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Commentary/Commentaire After the Fox: Griaule, Griots, and Griottes

William Rodman

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Commentary/Commentaire

After the Fox: Griaule, Griots, and Griottes

William Rodman

Comments Prepared as Discussant of Gilles Bibeau's Paper,
 "The Wanderings of the Dogon Pale Fox: A Refiguration of Intellectual Mindscapes in Post-Colonial Africa"

INTRODUCTION

It is a pleasure for me to discuss Professor Bibeau's paper. I must admit that when I first heard the title of his paper, I wondered why our organizer was asking me to be its discussant. I work in the South Pacific, not Africa, and I have no special knowledge of the Dogon or even of the work of Marcel Griaule. From the outset, I must position myself as an outsider rather than an insider in African research. But Professor Bibeau has made my task much easier than it might otherwise have been. In his paper, he provides a clear and concise summary of a complex intellectual mindscape in contemporary Africa. He builds intercontinental as well as interdisciplinary bridges between trends in representation in diverse scholarly disciplines — cultural anthropology, comparative literature, history and philosophy. I cannot possibly do justice to the full richness of ideas and insights in "The Wanderings of the Dogon Pale Fox..." in these comments. Instead, I will try to extend a few strands of Professor Bibeau's discussion of representation and the postcolonial order, tie up a few loose ends, and raise some additional questions.

One of Professor Bibeau's key conclusions is that "it is an illusion to proclaim that we have entered a post-colonial age." (p. 25). Postcolonialism, of course, is not unproblematic as a term: in fact, "the term "describes a remarkably heterogeneous set of subject positions, professional fields, and critical enterprises" (Slemon, 1995:45).¹ Even so, I suspect that many of us would agree - at least intuitively - with Professor Bibeau's sentiment that anthropology has yet to be decolonized. If we accept the validity (and the importance) of his conclusion, then our next step should be to ask two questions: first - if anthropology has not entered a postcolonial age, why has it failed to do so?

Second, what steps do anthropologists need to take in order to liberate themselves from the colonial past of the discipline, and from the colonial mentality that persists in some quarters of the discipline? Professor Bibeau seems to me to have a rather discouraged view of the prospects of decolonization in anthropology and, more generally, international science. He represents African literature, philosophy and history as more vigorous and innovative than the social sciences in general and anthropology in particular. My own view is less pessimistic: while recognizing that anthropology has not entered a postcolonial age, I perceive some hopeful signs that the discipline may be heading in the right direction. What I will do now is examine some of the points of agreement and convergence between the intellectual agendas of the new African writers and scholars and emerging trends in interpretive anthropology.

At the centre of Bibeau's critique of anthropology are two other critiques. The first is the critique put forward by Dutch anthropologist Walter van Beek (1991) of Marcel Griaule's field methods and the reliability of his texts on the Dogon. Professor Bibeau appears to accept the validity of van Beek's criticisms of Griaule, but he insightfully points out that the Dutch anthropologist essentially reiterates criticisms of anthropology that a Dogon writer named Yambo Ouologuem reached thirty years earlier in his novel, *Bound to Violence* (1971). Ouologuem satirizes anthropologists as "salesmen and manufacturers of ideology" (1971: 95). His anthropologist - named none too subtly "Fritz Shrobenius" - makes a fortune (and is awarded a lofty Sorbonnic chair) from the sale of "three year old masks...charged with the weight of four centuries of tradition" (1971: 96). Shrobenius gives his European clientele what they want, not just African art, but a whole cloth of invented

* Department of Anthropology, McMaster University,
 Hamilton, Ontario, L8S 4L9

tradition, woven from patches of cosmology, stitched with mysticism, dyed in the bright colours of myth. In fairness, van Beek's view of Griaule is somewhat kinder than Ouologuem's sketch of Shrobenius: Griaule stands accused more of an excess of imagination than of the sins of mercantile intellectualism. Nonetheless, Bibeau's point seems to be, first, that anthropologists are saying nothing new in criticizing each other for exoticizing the Other; for ages, Africans have been chiding and sometimes reproaching us for misrepresenting them. The problem is that we have listened to our African friends and informants but not to our African critics. Second, Bibeau implies that anthropologists still persist in their old ways: they still return from Africa to their home universities with surprising tales to tell, stories that have little to do with the cultural realities of Africa.

I wish that Professor Bibeau had been more specific about the targets for his criticisms, other than Griaule. It is unclear to me whom Professor Bibeau considers to be the contemporary ethnographers, especially of the younger generation, who are carrying on the practices of the older generation that he criticizes so well. Some anthropologists may well persist in exoticizing the Other, but the prevailing mood of anthropology at the present time seems to me to be dead set against "exotic readings of cultural texts". Keesing, for one, discussed the topic in three major and influential articles (1989, but also 1987 and 1990). So, from the perspective of the decolonization of anthropology, I count exotification as a lesson that has been injected - if not completely absorbed - into the mainstream.

