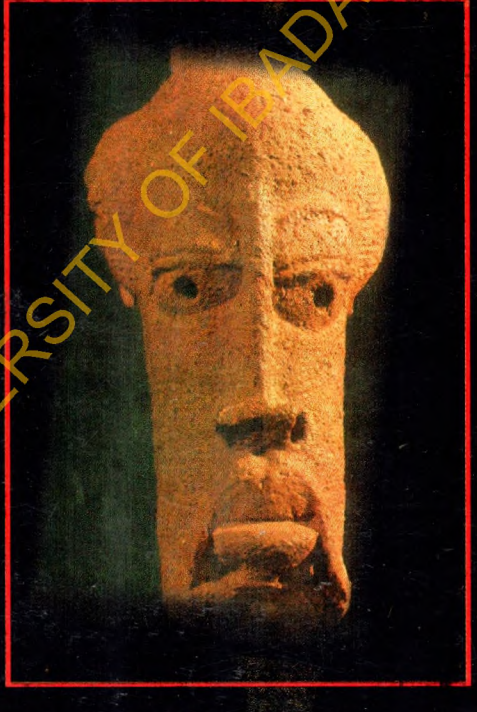
A Handbook of Methodology in African Studies



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A HANDBOOK OF
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IN AFRICAN STUDIES

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AFRICANIST FIELD RESEARCH AND THE REALM OF VALUE

DELE LAYIWOLA

6

In opening this paper, it is necessary to predicate it with the famous words of Barbara Hernstein Smith on the contingencies of value, that:

> The privileging of the self through the pathologising of the other remains the key move and defining objective of axiology [1988;38].

This oblique reference to both polarisation and hybridity would seem to be an emerging possibility in the field of Africanist research. In the previous essay, I referred to the tension between anthropologists and art historians. In this essay, I hope to demonstrate that the realm of value is bombarded by the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge as well as by the tension between possibilities and proliferation of ideas. The result is that we are torn between ideas and value judgements which represent the same field but divergent in perceptual orientation such that we stand the risk of losing grip and harmony within the same household of cultural speculation.

If we take, for instance, the recent advancement of gender-laden theories of womanist perspectives as a realm of value, in itself, then

scholarship probably has gender. We can also assume that the perception of value in the interpretation of a drama or an artwork can be a way of revisiting the world if we say that those works have the masculine and the feminine within their realm of value. It is possible to say that a certain culture can be either the high type or its popular equivalent. Certainly, if within the same household of culture such disparities occur, then we can no longer talk of a uniform realm of value judgements or assessments. The possibilities of value are often inimitable.

I will like to illustrate this with a practical point in Nigeria's second republic; the era of 1979-83 politicians. Before this era, regional media houses had often, for institutional reasons, broadcast in major local languages or in English, the *lingua franca*. The myth of a uniform audience was then shattered when the erstwhile 'minority' languages foregrounded themselves and insisted on being included on broadcast stations, if not in printed media. The fact of a seething semiotic undercurrent was lost to many, but a spectacular example occurred in Lagos and Ogun states. The evening Yoruba broadcast had to be complemented with the 'uppish' Ahori language sub-group of the region. Though the Ahori speak the dominant Yoruba language, they demanded the inclusion of their mother tongue in the broadcast media. The 'pathologising of an other' would thereby generate a midwifing of a complex culture where competition can(not) be truly imagined. Hence, which language is popular and which is not since the broadcast is to the same volume and spectrum of audiences in the Lagos and Ogun gateway field areas? No one could say that Ahori could not be broadcast because it has no orthography studied in schools. Afterall, they are a politically influential electorate in the politics of the area.

In a fieldwork situation, for instance, if we were to assume a uniform framework of value, which of the two linguistic options mentioned above would be most suitable for information generation and dissemination? What language medium will be either "politic" or "just convenient" within the field of play? Would a researcher dwell on the complexity of syntax, or history in his choice of language or would he dwell on another aspect of socio-linguistics – say, that of social class or political clout? It then becomes clear that, theoretically speaking, the realm of value is fundamental to our choice and context; the only problem is in being able to explain the choices that we make and why such choices have priority over others.

What my point advocates is simply that we must, more than ever before, pay greater attention to the classifications we make in our analyses of field work. We must, in fact, pay attention to the slant of language usage, which is capable of inflicting value judgements and prejudices over the statements we make. There is an inevitable bias in the analyses and processing of information and data from given geographical and field conditions. In what way do we mark off territories and sort out historical or conceptual links in-between sources which are either oral or written, sung or declaimed, recited or chanted? What John Frow records on this is succinct:

> More broadly, this would be an analysis not only of norms and procedures but of the institutional structures through which value is formed, transmitted and regulated; of the social distribution of literacy; of the mechanisms for the training and certification of valuing subjects; of the multiplicity of the formations of value, differentiated by age, by class, by gender, by race, and so on [1996:135].

