Representing African Reality through Knotty Terms

Représenter la réalité africaine à travers des « termes épineux »

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Representing African Reality through Knotty Terms*

We are very aware that we represent reality through terms and all of the conceptual contents they imply. A frequent problem we have to face when we are researching African realities from an anthropological point of view is the discomfort in using some of these terms, which we can understand as knotty terms.

The adjective “ethnic” as it appears when we talk about “ethnic music”, “ethnic food”, “ethnic clothing” is a good example of this. We also have problems with “tribe” and derivatives such as “tribal society” and “tribalism” and especially with terms such as “witchcraft” or “sorcery”. We often see anthropologists excuse themselves when they are forced to use these terms but in spite of this, they still use them or try to find other substitutes that most often are just not fully convincing. The problem becomes even more complicated when we observe that despite anthropologists’ efforts not to use them, these terms have been adopted by Africans themselves (Mudimbe 1998: 197) and are now in widespread use. It is clear that the interest in this question lies in the fact that it not only represents an epistemological issue for anthropology but has an important ideological and therefore social dimension as well.

The problem with these knotty terms is not only that they may have a contested analytical value, something that after all happens with many concepts in the human and social sciences. It would be difficult to find unanimity among the specialists regarding the different concepts that we use in the scientific practice. Anthropology, like other disciplines, is neither monolithic nor static. The problem with these terms is also the fact that they can connote a pejorative dimension, an inheritance and result of the old evolutionary vision of anthropology that did not only classify societies that it studied but also arranged them into a hierarchy. And actually, what is worse, we are not only speaking of disparagement but also of the construction of a reality inscribed in a social hierarchical structure.

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Thus, a concept of very frequent use within African studies, as for example in the case of “tribe”, has, since some time ago, fallen into true disrepute. It is quite vague and has been criticized for its evolutionist implications, as well for its low analytical and comparative value (Berndt 1959; Fried 1968; Godelier 1973). It has often been denounced that while using the term “tribe” or “tribalism”—the latter with clear pejorative dimensions—to reflect African reality, for the European cases people speak of “nationalities” or “separatist movements” (Diouf 1994: 9). Today, within the political context, the concept of “tribe” is being used less and anthropologists prefer very often—and according to the specific context—the terms “stateless society”, “ethnicity” or “ethnic group” (Southall 1970). Also, many archaeologists prefer more neutral terms such as “middle-level” or “transegalitarian societies” for this kind of social organization. Precisely because of its evolutionary implications, the term “tribe” can be not only inaccurate but also entail clear connotations that refer to the colonial view of the administered African countries that has to do with backwardness, primitivism, and other similar ideas.

The very term “ethnicity” with which some take refuge in order to avoid the term “tribe” can be problematic as well. Not only because of definition problems¹ but also because there is the trend to employ the term more for the non Western Other, although in fact the concept can be applicable to any society. Edward T. Hall, for example, also spoke of an “English-British ethnicity” (Drew 1998) and in the case of the autonomist or separatist European movements, anthropologists may also speak of “ethnicity”².

In spite of this, “ethnicity” is a concept that we do not hear too much beyond the academic circles; but that is not so with the adjective “ethnic”, an adjective that may accompany the most diverse cultural manifestations. In this way, people speak of “ethnic music”, “ethnic food”, “ethnic clothes” or even “ethnic disorder” (Devereux 1980).

If we now focus on the case of music, it is clear that very diverse kinds of music are labeled under the concept of “ethnic music”, some often

1. Today anthropologists are very aware of the conceptual problems of this term. Obviously it is not within the scope of this article to enter into this discussion. Nevertheless the main problem lies in understanding “ethnicity” in a misleading and stuffy form in the same way as “*ethnie*” or “ethnic group” *i.e.* as a human collective whose members share determined cultural attributes and show some kind of social articulation. But if we understand “ethnicity” more as an idea-force, as a conscience and discursive way to understand a certain kind of collective identity or as “social dynamics” in terms of Dominique DARBON (1995: 223), its presence in Africa, as in many other parts of the world, is undeniable. As a matter of fact, it is not relevant at all if this ethnicity is due to endogen factors or has its origins in colonial policies or academic constructs, in a manipulated history or in myths. Important and above all is the fact that today people may experience ethnicity and seek to bring about a concrete social and political articulation according to this idea-force.
2. Especially from the 80s onwards. Nevertheless today the term is used less in this context.

belonging to the Western area as well. But that the denomination of “ethnic music”, when it is applied to African cases, has embedded in it the colonial or neocolonial gaze, proven by the fact that this concept is very often used to categorize African types of music for whose equivalent in the West other names are used.

