Résumé
A. Southall — Le cœur ethnique de l'anthropologie.
Compte rendu de l'ouvrage collectif édité par J.-L. Amselle et E. M'Bokoio, sur la critique des notions de « tribu » ou d’ « ethnie ». L'auteur loue ses collègues français de leur travail de déconstruction d'un concept largement artificiel et suscité, sciemment ou non, par le pouvoir colonial, tant politique que religieux.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Document généré le 02/06/2016
The Ethnic Heart of Anthropology*

Aidan Southall

Amselle launches the book with a detailed historical analysis of *ethnie-tribu* as the heart of anthropology, which anthropologists somehow neglect, as they rush on to their studies of kinship and religion, whereas, 'the definition of the ethnic group studied should constitute the fundamental epistemological enquiry in any monograph, from which the other aspects should flow' (p. 11). The fundamental error of anthropologists has been to go out with the admirable intention of studying the lives of people as they are, but doing so late in the colonial period and not only assuming that they could find integrated societies, which each could call his own, but that what they saw in the mid-20th century was a primeval state of affairs—the ethnographic present. After the rather tired ethnic monographs which have begun to repeat themselves in Britain and America—as a recent commentator concluded: 'Ethnicity analysis has reached a plateau to which only the enrichment of a wholly new empirical infusion, or improbably original reconceptualization, can impart new momentum'—, the contributions in this book have a distinctively Gallic quality which is refreshing. They deal with the history of ideas, and usually misconceived ideas at that, rather than the history of events, except where immediately involved. Indeed, it is an entertaining and bitter history of the genesis of misconceptions, as the best approach to unravelling them.

Half the volume deals with Rwanda, Burundi and Katanga, but the main thrust is on West Africa. Segmentary societies are not considered, on the possible ground that, as in Gellner's studies of North Africa, they are always defined in relation to precolonial States and cities—the same argument that Fried brought from China, but hardly true of Africa outside west and north. It would be hard to find against what States or cities the Dinka, Nuer, Lugbara, Luo, Kikuyu, Safwa, Tiv, Somali, Tonga, etc., were defining themselves. Consequently, the suggested refocus away from ethnic groups to 'international space', chains of societies and inter-societal relations, as primary factors, is less relevant. But it is true that these forces had to be disarticulated by colonialism to create 'tribes' as clear-cut, homogeneous building blocks for colonial administration.

All terms attached to debased subjects become debased themselves, but in English the sociologists' term 'ethnicity' is less debased than 'tribe', because it speaks to a wider and less irrational world of discourse. 'Ethnicity' was the

1. Crawford Young, 'Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Class in Africa: A Retrospective', *Cahiers d'Études africaines* XXVI (3), 103, 1986 (thecg.)

preserve of sociology, as ‘tribe’ was the world of anthropology—surprisingly, in view of its ethnographic and ethnological foundation. In recent decades, many anthropologists, and most Africanists, have dropped ‘tribe’ in favor of ‘ethnicity’, to mark a radical change of heart, although many atavisms remain. ‘Ethnicity’ does not fence off Africa and the third world from ourselves, as the lands of barbarism par excellence, as did the concept of tribe. It links them with us as facing the same problems. ‘Ethnie’ and ‘tribu’ have ‘almost the same usage’, yet, relating to Godelier, ‘close but in reality distinct’ (p. 13). Larousse gives ‘les tribus sauvages de l’Afrique centrale’ as prime example. Despite such pejorative precedent, the French do not seem to have created such a conceptually segregated ‘tribal’ world as the English did, using other terms such as ‘archaïque’ which happily confuse past and present. Yet, ‘indigène’ can be as pejorative as ‘native’, and ‘boy’ lives on in French, not English.

