" knowledge and its influence on interpretations of foreign cultures. Scholars have devised various means for dealing with such problems but all stress the importance of knowing local languages and patterns of social behavior.

In his introduction to **Interpreting Folklore**, Alan Dundes (1980) laments the dearth of interpretation of folklore materials. He writes:

> *I believe that one reason for the reluctance of folklorists to attempt interpretations of their data is their tendency to treat "lore" as though it were totally separate from "folk." The tales, ballads, riddles, etc. are studied as entitles independent of living human beings. A folktale may be tale typed, morphologically dissected or mapped without regard to the fact that it is told by one human being to another. I am interested in folklore because it represents a people's image of themselves.*

If folklore truly represents the self-image of the people who produce it, folkloristic interpretations should include the people themselves or folklorists should legitimize their interpretations by taking the people, their language and their cognitive system into consideration. Such an inclusion would help the folklorists 'put the folk back into folklore.' Folklorists also must ensure sufficient data on which to base these interpretations. Otherwise, the folklorist will be ineffective as an interpreter and will do no justice to the people without whom there would be no folklore.

For decades African materials have been collected and studied by outside ethnographers, especially anthropologists, missionaries, travelers and agents of colonial authorities. Some of these writers had dubious presuppositions which remain embedded in their work on African cultures.

For example, Blake Vernon (1927, p. 27) in his treatment of "The Aesthetic of Ashanti" had no idea how the Ashanti perceived their world. Because he did not understand the *Twi* language, as well as the aesthetic values of other facets of the cognitive systems of the Ashanti, he believed a defect of the primitive mind made Ashanti sculpture deformed. He argued that "the defect of the primitive mind, its incapability of following prolonged discussion, is scarcely a defect from the artistic point of view." According to Vernon (ibid.), "It may be that European aesthetic notions at work in an African mind might produce a worthy result." Thus Vernon was unable to grasp the indigenous value systems, the way the Ashanti saw his world, and how the Ashanti viewed and evaluated his own aesthetics. His use of the word 'deformation' implies a negative evaluation of the African as compared to the European - he was comparing two races of human beings, the African and the European using the lences of the latter.

Vernon Blake (ibid., p. 364) not only abhorred the 'primitive mind' of the Ashanti but also attributed lack of reality to Ashanti aesthetics because of the "tremendous memory of the primitive." Like Vernon Blake, who diagnosed and interpreted the African mind, Ladislas Segy 1958, p. 5) compared the mind of the African to that of the European child. He contended infantile animism is inherent in the adult mind of the African. He wrote:

In our culture, when a child goes to bed and is separated from his protecting mother, he may become insensely frightened. But if he is allowed to hold a doll or a toy rabbit or bear, or something similar, he will often feel that he is not alone, and will sleep peacefully. The child and his parents, of course, do not realize it, but the child's feelings are not too different from the African's.

Although these scholars were writing on the visual and the plastic arts, their interpretations did not exclude language or the verbal arts which are also products of the African mind. Such were the characteristics of the works of early ethnographers like Henry L. Morgan's (1977) **Ancient Society**, Lucien Levy-Bruhl's (1926) **How Natives Think**, Vernon Blake's "The Aesthetic of Ashanti," and Ladislas Segy's **African Sculpture.** These scholars wrote about and interpreted cultures which they never completely understood.[3] The evolutionary theory in social sciences influenced many scholars who interpreted African cultures. Thus scholars were looking for the African primitive, savage and "barbaric" minds, which they contrasted to the European "civilized" mind.

By contrast, R.S. Rattray (1927, p. v) writing on Ashanti art and religion was aware of the problem of interpreting cultures different from the interpreter's own and displayed healthy respect for the civilization of the Africans and argued that: "... had the Ashanti been left to work out their own salvation, perhaps some day an African Messiah would have arisen." Rattray, though an outsider to Ashanti tradition, still realized the importance of grasping the native's viewpoint when interpreting a foreign culture. He commented: "As West Africa has been termed 'The Land of Fetish' it seems only right and proper that we should try to discover what this term conveys to the mind of the West African himself, (Ibid., p. vi).