The idea behind the concept of “ethnic music” also applies to the not less problematic category of “world music”. This category refers to a type of music with structures of pop, rock, jazz, etc., a type of music that is labeled simply as popular music, rock or jazz when it is executed by Westerners. It should not be forgotten that the world music label was originally identified with African music in particular, but later it was associated with the music of the “third world” in commercial fields. Baaba Maal, the well-known Senegalese musician, when asked how he felt about his music being categorized as world music answered the following:

“I don’t care. I did not like that name ‘World Music’ in the beginning. I think that African music must get more respect than to be put in a ghetto like that. We have something to give to others. When you look to how African music is built, when you understand this kind of music, you can understand that a lot of all this modern music that you are hearing in the world has similarities to African music. It’s like the origin of a lot of kinds of music” (Doran n.d.).

In fact, the concept of world music is used to sing diversity, but at the same time to frame this diversity within structures of social hierarchy. World music operates according to dynamics of exclusion (Martin 2002: 398). *We have not to wonder*, then, that people speak of it as “that insulting term for non-Western pop”³ or that going further, people consider this trade in world music as a “reminiscence of the colonial trade patterns” (Negus 1992: 167). Precisely, the Guinean musician Mory Kanté has rightly complained about the image that the West gives of African musicians, associating them with tribal music. In his own words: “People speak of African music as ethnic music but it is also universal music” (Rodríguez 1997: 45). And in fact, with the adjective “ethnic” that people in the West use so often to refer to the music, dance, clothing, food, etc. of non-Western cultures, if we analyze it deeply, it is easy to see that it also has connotations that suggest the existence of upper and lower forms (Swanwick 1988: 103; Martí 2000: 25-26). So, for instance, in a customer review that appeared on the Internet about the re-edition in 1999 of Johnny Alf’s Bossa Nova CD *Eu e a brisa*, we could read the following:

“Like everything made by Alf, it is very sophisticated, romantic with a little bebop flavour. It is not ethnic music, but good Brazilian jazz. Music with a capital M” (Rodrigues 1999).

3. Ian McCann in his liner notes to Zairean singer Ray Lema’s 1990 album *Gaia* (MITCHELL 1996: 55).

This anecdotal comment makes clear therefore that one thing is “ethnic music” and the other, music with a capital M. The use of the adjective “ethnic” unmistakably reflects a very concrete way of understanding the world. As we said before, it is not easy to find unanimity of views on what “ethnic” or world music actually mean. But apart from these conceptual problems, what is clear is that the differentiated use that is made of the term, rock or pop for some musicians, and ethnic or world music for others, clearly reveals a deep ideological problem.

The implicit semantic problem of the adjective “ethnic” is also found in the very conceptualization of some academic fields whose denomination enclose the prefix “ethno”, such as in the case of ethnomusicology which contrasts with “musicology” (Martí 2000: 21-30). The ideology that underlies this denomination is the reason that there are “[...] musicologists who study the West and ethnomusicologists who study the Rest”, in the words of Kay Kaufman Shelemay (1996: 14)⁴. The same can be said of the fashion studies of the West versus the ethnographies of costume for the rest (Allman 2004: 3-9). Also the term ethno-philosophy, a concept very focused on African reality, regardless of the controversies that its contents raise, does not escape these issues either. After all, the prefix “ethno” is indeed likely to indicate a field of “native” knowledge, whose status is relative to a canonical counterpart within non-“ethno” Western science (Hviding 1996: 168). And one of the criticisms that has been made of ethno-philosophy is that—as Y. M. Guissé wrote—“Ethno-philosophy is, in our view, the most complete form of ‘this ideological compromise’ which, from an essentially folkloric and exotic approach, is based on the colonial Ethnology’s work” (Sow 2010: 251).

The Witchcraft Term as a Problem

The terms, which are somehow uneasy for anthropologists dealing with Africa, are not lacking by any means. But among them, there is one which has caused quite a few headaches to anthropologists: “witchcraft”. And without any doubt, if we talk about knotty terms, witchcraft deserves a place of honor in this issue. It can be extremely instructive to think about this term.