Many English writers restricted ‘ethnicity’ to the modern phenomenon of confrontation within the nation-State, which has accentuated ethnic rivalry or generated it for the first time. The more inclusive French usage is preferable. Dating only from 1896, it was preceded by the concept of ‘nation’, which was also current in the United States for American Indian groups. African ethnicity differs from Euro-American in the innumerable local ethnicities in most African States, to which Western examples such as Fleming and Walloon, or Welsh and Scots are hardly parallel. As long as such localization continues, African ethnicity will stay strong as a resource base for the mobilization of political support. Few Anglo-Saxon anthropologists with relevant field experience have defended the concept of tribe in the last twenty-five years. What Honigmann3 described, in 1964, as generally accepted was in fact already widely rejected. Many of us fought fiercely against on, yet the notion continues to flourish as a counterfeit currency, especially in the mass media. Morton Fried wrote a whole book4 against it, but recognized his effort as a losing battle from the start. It is galling for anthropologists who feel they have seen the light to be taunted for giving birth to the monster.

Amselle proposes a topological anthropology, apparently a plea to see ethnic phenomena clearly in time and space, as in his elaboration of ‘chains of societies’ in an international space, with different aspects—such as exchange; States, politics and war; language, culture and religion—in which the space occupied by one factor and another differs, but one is interlacing and interpenetrating with another. In a survey of definitions (pp. 16-17), those of Nadel, in the 1940s, are cited as among the best. The much later ones of P. Mercier, G. Nicolas and J. J. Honigmann perpetuate the misconception of the bounded group with common name, language, tradition and descent, culture and territory. J. Richard-Molard’s ‘area of peace’ would correspond with Evans-Pritchard’s usage, popular with some social anthropologists but unknown outside.

Despite the charge that tribes were colonial creations, there were significant precolonial identities, but the examples cited—Peul, Bambara and Dyula—are exceptional cases bound to West African long-distance trade and State relations. Some of the identities of segmentary peoples, Lwo for example, would illustrate ‘international chains of societies’ (p. 23, 34) better. Modern tribalism is partly a media confusion, masking something else, partly the expression of manipulations by both dominant and dominated elements in heterogeneous post-colonial States.

Amselle is tempted not to use any of these notions, including that of 'society' itself. It was only with colonization that social categories were turned into 'ethnic fetishes' (p. 42). The ethnic category, and much of anthropology, was bound to colonialism and neocolonialism, not so much in the service of imperialism, but as having flourished in its bosom and developed within colonial forms of classification. In future, anthropology, with the aid of linguistics and history, must not take ethnonyms for granted, but deal with the ideal genesis of symbols and show how terms situated in time and space acquire a multiplicity of meanings.

In forty pages, which he feels too succinct, Bazin wittily tells how 'Bambara'—which shows two millennia of continuity with Greek barbaroi, Arabic barbar, and Berbère, Barbary, etc.—was used for half a millennium in transmogrified forms for any African people along the trade routes between the northern Muslim kingdoms and the southern peoples with African religions, especially in the valley of the middle Niger on the gold and kola routes. Your flat nose, crinkly hair and thick neck became invisible if you were a devout Muslim trader. Trade made you Juula, drinking beer made you Bambara, and you were stupid and superstitious, ferocious and savage, warlike or peaceful, hardworking or lazy, sad or gay by turns, according to the disposition and prejudices of the commentator and the fortuitous circumstances of the particular encounter—the only common element being the contempt in which the arrogant foreigner was licensed by his superior fire power to hold you. So Auvergnats (and Scots) were avaricious, Cretans liars, Welshmen thieves. Bazin regards as extreme Goody's retreat to vernacular expressions meaning simply 'those of the East', or 'those of the West'. But many examples confirm the point. 'Hausa' is not the proper name of this great conglomeration of medieval trading city-States, but just the Songhay term for 'those of the East'. Exploring the East African interior in the 1850s, Richard F. Burton found three great 'tribes' called Sukuma, Nyamwezi and Takama, unaware that his interpreters were giving him the terms for 'those to the North, West and South' of wherever they happened to be; Nyamwezi and Sukuma remain, but Takama has disappeared.