Rattray (*op. cit.*) took a bold stand on this matter; he recognized that his position on the issue of the so-called "primitive mentality" was contrary to the notions his colleagues had about Africans. This is because Rattray understood the language and did not have to depend on dubious interpreters who as insiders with acquired western vocabularies were often misleading.

The "old regime" as Rattray identified them, tended to dehumanize the African; whatever their intentions, they can often be charged with inculcating and prolonging false and prejudicial ideas about Africans. These attempts to investigate African cultures and communities did justice to neither the scientific community nor the people being studied. Why was Rattray different? For one thing, not only did he know and speak the *Twi* language, he also gained the fullest confidence, and he inspired the people's trust and affection. In addition, he also approached the people as a seeker after truths, the key to which they alone possessed. With such confidence, the Asante even took Rattray to deities' rooms, places where outsiders were forbidden to go. The following proverb explains the reasons why certain customs and rituals are hidden from the outsiders: *Obi nhata ne ntoma abontenso*, literally meaning "No one dries his worn-out cloth on the streets". This means that no one should reveal his background to the public. Thus people refuse to talk to outsiders about their lives, especially matters concerning their religion - Supernatural belief systems. In this case, even a native scholar who is not a member of the family is considered an outsider and therefore intruder.

Rattray (1923, p. 88) also abhorred the use of unknowledgeable inside interpreters which contributed to European misunderstanding of the African culture. He laments:

With regard to the second source of our European misinformation - the uneducated African - who isexamined by the white man through the medium of an interpreter, such methods of dealing with a delicate and difficult subject like religion are, in my own opinion, and from my own experience, equally unsatisfactory. Inquiries conducted on such lines will either lead to almost wholly negative results or, what is as bad, the information so gained will again be tinged by just the same half-truths as the material obtained from the former source which it thus seems to corroborate. The wrong atmosphere is once again imported by the educated or semi-educated interpreter, who will unconsciously give answers, couched in the only phraseology which he knows, with which lie has been familiar since he first began to learn to read and write.

Ethnographic research in Africa is a formidable task, even for a native Scholar. It is imperative to understand the language of the people before one can make a meaningful interpretation. In Ashanti Rattray (*Op. cit.*) sympathized with the language problem:

In a land where, even now only a few Europeans are able to speak the language of its people, it was inevitable that inappropriate European words should have been employed to describe objects and actions, the real significance of which was never fully examined or understood.

In addition, Rattray knew the importance of incorporating the values and the perceptions of the Ashanti into his interpretations of their culture.

The essence of the scientific attitude was lacking because ethnologists could not abandon personal prejudices. Gordon Childe (1951, p. 10) in his book, **Man Makes Himself** explains the function of science as "the classification of facts, the recognition of their sequence and relative significance. The scientific attitude is shown in the habit of forming judgment on the facts unbiased by personal feelings."

Maxwell Owusu (*Op. cit.*, p. 326) points out that the evolutionary anthropological interpretation of African cultures is inaccurate and outmoded. He asserts that:

A growing number of well-informed African writers and critics, anthropology as a study of "primitive" peoples by "civilized" Westerners is or ought to be dead. The reason is quite simple: African societies and cultures on balance are no less or more "primitive" than any others.

Outsiders doing ethnographic work presently in African societies still make errors. Owusu (Op. cit., p. 326) noticed that one critical factor that greatly contributes to systematic errors in ethnographic accounts on Africa is lack of language familiarity or fluency. He explains:

Today, when heavy acculturation is the rule rather than the exception in African societies, a prior ability to speak and understand several relevant local vernaculars is essential if the ethnographer is to avoid serious factual errors and misleading theoretical conclusions. Command of several local vernaculars is necessary because of the increasing tendency of Africans to shift from language to language within a single interaction context or social field as a result of the mixing of different speech communities. Unfortunately there is a growing tendency among Africanists

(and anthropologists working in other geographic areas as well) to assume rather naively, even as they pay lip service to the importance of the use of native languages, that since European languages are now widely used throughout Africa, satisfactory scholarly ethnographies based on fieldwork can be written without mastery of the relevant vernaculars.

