

Vestiges of colonial anthropology and race in Nigerian higher education

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What happens to colonial racial constructions in postcolonial African societies? The Western imaginary depicts post-independent African nations like Nigeria rebuilding institutions that are void of colonial racial deterministic practices. Popular belief holds that when Nigeria declared independence from the British crown colonial influence over Nigerian institutions dissipated. However, many Nigerian nationals know that there are institutions and disciplines still viewed as vestiges of colonial society. Sociocultural anthropology is one of the disciplines viewed as a relic of the colonial masters. In academic departments throughout Nigeria, anthropology is marked by colonial Britain's early use of anthropology to study Nigerians in order to strengthen their imperialist rule of Nigeria (Anugwom, 2007). British anthropologists submitted conscribed findings that were codified as epistemological knowledge for Nigerian universities and early foundational studies of British anthropology. Across Nigeria university communities aware of this history talk about anthropology as an imperialist tool that is: 1) Used against development efforts of Nigeria, 2) Perpetuates racist colonial constructions of race, and 3. Casts Nigeria as a primitive and backward nation. This essay explores the institutionalization of colonial constructions of race and how this influences the current view of anthropology in Nigeria. Specifically, how scientific racism influenced knowledge production which replicates colonial knowledge systems

that reproduce false dichotomies such as inferior African cultures vs. superior Western cultures. This essay begins with a discussion of the British colonial government's use of colonial knowledge production in Nigeria. The institutionalization of anthropology in Nigerian higher education as a tool central to the indirect British colonial rule is also addressed. Next, colonial constructions of race and imperialist notions operating in the anthropology curriculum at present-day Nigerian universities are discussed. Finally, further suggestions review a collaborative project working towards a critical engaged Nigerian anthropology focus and curriculum. This paper also examines how these colonial racial conceptualizations continues to marginalize anthropological knowledge produced by Nigerian scholars.

Anthropology in colonial Nigeria

This discussion will provide explicit examples of the roles that colonial ideologies regarding racial difference play in the postcolonial present. These examples led to understanding aspects of neocolonial relations that African scholars argue replaced postcolonialism. Nigerian Philosopher Salami states that under neocolonialism, "Such [African] nations may be seen to have mere flag independence without having the necessary economic and political independence to back it up and foster their independent development" (Salami, 2009). This flag independence

is represented in African nations' economic and political dependence on former imperialist countries. Nigerian citizens effortlessly identify neocolonialism and the political and economic reach of imperialist interests. However, ideological and conceptual institutionalization of colonial racism is difficult to determine in a nation with institutions run by Africans. The colonial period saw the growth of the British African knowledge economy—with anthropological studies being a significant contributor—which became the basis for racial classifications used to justify colonial action. Colonial knowledge systems, in this case, British colonial typologies of Nigerian ethnic groups and African societies are still present in current Nigerian anthropology. These typologies provided racial justification for British social, cultural and political dominance of Nigerian life and institutions. These racial categories instituted under colonial rule did not just remain in the curriculum and colonial government offices, they were adopted in Nigerians everyday lexicon. Many Nigerians and Nigerian institutions defined themselves through false binaries: Global North, superior/Global South, inferior; Europe civilized/Africa barbaric; Black, dirty/White, pure. Racist concepts remained in everyday Nigerian life and institutions because, according to Faye V. Harrison, although not a biological fact, race, both directly and indirectly, shapes transnational identification and various aspects of life, including institutions (Harrison, 2008).

With the exception of corrupt Nigerian government officials being accused of mimicking their colonial masters, Nigeria is viewed as being removed from colonial constructions of race (Salami, 2009). It is evident that even after independence colonial systems remain in the fabric of society. These imperialist systems establish the inherent limitation of African-ness and replicate the broader racial and societal categories of colonial thought—primitive vs. advanced. The legitimating function that the “Science of native peoples had for colonial theory and practice did not disappear at once with decolonization. In fact, there is evidence to support the claim that colonial anthropology (along with North American

anthropology) acted as a matrix for the use of anthropology by United Nations agencies for development projects.” (L'Estoile, 1997).