In the long, tortuous history of 'Bambara', with its 'confusion of names, languages, customs and signs' (p. 96), the Portuguese mentioned 'Banbarranaa ('chez les Banbara', p. 98) in the 15th century, then the 17th-century Ta'rikh al-Sudan the Juula form 'Banbara', and so on: always outsiders referring to hypothetical and elusive populations of vastly diverse and hopelessly contradictory attributes. Were they pillagers, as at first in the Ta'rikh, or metaphysicians, as at last in G. Dieterlen's Essai sur la religion bambara? The latter, together with L. Tauxier's La religion bambara, even provides them with two different religions, since the peoples referred to were not the same.

Nobody ever met the ethnologist's Bambara. For Muslims they were pagan infidels drinking alcohol, for pastoralists they were cultivators, for power-holders they were slaves, for all they were primitive and inferior. Today, Minianka call themselves Bambara. Others are Soninke. Kagoro speak Soninke but cut their cheeks with Bambara marks. In Senegal, all captives from the interior and all slave soldiers are Bambara. In Segu, many groups, including Bambara, speak Manling but the real Manding lingua franca is called 'Bambara' in Mali and 'Dioula' in the Ivory Coast. Creative confusion reigns. We forget that Bambara are not named with brands on their foreheads like cattle, and this is harder now that they appear on Michelin maps, just as geographers of old peopled their unknown deserts. However arbitrary or absurd its beginning, a new political identity can be born. That is no excuse for projecting it into the past when it had no meaning, to give it the benefit of eternity as legitimation. Our task is rather to deliver historical knowledge of colonial and post-colonial distortions. But that is to suppose, 'painfully or dangerously', that anthropology changes its subject (p. 125).
Dozon gives another vivid example of ethnicity fabricated by processes of colonial conquest. 'Bete' derives from the expression bete o bete o, meaning 'peace, pardon', used in conciliation and submission during the phase of intensive pacification. Oddly enough, the term was used by colonial officials even before their administration had penetrated the country which was to become Bete, although the Bete were still unaware of their name. But the Bete ethnicity exists incontestably today. While the name is fortuitous, the need for it arose, as so often, from the fact that the area had no single appellation, but a multitude of names for the real local groupings of segmentary lineages interlinked in ritual, marriage, hunting and war. Their neighbors, the Guro, Dida and so forth, were equally privileged in having new identities fabricated for them. Colonial administration needed a simpler and larger-scale classification as it could not cope with the real organization of local society.

Despite the nominal unity imposed, administrators complained of the incomprehensible diversity of the population they found. The Bete's oral traditions derive from many different directions, but ironically a latter-day Bete regionalist reversed this by claiming that they were autochthons, hoping to make the now dominant Baule seem like foreigners from Ghana. The Bete identity crystallized as they experienced a distinctive colonial history, last conquered and last developed, yet their fertile forest country attracted such heavy immigration of would-be cocoa and coffee growers that the foreigners became the majority in some places. Defined by contraposition to the economically, politically and educationally dominant South-East, the Bete demonstrated some oppositional tendencies, culminating in the brief and harshly repressed république d'Ébounie declared in 1970 (p. 81). However ineffective, it strengthened and confirmed the process of ethnic crystallization.

A red herring started on its course by J. H. Speke in 1863: the 'Hamitic Myth' is another anthropological ghost supposedly exorcised long ago, but Chrétien brings it to life in the fascinating details of its tragic history in Rwanda and Burundi. The Tutsi, long since accorded tourist fame, film star and pop dance status in Hollywood, were equipped by circumstance and the ruthless needs of their colonial conquerors to carry the myth to self-destructive excess. Yet Tutsi and Hutu were ethnically distinguished neither by language, culture, history or geographical space. A famous anthropologist was so caught up in the myth as to reinforce the stereotype of Tutsi lords and Hutu servants by photographs of the former silhouetted romantically against the sky with their long-horned cattle, in contrast to the lowly Hutu shown in ragged garments against the bare earth and grass. Indeed, by the 1940s and 1950s, the stereotype assiduously promoted for half a century was so firmly rooted, so voluminously 'documented' in the massive tomes of Fathers Gorju, De Laeger and Pagès, that the most genuinely enquiring visitor could hardly escape deception. How could we anthropologists discredit the ethnographic work of their Tutsi pupil Father Kagame, one of the first African scholars to break through the White monopoly on anthropological research? It has taken a strenuous effort of post-colonial deconstruction to shatter the myth in academia, while outside it still lives on. Here, by the equally fabulous Mountains of the Moon, the Noble Savage could be made real, as long as the other 90% of the population could be degraded to the status of serfs to do the work.