We certainly cannot claim that value judgments are not relational or variable; we cannot claim that what would be 'universal' for one researcher or a group of researchers will necessarily be same in another class or gender-specific situation. There, certainly, are various grades and dimensions to the study of matter and the intellectual properties of existence.

When we process cultural materials from their peculiar contexts: that of ethnic violence; political shifts and domination; aetiology of selfish interests and prejudice; economic domination and struggle; situations of uneven perception, then they emerge without reflecting the conditions under which they were gathered. The truth, sometimes, is that it becomes the pronouncement of an individual, which unwittingly affirms that what we read is a factual, omniscient canon that is above any realm of value. Obviously, we underestimate the power of value over even the notions categorised as facts and records. The only sane antidote to this mismanagement of research information and procedure is to adopt the warning of Clifford and Marcus (1986:15) that culture is always relational and is an aspect of communicative process and exchange, which are historically between subjects in relations of power. It is this relations of power that are categorised by terminologies such as gender, class, popular or elitist, etc. The field is full of landmines, often far more suffusing than we think. It can only be that the position of genuine scholarship becomes more precarious

and hazardous with the progress of history. Social formations tend to reveal at the same time as they obfuscate varying categories of analyses and the rules of knowledge production.

Let us go unto other examples, realising that there are always alternative ways of explaining the world; alternative perceptions of events and values in a rational situation. Besides, we do not want to be bogged down by over-theorising tendencies and making particular situations look like ends in themselves rather than seeing them as a process of a given history or tradition. Here I shall give two tendencies in the contemporary experience of African literature; tendencies curiously overt only in the form of the novel. There are two novels of Chinua Achebe involved: *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964).

In the first novel, the author creates a cultural scenario whereby a cultural domain tries to explain its own world as a way of asserting it. It says that colonialism did not come to civilise Africans but that there have been organicist models whereby communities grew on their own terms, *in situ,* and are valid for their own purposes. In other words, their value systems are co-ordinated from within and are not fore-closed to other communal systems with which they can have cultural and value exchanges so far as there is mutual respect for one another. This is why, in that first novel, the major patriarchal character, Okonkwo, goes all out with macho and style prejudicial in his own favour. The author, as is to be expected, presents this hero with great artistry by putting emphasis and exaggeration on certain dominant traits of the individual as a template replicating an internalised system. Of course, Okonkwo, as a person, cannot possibly be as gastronomic as he is portrayed, neither does a whole community, in exaggerated fits of manual labour, need to pound a mountain of yams just for the sake of showing agricultural prowess and then proceed to eat it all up within a period of twenty-four hours. That will not display the necessary sense of rectitude. However, the subtle point remains that it was a self-sufficient, self-catering community where none lacked in wherewithals.

Achebe performs an artistic feat in creating a larger-than-life situation meant to illustrate a simple point or notion on the probabilities of human accomplishment. But if we were to subject the idea to empiricist analysis then we might ask whether it is the same labour that produced the yam which now pounded it or were there some machines and robots employed? If individuals from diverse groups would come from the various distant communities on foot, at what point of the pounding did they arrive given that the pounded

yam didn't grow cold and unappetising? If indeed the communal feast involved the total participation of the various provinces, how long did each person stay as to enable him exchange handshakes over the left-over of the day? The story is a feat of the intellect which creates its own peculiar realism that, as is now too obvious, cannot bear the insult of modern cinematic technology as borne out by the travesty of its transfer into a modern film. One linguistic effect, which is realised in abstractions rather than in bland empiricism, is the symbolic use of parts to express wholes. This often appears as a rhetorical device in circumlocution as indigenous Igbo expressions. Christophe Kambaji [1994:72] has noted two instances of such expressions in *Things Fall Apart*. The first was the afternoon when the ancestral body of *Egwugwu* gathered for a legislative fiat over the affairs of the living. The *Egwugwu*, as the living body of ancestors, are the supreme body in Igbo law and jurisprudence. Their periodical appearance, therefore, is always full of ritual and performance. Utterances on such occasion are, therefore, spectacular and pregnant with meaning. It is customary, in adjudication, for the esteemed judges to utter greetings to litigants on both sides. On that occasion, an *Egwugwu* addressed Uzowulu thus:

> Uzowulu's body, I salute you (p. 81)

The status of an ancestral spirit puts him on a different pedestal from Uzowulu who is a mere mortal before these awesome spirits. He, therefore, addresses him as 'body' rather than as 'spirit being'.