Though race is a global social fact, many Westerners and Africans conclude that there are no issues with race or racism in African nations where both majority and minority ethnic groups are of African descent. Racism is not seen as an African problem, it is recognized as practices of symbolic and actual violence of a racial majority against a racial minority. Because Nigeria is a racially homogeneous nation no longer under imperialist indirect colonial rule it is inconceivable that scientific racist arguments still influence Nigerian postcolonial government policies and everyday life. As a result, “Africa stands for race but yet, paradoxically, race does not exist in Africa” (Pierre, 2012, pp. xii-xiii). Thus, colonial racial ideology and its outputs are seldom identified as racist, or the institutionalization of these concepts in cultural practices and infrastructure. Instead of race many Nigerians turn to ethnicism to explain the sociopolitical and economic inequality among Nigerian groups. In fact, some say, “We don't have race (racism), we have tribalism.” Ethnicism, cultural as opposed to biologized stereotypes or ethnocentrism, is referred to so often to explain discriminatory practices among different ethnic groups it is not uncommon for Nigerians to say, “I am racist against the other group.”

Colonial knowledge production and higher education

Colonial constructions of race matter to anthropological knowledge production because these racial hierarchies form the ideological basis of anthropology at Nigerian universities. It is clear that the colonial foundation of anthropology reflected in current anthropological curricular models represents a crisis of the dominant brand of anthropology in Nigeria. The crisis centers on biased imperialist studies supporting African primitivisms presented as universal truths. In these studies, the African civilization

was deemed inferior, hence, African knowledge systems were devalued. These analyses were used to legitimate early models of African sociocultural anthropology and were used as ontological justification for British imperialism. This conceptualization of race was also the core of the colonial epistemic model of Nigerian universities under colonial rule.

This racial binary that defines colonial anthropology reinforces pseudoscientific notions of African inferiority. Racial binaries and categories of superiority vs. inferiority are reproduced in educational structures and are still present in post-colonial institutions. If hegemonic definitions of race are codified in disciplines based on Western imperialist practices and are a part of the fabric of Nigerian society—in the physical structures, language, dress, social practices and curricular focus—then racial binaries will be perpetuated.

Colonial race models shape anthropological knowledge production in higher education across Nigeria. As a result, for current Nigerian anthropological research to be considered authentic, the study must present descriptive or what is considered ancient, primitive African cultures. These delimiting narratives of African societies marginalize Nigerian scholarship on many levels. African scholars navigate a global research climate that marginalizes their research contributions while privileging the studies of Western researchers. Western scholars and institutions often approach African anthropologists and Africa as a site to study as opposed to engaging African scholars and scholarship (Mafeje, 1976; Harrison, 2008). According to Faye V. Harrison, when looking at the representation of anthropologists of color in the making of the anthropology canon, “The racial economy of anthropology is constituted by hierarchy-producing assumptions, discourses, and practices that result in the peripheralization of anthropologists of color” (as cited in Harrison, 2008, p. 275). The widely accepted ‘authentic’ anthropological theory in Nigeria is predominantly a colonial discipline that reinforces biological determinist arguments of race and racialized hierarchical societal divisions which are justifications of colonial rule over

African nations. Knowledge construction, production, and dissemination are dependent on an institutional infrastructure that upholds colonial racialized differences. Though touted as universal and ideologically free, the act of knowledge production is a distinctly political act mired in social, cultural, and economic configurations of race and power (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984).

In the early twentieth century one of the African resources the British gained under colonial rule was the creation of the primitive African society. The African primitive society helped legitimate anthropology as a social science discipline (Jones, 1974). British social-cultural anthropology gained credibility throughout the West as an academic discipline through the study of primitive societies of the Global South. Before the legitimization of anthropology as a discipline, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, anthropology was considered the past time of traveler-adventurers, an enterprise of wealthy travelers and geographers, or those with access to wealth. The information provided by armchair anthropologists through travelogues and colonial reports formed the basis of hierarchical taxonomies of societies with African societies at the bottom. There was considerable interest in collecting data to add to the construction of the natural history of Africans as primitive (Jones, 1974; Osezua, 2015). Anthropology was also deemed to be a useful tool to learn more about the backward natives in the colonies; early British anthropological researchers funded by colonial financial corporations sought to gain information about the cultural and political systems of Nigerian groups to justify the role of colonialism in Africa.