The Tutsi were not as separate or distinct as we imperial conquerors made them, but when the game had been played out for us, and had paided full dividends, they continued to play it on themselves in tragic mockery and self-destruction as we had taught them so well. The administration needed cadres to rule the masses, and the White Fathers could use a distinctive élite to bring the masses into the church, gladly hitting back at science with fanciful biblical ethnography. The Tutsi represented the southward push into Africa of the People of God, they were mono-
phySite Christians from Abyssinia who had forgotten their language and religion. Speke’s lead was picked up by the first European explorers of Rwanda and Burundi and followed by the greatest anthropo-geographers. Ratzeb’s theory of highland pastoralists dominating cultivators of the plains came to life again. In this self-deception the Galla became Gaulois, the Fulani Judeo-Syrians, the Fang Germans, Zimbabwe was Phoenician like Frobenius’ terracotta heads from Ile. The colonial governor fancied the Tutsi kings as reincarnations of the pharaohs, their daughters were Nefertiti princesses and the Tutsi were given the final accolade as honorary Aryans by Nazi scholars.

Unable to create territorial tribes and set them against one another in the usual colonial style, the Belgian government chose a politics of race. To suppress the Tutsi ‘caste’, wrote the monseigneur, would be the greatest mistake the government could make, leading straight to anarchy, communism and anti-European hatred (p. 144). For the Tutsi were the best, most intelligent, most energetic chiefs, best able to understand progress and most accepted by the people. So they were given privileges all round, special exclusive education to man the local administration at all levels, while the Hutu could man the mines and plantations. The Hutu chiefs were steadily eliminated in favor of the Tutsi. To accentuate the gulf between them, demography itself was falsified, to show the Tutsi as an extreme minority of 7% of the population, by excluding the Tutsi poors, who spoiled the image. Surveys showed the Tutsi nearer 18%. Once the system was established, blame for it could be put upon the Tutsi and Hutu themselves. The massive migration to Uganda was ascribed to the extortions of Tutsi chiefs. School segregation was blamed on Hutu passivity in contrast to Tutsi brains. When Hutu were let into the seminaries, they were indoctrinated with the eternal rightness of their subjection by religious sanction.

In the 1950s, the Hutu began to get restive, suggesting that the caste system was based not on race but on deliberate political monopoly in education and in the economy. The new generation of priests assisted in the production of protest manifestos. As the system began to disintegrate, the administration also changed tune and started deserting its Tutsi protégés. As disturbances increased, Tutsi ran away from the country in large numbers. The Hutu party won a huge majority in the local elections of 1960, and political independence six months later.

Meanwhile, the Rwanda model has been exported to Burundi, where the distinctions were even more blurred and the ruling dynasty itself may have been Hutu. Tutsi who fled to Burundi at Rwanda’s independence exacerbated tensions there. Raiding back into Rwanda, they caused panic and some 15,000 of them were massacred. In Burundi, the assassination of the crown prince, leader of the party of reconciliation, and the presence of Tutsi refugees, increased polarization, culminating in the genocidal massacre of some 100,000 Hutu in 1972, including nearly all those with education.