Is the intellectual climate in Africa today really so far removed from that prevailing in cultural anthropology? Reading Professor Bibeau's paper, I perceive a number of parallels between the current outlook of African intellectuals and that of anthropologists in the nineties. As is true of many current Western historians and anthropologists, African historians have developed a wariness of totalizing visions and have made a commitment to the local perspective. Among anthropologists as among African intellectuals, there is a strong recognition of the importance of global linkages, of the potential or actual interconnections of all to all, of the sheer inescapability of the development of "hybrid authenticities" as the world proceeds into the millennium (Clifford, 1995: 114). Bibeau states that "African intellectuals see precisely as their work to explore the interface between their local cultures and the increasingly globalizing civilization." Many anthropologists set themselves the same goal, precisely.

There also is a new focus in anthropology and in African history and literature on the interpenetration of meaning and memory. Anthropologists and historians both acknowledge that people use the past as a resource, and that memory is socially coded. Professor Bibeau quotes Elizabeth Tonkin's conclusion on the basis of her study of the Jlaio people of Liberia that "memory makes us" and "we make memory" (p. 22). Other anthropologists in other parts of the world have reached the same conclusion; in fact, as Myers points out in an article concerning the Holocaust Exhibit at the Jewish Museum in New York, "in recent years, the topic of memory, especially social memory, has become a salient anthropological concern, while post-modern cultural theories have intensified the critical questioning of history (and its writing) as a form of cultural production..." (1995: 350).

Given their mutual interest in the arts of memory, it is not surprising that African intellectuals also share with current anthropologists a keen interest in cultural and political identity. Professor Bibeau points out that no African intellectuals can escape the questions: "Who are we?" and "Which Africa are we going to build?" It is hard to imagine an anthropologist working in Africa today who is uninterested in the answers to such basic questions, both on the local and national levels of the countries in which he or she works.

Professor Bibeau notes that young historians in African universities are being taught "to narrate their own histories through 'the voices of local actors themselves'." This emphasis too fits well with the current mood of anthropology, in which considerable attention is being paid to finding ways to "democratize the social relations of research" (Salazar, 1991: 103) and represent accurately the multiple voices we hear in the field.

A final coincidence of interest I would like to mention emerges from a shift of focus and attention in many intellectual domains from the centre to the margins. Anthropologists once tended to regard borderlands, margins, and peripheries as "analytically empty transitional zones" (Rosaldo, 1989: 208). Times have changed, however. Today, the borderlands - that is, the places between cultural, territorial, national, and sexual boundaries - are regarded as sites of cultural production that urgently require investigation (Enslin, 1994: 548; Rosaldo, 1989: 208). As a discipline, we are devoting more and more of our attention to people who, as Bibeau puts it, "live constantly on the borders of many worlds."

I mention these parallels between the intellectual scene in Africa that Professor Bibeau describes and contemporary cultural anthropology in order to show a certain confluence of interests, an epistemological foundation that could develop into bridges of communication, understanding, and mutual respect between scholars and writers in Africa and the West. But there is much work yet to be done before anthropology can claim to have entered a postcolonial age.

I would like to end my comments with a discussion of some of the work that remains to be done, critical issues that arise from my reading of Professor Bibeau's paper and that have a bearing on our more general discussion of representation and the prospect of postcolonialism. First, I turn to Professor Bibeau's critique of Griaule, which is at the very heart of his paper. His comments on Griaule and the Dogon Pale Fox strike me as appropriate, insightful, and very much in keeping with the criticisms made by other anthropologists such as Walter van Beek (1991). However, it seems to me that - to truly decolonize ourselves - it is not enough to critique the works of our intellectual ancestors, to document their epistemological flaws and political naiveté with chilling accuracy. We need to extend the critique one step further, and ask a hard question: after the fox is dead, what remains of the hunt? Our deconstructive hunts have been many and we seem to be fast depleting our store of ancestors. After Dan Sperber (1985) and Renato Rosaldo (1986) point out the truly breathtaking generalizations and leaps of logic in Evans Pritchard's *Nuer Religion*, what precisely is the value for contemporary anthropology of Evans-Pritchard's ethnography?² In the aftermath of Bibeau's and van Beek's criticisms of Griaule's work, what remains of Griaule? What sense do we make of *Conversations with Ogotemmeli* and *The Pale Fox*? In what ways can these books be said to speak constructively to the present of anthropology? Are they of value only as nostalgia? I have no answers, but I feel these are questions that need to be asked in these unsettled times.

Under the circumstances, a pessimist might conclude that the partial truths of a single informant such as Ogotemmeli are - for all intents and purposes - no truths at all. Others might say, as Professor Bibeau does, that "traditional orality speaks with many voices," and that we need to incorporate these voices with their many points of view into our ethnographies. However, the lesson that experience seems to teach us is not that there are no truths, or even that there are multiple truths. The message we ourselves are having a hard time learning, and having an even harder time communicating to Others, is that truths are positioned.

All truths, all the time, everywhere. This includes the truths of members of Third World intellectual elites as well as those of anthropologists.