A similar instance occurs when Ekwefi narrates to the priestess Chielo how horrified she was when Okonkwo shot at her with his gun. She remarks:

> I cannot yet find the mouth with which to tell the story (p. 44)

This simply means that she is still too horrified to describe the circumstances of the incident. As Kambaji has observed, this will be ungrammatical as well as puzzling in the English language, but the rhetorical device is perfectly acceptable in the cultural context. A casual visitor, even a researcher in the field, would be expected to 'catch up', as it were, with such situations if and when they arise. But the point is too well made that there were great pre-industrial societies with their own system of organisation – juridical, cultural and legislative – before the intrusion of market forces and colonialism.

In the novel that came six years later, Achebe presents a more balanced; a more contemplative scenario that is striving to take in, understand, and selectively tackle a new-fangled urbanity that is

nascent with colonialism. A few critics and researchers feel that *Arrow of God,* if only for that reason, is a more accomplished artwork than the former novel. But, for our present purposes, that is in itself the realm of value judgement. What we can say is that the value of cultural capital in African Studies would, for a while, be ruled by the two faces of the same coin. The first is that there are indigenous systems which are whole and complete in themselves and often demand a unique analysis of partially closed value systems for their understanding. That is the group to which *Things fall Apart* belongs. The other is more eclectic, more interdisciplinary, and that is the group to which *Arrow of God* belongs.

It is noticeable in the latter work that the main character, Ezeulu, is unlike Okonkwo in very many respects. First, Okonkwo's temperament is that of a conservative, legendary political figure who would dabble in the mundane politics of his day or wherever prestige offers him a role to play. But Ezeulu, a bit more of an introvert rules by other means; he combines the role of a king and priest. He leans more in temperament to the clergy of the old order. He affirms that he would not altogether resist a new order but would take the best of both worlds. The irony is that this seeming pragmatism does not save him from the tragic fate of heroes. The only difference is that of a rather intriguing tragic irony. Okonkwo loves his fatherland and would cultivate its values. He would tame it, if need be, to prove a mettle. He would meet the alien tradition with the same kind of ruthlessness. He eventually caves in to that pressure from the outside, intruding influence. On the other hand, Ezeulu, noble and calculating, would welcome and weigh the influence coming from outside of his community and immediate field of cognition. But his undoing is his lack of a total understanding of the pressures from within. It is a sad irony that a man who would serve both worlds would succumb to the undoing from the inside.

The aforegoing instances reveal how complex and varied the analysis of value and cultural capital can be; especially under vacillating, uneven allegiances. But one fact cannot be gainsaid: that is that every political or cultural system has within its kernel that which builds as well as that which rebuilds or destroys it.

It is abundantly clear that the future of African studies in its relation to the realm of value in other cultures must continue to affirm its own validity as much as revitalise itself through the emergence of other intruding cultures and attitudes alien to it. Its thrust in the coming millennium will be predicated on how much of its own

documentation it has organised for the value of facts and true representation as opposed to misrepresentation and conjectures. It will also have to open up to true models of multi-disciplinary, inter-textual as well as trans-textual studies without sacrificing its own unique identity. For instance, depending on the country one is in, African studies is either located in such varying fields as literature, cultural studies, history, politics, anthropology, economics and fine art. And for the future it should subtend such fields as physics, medicine, pharmacy and engineering. What then is that protean field called African studies and what will be the rules of its methodology? One of its strengths is in being located in as many fields as we can find, but the same bastardises it by removing its focus.

We must not forget an even stronger factor in the realm of value formation: that much of African studies research is, purportedly, now done farther afield than at home itself. The risk being that 'workers' at home only provide raw data whilst 'researchers' abroad can then process the data sent from a home-grown market. Whether the result can be salutary to workers at both or either ends of the scale is something to be examined in a future essay. However, one abiding factor will be that of genuine collaboration between the two categories of scholars. One side must be in the constant know of what the other is doing as either roles are important and each stands in the mortal danger of losing sight of the other in the jigsaw arrangement.

The situation places an all-time premium on the responsibility of the Africanists on the African continent itself. They will be expected to be at the cutting edge of research or data gathering in the area whilst enjoying the support of their colleagues abroad. This, by way of conclusion, would seem to confirm the observation of John Frow once again:

> In order to move beyond the limitations of relativism (which does not mean the reinstatement of some non-positional perspective), it becomes necessary to redefine the notion of positionality itself, together with the notion of representation on which it depends. The crucial argument here, it seems to me, is the one that follows when regimes of value are detached from a directly expressive relation to a social community (p. 154).

Once this is achieved, a more centralised focus should begin to emerge for the benefit of the field itself. It also means that a more meaningful economy of value would most certainly emerge with greater clarity across the field as a whole.