The victims of the tragic explosions in Rwanda and Burundi can neither be dismissed as barbarism of the past, nor elevated as martyrs of bright tomorrows. The exaltation of blood, soil and race can assume very modern forms in the heart of politics, as bitter as Brecht’s satire of the Round and Pointed Heads.

C. Vidal pillories the anthropologists of Rwanda scathingly, but her first target is a German ‘etnologue’ who led a military expedition in 1898, and then the priestly amateur ethnologists conducting their ideological campaign of Realpolitik. She covers the same ground as Christen, but adds interesting details. In 1898, Dr. Kandt found actual Tutsi power only in a small core area. Sixty kilometers north, he discovered a total contrast: independent Hutu communities on the hills, plundering cattle from Tutsi in the plains with impunity. The Tutsi had only briefly subjugated the North and West, by ravaging the country and killing the chiefs, but it had soon relapsed into autonomy. The Germans helped King Musinga.
to defeat rival factions, but left the realm to rule itself as long as they were not molested.

Vidal reached Rwanda in 1967, when the Hutu had no more grievances against Tutsi chiefs. Tutsi who had not fled where subjected to discrimination in their turn, and ingratiated themselves with Europeans for help. Hutu were violently jealous of Tutsi women and bitterly critical of Hutu who married them. Tutsi invasion threats from Burundi kept tension high. Rwanda became like an island, horrified at the Zaire rebellions, fearful of Burundi, reserved towards Tanzania and dependent on Uganda for supplies—both of the latter also harboring thousands of Tutsi refugees. Equally afraid of a popular communist revolt as of the Tutsi, the government forbade traditional cultural celebrations. Desperately poor and materially deprived, the land is suffocated by rumor and distrust, like a paralysis of thought.

M'Bokolo focuses on the persistent separatism of Katanga—the richest, most remote, yet dominant province of the Congo—since the 1950s. He is interested in the 'real factors'—the antagonistic social forces of States, regions and classes—not the phantasms of ethnic fabrication and confusion, though he does see the Lunda 'empire' as another case of systematic distortion of cleverly deformed history for partisan ends. He is shocked that Olga Boone uncritically took the 1949 colonial units of chefferies and secteurs as the basis of her ethnic map, which reinforced them, and that Vansina's Introduction à l'ethnographie du Congo was in continuity with Boone's work, trying to clarify it, yet treating groups as fixed ethnic entities despite the violent interventions of the Congo State. He outlines the background of Luba, Lunda, Tshokwe and Yeke relations, the growth of the mining economy, the European population and the urbanization of the Africans.

The ethnic factor became dominant from 1956. With 30,000 jobless whom they dared not repatriate lest they contaminate the rural areas, the authorities got the missions to organize apolitical associations to counter more radical popular movements. Then they tried to control by emphasizing racial and occupational divisions, finally recognizing class in the hope of consolidating a conservative Black bourgeoisie. The first political grouping was dominated by Luba and Tshokwe, but was overcome by the xenophobic Conakat, linking Lunda, Yeke and White settlers. All this went on within a bizarre conjuncture of national and international events: the political gymnastics of Tshombe, the incessant strikes and ethnic violence, the precipitate flight of Belgian administration, the overtures from Welensky's racist Rhodesia, the UN intervention and the deaths of Hammerskjöld and Lumumba, the mutinies of Katangese soldiers and European mercenaries, the popularly supported invasions from Angola, only crushed for Mobutu by massive French military intervention.

Coming at the end of the ethnic vogue in anthropology, it would be nice to hope that this volume will finally dispose of the naively reified concept of tribe. Granting the reality of ethnic particularisms in modern States from Africa to the Arctic, from the United States to China, and their positive value in the struggle against oppression, there is an essential deconstruction of recidivist usages to be accomplished. Amselle, M'Bokolo and their colleague are to be congratulated on dissecting the heart of the ethnologists' African ethnic tribe as a largely artificial organ, diseased and deformed, clogged with persistent and well-motivated prejudices and misconceptions. A chacun son ethnie!

Wheaton College, Norton, MA.