In his paper, Professor Bibeau contends that "the new nations of Africa need to revive their moral premises, their past cosmologies and their mythologies that have to be reinvented in order to be meaningful in the world of today." (p.7-8). This statement sounds reasonable until one considers its scope and the question of position. Which moral premises will be revised? By whom? To serve what ends? What leaders or members of the intellectual elite have the authority to choose between contesting cosmologies? If mythologies are to be reinvented, then who does the reinventing? To serve what and whose ends? It all comes down to the fundamental questions that Clifford posed a decade ago: "who speaks? who writes?...under what institutional and historical constraints?" (Clifford, 1986: 13).

We might also ask a question that Clifford (1986) did not ask: who is silenced? In Professor Bibeau's paper, "the silenced" are African intellectuals themselves, shut out by Western academia, and also the local people whose voices might have contested the tales of the official storytellers, *griots*. Bibeau makes the point that the novelist Ouologuem restores the voice of these "little" people, and now African historians and other intellectuals are attempting the same task.

However, there is another silenced group important to the postcolonial agenda that Professor Bibeau does not mention. I was surprised to find no mention of gender issues in this paper. All the African novelists, philosophers and historians he discusses are male; and so too - with a few exceptions (Spivak, Tonkin) - are all the Western anthropologists and historians. For that matter, so are the *griots* - official storytellers - that are so important to Bibeau's and van Beek's critique of Griaule. Viewed from the perspective of gender, Professor Bibeau's paper concerns men talking to other men about men. This raises several issues:

First, there is the question of the status of women writers in Africa today. A review of the critical literature makes it clear that women increasingly are active as writers throughout Africa. And the implications of African women writing and publishing for decolonization and the changing mindscapes of Africa should not be underestimated. Davies and Fido insightfully point out in a recent article that "African women writers engage in several different discourses, which give voice to their many realities. They are conscious of neo-colonialism and are interested in fighting through their work for a greater genuine independence for Africa...They write of realities in ways male African

writers do not...They become not just artists but also pathfinders for new relations between men, women and children" (1993:311).

Second, mention certainly should be made in any discussion of anthropology's attempts to decolonize itself in Africa of the work of the current generation of women anthropologists. The studies of Jean Comaroff and Janice Boddy are well-known internationally. Other anthropologists, not yet as famous, are decentering and changing in fundamental ways our understandings of African society. To cite just two examples: in *Dancing Skeletons: Life and Death in West Africa* (1994), Katherine Dettwyler discusses from a woman's point of view fundamental issues of nutrition and health in Mali. Henrietta Moore and Megan Vaughn recently published a study entitled *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890-1990* (1994). Their reviewer in *American Anthropologist* comments that they "...show that the history of Africa that colonialists like to tell themselves is disrupted when women are more fully brought into the picture." (Shaw, 1995: 803). What could be more important to the enterprise of decolonization! The comment itself has a rather generic ring to it: I'm sure that same could be said of many other recent ethnographies as well.

Finally, we might pose the question: Griaule grilled *griots*, but why no mention of *griottes* - female story tellers - either in his work or that of his critics such as Bibeau and van Beek (1991)? It is not as though these woman oral artists are rare or unimportant. *Griottes* apparently are quite numerous in many countries in West Africa, and have been so for a long time (Hale, 1994: 85) They perform many of the same functions as male *griots*: that is, they "sing songs of praise and advice, serve as intermediaries in delicate interpersonal negotiations, and articulate the values of society at major social events" (Hale, 1994: 71). One of Mali's best-known female *griottes* recently was given the gift of a small airplane, an event that "suggests that these women performers stand somewhat closer to the centre, not the periphery, of their cultural network" (Hale, 1995: 71). Yet anthropologists largely have been blind to these performers, and their voices go unheard in ethnographic literature about the region.³ It is indeed true, as Professor Bibeau states, that the narratives chanted by the genealogists, *griots* and official storytellers represent only one point of view about past events" (p. 30). What if women praise-singers are introduced into the equation? What alternative tales do they tell? Do their songs oppose the dominant discourses, perhaps in subtle ways? What is their impact

on social life and on the direction of change in West Africa? At the present time, we do not have good answers to these questions. We stand poised on the very margins of knowledge about *griottes*, but I would be willing to bet money that some anthropologist is preparing to take the next step. Our neglect of *griottes* is one reason why I think we still have a long way to travel on the road to understanding representation in the context of postcolonialism. But I think we're dealing here with a road that begs to be explored, a road many of us are willing to travel.

Notes

1. As Hutcheon points out, "The term 'postcolonial' is simply going to mean different things because the experience of colonialism has meant different things" (1994: 210). This is an insight that Nicolas Thomas develops at length and in depth in his recent book, *Colonialism's Culture* (1994).
2. Sperber (1985:14) analyses one of Evans-Pritchard's well-known anecdotes from *Nuer Religion* and concludes: "This is about as raw a factual account as you will ever find in most ethnographic works. Yet not a single statement in it expresses a plain observation."
3. Trinh Minh-ha (1989) is an exception to the pervasive lack of attention to *griottes*. She devotes a chapter in *Native, Woman, Other* (1989) to female storytellers and underscores the cultural importance of *griottes* in West Africa.

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