The establishment of institutions of higher learning in Nigeria was not a philanthropic gesture nor one to support Nigerians’ pursuit of knowledge. It was an extension of remote management through British indirect rule. In her historical analysis of the discipline of anthropology at Nigerian universities, researcher, Edlyne Anugwom, stated that anthropology was founded under the sciences as physical anthropology (2007). The colonial administrators saw colonial education as an avenue to: indoctrinate

Nigerian colonial subjects; ensure loyalty to the British imperial crown; and propagate messages of British cultural and racial superiority versus Nigerian cultural and racial inferiority (Anugwom, 2007). In addition to anthropology degrees, anthropology in postcolonial institutions led to the establishment of centers for African Studies at Western Universities. The anthropological discipline was designed to meet the hegemonic, colonial and imperial external control of post-colonial Nigerian society. In 1932, the British colonial administration founded the first college in Nigeria, the Higher College at Yaba in Lagos (Ajayi, 1975; Fajana, 1972). Soon after establishing the first college in Lagos, the University College Ibadan founded the first anthropology program in a Nigerian University in 1948. The Department of Anthropology first became a fully-fledged department (Department of Sociology and Anthropology) when the University of Nsukka was established in 1960. Cultural anthropology introduced a course under the Arts and Humanities in 1982-1983. Then in 1986-1987, the University of Ibadan became the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology. Despite independence, the colonial model of anthropology continued at universities across Nigeria.

Nigerian nationals anticipated that Nigerian independence would support an anthropology that critically examines the colonial model of anthropology. However, the development of anthropology as a discipline and curricula at Nigerian universities—funded by foreign foundations and other western interests—moved from colonial administration to neocolonial interests. This hegemonic curriculum instituted a colonial focus for anthropology, “In spite of the decades of emergence of anthropology as a university discipline, it has not been able to break through the negative clouds of colonialism – it fails to address indigenous issues, aspirations of Nigerian students’ positive role in national development and inability of anthropologists to rise up to the challenges of contemporary Nigerian society” (Anugwom, 2007). Colonial anthropology and race present in postcolonial

Nigerian anthropology still reflect the elevation of European colonial constructions in Nigerian society. While anthropologists of previously objectified groups—anthropologists of African descent, Native American, Indian, and other racially minoritized groups—request Western anthropology to continually and critically assess the imperialist, racist theoretical and methodological foundations of anthropology, Nigerian anthropologists are still negotiating colonial constructions of race within their departments.

Nigerian anthropology today and the colonial primitive

Within Nigeria, Nigerians perceive anthropology as a colonial distraction for a postcolonial nation focused on self-sustainability and development. The dominant model of anthropology authenticates a colonial reading of Nigerian cultures. Because anthropology is viewed suspiciously as a dated, colonial analytical tool, anthropologists and their work are often passed over for disciplines such as sociology. This perspective is grounded in historical responses to early anthropology in Nigeria. In the mid-1930s, anthropology book titles like, *Tailed Headhunters* and *At home with the Savage* drew the ire of African elites, who distrusted the value of anthropology, a discipline that seeks to study and brand Nigerians as savages. Instead, they preferred studies in sociology known as the study of civilized society (Jones, 1974, p. 286). There is minimal belief in anthropology producing studies that move away from the primitive, and limited trust in anthropology attracting students at universities across Nigeria. Conversely, Nigerian anthropologists aim to critique colonial racial constructions that conceptualize African bodies as objects incapable of contributing knowledge. Thus, Nigerian anthropologists’ critique of current anthropology is that it does not contribute to the understanding of Nigerian people and nation. Nigerian anthropologists are troubling anthropology to reclaim Nigerian knowledge bases from colonial constructions of racial inferiority and primitivism (L’Estoile, 1997). Nigerian

anthropologists are forging critical anthropology that critiques institutional and canonical views that still operationalize colonial conceptions of Africa and African knowledge as inferior. In an effort to rebrand anthropology, Nigerian anthropologists developed teaching and research concentrations on the anthropology of development in an effort to rebrand anthropology. It is a focus of social anthropology that advances the development of independent Nigeria. Even with Developmental Anthropology producing engaged anthropology, dominant colonial constructions of race are still pervasive in curricular, theoretical and methodological foundations thus making it difficult for African anthropology to be a viable and critical discipline.

