

Representing African Reality through Knotty Terms

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We are very aware that we represent reality through terms and the whole contents they imply. And a frequent problem we have to face when we are researching African realities from the anthropological point of view is precisely the discomfort using some of these terms, which we can understand as “knotty terms”. It is not very difficult to find examples for that. This is the case with the adjective “ethnic” when people use it in expressions such as “ethnic music” or “ethnic clothing”. The same or perhaps worse happens with “tribe” or “tribal society”, with “witchcraft” or “sorcery”. Without any doubt all these terms have contributed to shape the images of Africans that were constructed during the colonial period and which have not disappeared in the present time. Very often we think that these terms are hardly appropriate or even absolutely inadequate. Not only because they may have a contested analytical value but because they may imply a pejorative dimension as well, as a consequence of that old evolutionist anthropological thought -so well assumed by colonialism- which not only classified societies but also imposed hierarchy.

Very often anthropologists feel the need to apologize when they have no choice but to use these terms in their writings, but they keep on using them or try to search other frequently not at all convincing alternatives. The problem becomes worse and even paradoxical when anthropologists see that, regardless of their efforts not to use them, the terms have been widely assumed in Africa.

Up to what extent can African anthropology do without these terms? How must our attitudes regarding these terms be if we really cannot give them up? Up to what extent do we fall in the *ideology of difference* which some African theorists denounce when the applicability of determined concepts which have been conceived in the West is denied for other different societies?

These are some of the questions I will debate throughout my paper, and the troublesome term of “witchcraft” is a very good starting point for beginning with. The frame of the current discourses about alterity can without any doubt help us to understand better this problem. The interest in reflecting about these knotty terms lies in the fact that they not only represent an epistemological issue for anthropology but they have an important ideological and therefore social dimension as well.