To understand Africans as they are, to comprehend their world view, the ethnographer must know the aesthetics of their language and culture. Indeed, Africa's self-identity is to a significant extent, wrapped up in this linguistic reality.

For the sake of high-quality research and interpretation in the science and humanities on African cultures, Owusu again suggests a 'radical' solution to the epistemological and methodological dilemmas of the foreign anthropologists who still dominate the field of study of African societies and cultures. He writes:

It is my firm belief that the continued professionalism in the field of African studies, the field's contribution to the science of society, and the extent to which ethnographic knowledge could be of real service to the host community and government all depend on data quality control as it relates particularly to linguistic competence is successfully tackled. (*ibid.*, p. 326)

My intention here is not categorically to denounce outsiders' interpretations, but to warn the reader that for several decades African societies have suffered from biased outsiders' interpretations. The basic cause of bias is the barrier of language and culture. With linguistic competence and respect for the culture on its owns terms, outsiders can go a long way towards minimizing some of these problems.

There are also some problems specific to the insider's role as ethnographer. Although the insider has the linguistic tools to dissect his own culture, he is always faced with troublesome local politics. Sometimes he finds himself caught between informants who are afraid that their secrets might be revealed to enemies. Although he is a member of the same country, he is not an insider in all subcultural groups. In his article "Anthropologists and native ethnographers", Tamas Hofer (1970, p. 19) addresses some important theoretical issues concerning ethnographical fieldwork in Europe, with specific reference to the differences between the works of native European ethnographers in their own localities and American anthropologists in Europe. Although Hofer does not take any particular stand on the issues; he believes that

Both anthropologists and ethnographers have their own tasks in exploring Europe. He regrets somewhat that the actual picture formed by anthropologists of the European countryside is more or less confined to what the community studies of recent years have grasped, namely the oppressive post-peasant morals of vanishing villages and backward societies. He believes that it would be expedient to insert in this picture the colourful, rich, intricate fabric of cultural processes which the ethnographers have explored and described in a language differing from that of the anthropologist.

The insider must evaluate his position in his own society and learn to deal with local obstacles which can impede his progress. Although he is a native scholar he must learn to understand and respect his own people.

In Akan societies, the left hand is excluded from activities such as eating and greetings; it is exclusively for sex and cleaning oneself after visiting the bathroom. Hence, it is disrespectful to receive things with the left hand.

a) The following summary of a tale explains why women do not visit the deity and the chief during menustration. Collected at Teachiman-Krobo, April 16, 1971.

There lived a hunter and his wife in a cottage in a thick forest. The hunter's wife was enchanted by her husband's success as a hunter, but she was also discontented because each time the husband brought meat home, the blood had been drained out. One day the women decided to spy on her husband to find out what he did with the blood from the animals he killed.

One evening the woman made small holes in her husband's hunting bag and put some ashes in the bag. The next morning, not knowing what had happened to his bag, the hunter started his journey as he always did. The ashes made a trail and the woman followed him to the hunting ground. In a moment, the hunter shot an antelope and immediately began to offer the blood to a deity in the forest. It was this deity which helped him to be a successful hunter. The deity became angry at the woman and forced her to drink the blood. The deity said, "Woman, I am not going to kill you, but every month you have to release some of the blood you have just drunk." This is why women menstruate. Earlier, women never menstruated yet they were able to give birth to babies. Hence menstruation became a taboo to the deities and chiefs.

I collected two variants of this etiological tale in 1971 from a male and a female informant in Techiman traditional area. April 16, 1971 and July 2, 1971

2) A foreigner to the Akan is more than a stranger (not like an Akan visiting another Akan community or town). A foreigner is *Manfrani*, literally "mixture of nations" (see Owusu Brempong "Attacking Deviation from the Norm: Insults in Bono - Ghana". (An unpublished M.A. Thesis, Indiana University, 1978, p. 82.

3) See Maxwell Owusu's article "Ethnography of Africa: the Usefulness of the Useless," **American Anthropologist** 80 (1978), pp. 310 - 334.

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