Nigerian anthropologists are working on excoriating primitive categorizations and the reputation that anthropology in Africa is a colonial tool. In its place, Nigerian anthropologists wish to develop a Nigerian anthropological canon that reflects the gendered, racialized, class and ethnic complexities of Nigerian society, a discipline that matters to a Nigerian and African reality and which is shared within the global research community. For students and scholars that might consider anthropological studies, anthropology is often within the sociology department or a subject within sociology. In fact, there are no stand-alone anthropology departments. As a result, it is not uncommon for trained anthropologists to adopt more sociological analyses and concepts to gain respectability and visibility. It is not uncommon for African scholars to work and consider themselves as sociologists (Harrison, 2008), or, to pose as sociologists (Heyward-Rotimi, 2015). Thus, many anthropologists are lost to sociology. African anthropologists generally recognize that anthropology is discounted as a colonial enterprise, an “obsolete discipline” with sociology viewed as a more credible discipline. Subsequently, to produce knowledge for a disciplinary focus that considers researchers as biologically and socially static is an almost futile exercise.

Knowledge production in the Nigerian postcolonial setting veers sharply away from the intent of building knowledge for a colonial

enterprise. The colonial enterprise was intended to collect information to understand how to rule and influence Nigerian colonial subjects. These conceptualizations have a real impact on Nigerian anthropologists’ access to various levels of knowledge production and whether they have valued input in global anthropological discourse. Racial superiority and inferiority are even ascribed to access research tools. For example, when the issue of African university access to digital academic database research tools is raised with Western educational institutions and development agencies, the familiar refrain is any access is good access for universities in nations of the Global South deemed to be developing and inferior. Furthermore, regarding knowledge production and exchange, West African analyses of neocolonialism, race, and globalization in Africa, West African anthropologists are marginally represented in the leading anthropological studies of Africa. Nigerian knowledge production of anthropological curricula, research and theorization will remain marginal to the global anthropological cannon if African culture continues to be perceived as static and inferior.

Further suggestions and conclusion

Nigerian anthropology is reimagining a disciplinary model that purports colonial conceptions of race and marginalizes Nigerian anthropology. Nigerian anthropologists are exploring approaches to colonial knowledge production that addresses the global marginalization of Nigerian anthropology. Anthropologists of the Global North and the Global South decided to address the anthropology curriculum for the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria. This collaboration is exploring the development of a critical, engaged anthropology focus that aims to set up anthropological knowledge that move away from colonial constructions of race and society while focusing on Nigerian ontological and epistemological knowledge. The Nigerian anthropologists’ findings and the collaboration

of anthropologists of the Global South and the Global North hold important implications for Nigerian higher education policy reform and university policies. The goal of this critical examination of colonial constructions of race is to facilitate bi-directional and critical knowledge exchange of Africa between scholars of the Global South and the Global North.

The collaborators (the co-authors of this essay and anthropologist Tina Osezua) conducted a curricular review as a baseline assessment of the anthropology focus in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Obafemi Awolowo University (Heyward-Rotimi, 2015). An analysis of the courses demonstrated limited anthropology courses. Informal discussions held with students and professors from departments such as sociology, history, etc. revealed that the anthropological focus on the study of primitive and ancient Nigerian societies considered anthropology as archaic, obsolete, and static with antiquated anthropological studies that present Nigerians as stuck in a primitive state (Osezua, 2015). The course descriptions revealed early colonial primitivisms. The colonial vestiges present in the curriculum turned many students away and subsequently made the continuance of anthropological study at OAU specifically, and anthropological programs at other Nigerian universities, generally very difficult (Owoeye, 2015). The anthropologists added that this antiquated focus made it difficult to present anthropology as a vibrant and constantly changing discipline. The suggestion is to critically analyze the colonial constructions in the curriculum and create a curricular focus that facilitates varied African models of African identification and societies. The collaborators are working on addressing the colonial racial reference of the anthropology-themed course descriptions in the Obafemi Awolowo University course booklet. As a corrective, the collaborators are developing a curricular focus that reflects a critical and engaged African and global anthropological focus. More studies of this sort are needed to address the educational and infrastructural development of contemporary Nigerian knowledge production.

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