In the fieldwork I’ve been carrying out in Equatorial Guinea for some years, the beliefs related to the occult constitute one of my research areas (Martí 2011, 2012). In this country, Fang people use the term *ngbwo* for what we anthropologists usually understand as “witchcraft”. Nevertheless, in some occasions, I have been faced with the fact that, according to the different individuals I interviewed, the same phenomenon was sometimes

4. See also John BLACKING’s (1977: 54) criticism of the restrictive use of the “ethnic music” concept.

labeled as *ngbwo* while for the others it was not *ngbwo* at all. This happens, for instance, with the belief that some people can convert into a leopard, something that can be hereditary and which is always linked to the *evu* notion⁵. That such discrepancies occur is something at which we have not to wonder at all. The notion of *ngbwo* does not correspond to a perfectly defined and bounded semantic field, something that is more complicated since the introduction in Africa of the concept of “witchcraft” as it was used in European tradition. In Equatorial Guinea, for example, during the Spanish colonization, people understood “witchcraft” as a phenomenon that the Equatoguineans conceptualized in a very different manner. It was thus understood as “witchcraft” (“*brujería*”), not only sorcery practices but also practices related to different rituals concerning the worship of ancestors (*melan*), as well rituals related to a variety of therapeutic practices. Or furthermore people labeled all religious beliefs that tried to resist Christianity *tout court* as “witchcraft” (Bernault 2005: 30). Anthropologists have already denounced that while in the West people very often speak of “religion” to refer to the set of beliefs which conform to Christianity; terms like “magic” or “witchcraft” are used for beliefs that are structurally similar but produced in the African context (Mallart 2004: 104)⁶.

But aside from these completely inappropriate uses of the term “witchcraft” when applied to areas that clearly deserve another better name, there are many anthropologists who would prefer to rule out completely the term “witchcraft” for African realities, or at least, if they can not dismiss it because a better alternative for this has not been found, they feel the need to justify it or at least to apologize for continuing to use the term “witchcraft”⁷.

The main reasons people give for that are:

- The fact of considering the term “witchcraft” as tied too much to Western contextual reality, which makes it inappropriate for describing local specificities of other societies (Crick 1973: 18; Pels 1998: 201; Moore & Sanders 2001: 4).

5. The *evu* is one of the fundamental principles of the occult among the Fang and other ethnic groups in Equatorial Guinea. Regarding this, see MALLART (1971, 1975), MARTÍ (2012, with additional bibliography).

6. Another problem that I do not discuss here is the distinction between “magic” or “witchcraft” and “religion”. A clear distinction between these phenomena is practically impossible and really, as many anthropologists have already recognized, it doesn’t make much sense to try to find different origins for them. See for example CUNNINGHAM (1999).

7. The anthropologist Lluís Mallart, for instance, who has practically devoted all his professional life to studying the *Evuzok* in Cameroon, has on numerous occasions expressed his discomfort with the use of the term “witchcraft” in his work on the *Evuzok*. In a personal communication he let me know his discomfort with the title of his doctoral thesis *Magie et sorcellerie evuzok* (MALLART 1971). In his other work (*ibid.* 1975) he refused to include the term “witchcraft” in the title though given that it was not possible to do without it, he ended up making the term appear in the subtitle. Regarding this, see also GESCHIERE (1997: 13-14, n. 1 225).

- As a result of the previous point, the concept of “witchcraft” has connotations of moral nature, intrinsically linking witchcraft with evil. This often becomes distorted because this feature is not always given in African traditions.
- The term “witchcraft” also refers to the ideas of primitivism and backwardness that the colonial gaze has traditionally applied to African peoples administered by European powers.

It is understandable, therefore, that at first we feel the need to avoid this term when talking about African cases, not only for semantic reasons but also for the negative values that are associated with it. But on the other hand, the use of terms of European origin such as “witchcraft”, “*sorcellerie*”, “*bruxería*” or “*brujería*” is a reality in the same African context, though the semantic field of these terms does not match exactly that which can be found in African languages alluding to hidden powers of the most diverse kind.

Is it really necessary to eliminate the term “witchcraft” when anthropologists speak about Africa? Looking into the history of anthropology it is easy to see that people often tried to kill terms in order to get rid of annoying epistemological pebbles in the anthropologist’s shoe. Thus, for instance, proposals have been made in order to eliminate “ritual” (Goody 1961; Bell 1992: 6), “identity” (Brubaker & Cooper 2000) or even for anthropology the almighty term “culture”! What would we anthropologists do without culture? (Martí 2003). Of course, none of these proposals have succeeded. Although these terms may be nebulous, inaccurate, imperfect, etc. we need them in order to speak (and to think) about the realities which they, for better or for worse, try to denote.

In fact I do not see it as easy and moreover necessary that anthropology do without the term of “witchcraft”. This is not only because of the circumstance that it has been assimilated and is commonly used by Africans themselves, a reason that as pointed out by some anthropologists, would justify its use (Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998: 13)⁸. If we think a little about this it is easy to realize that within the European context, this term—like so many others—is subjected to a continuous process of “resemantization” so that although we retain the term over time, everything involving the concept has not always been exactly the same. The negativity at the societal level that has traditionally been associated with the term, that which was considered “superstition” or even what Freud might have considered as “collective neurosis”, can be diluted in other views understanding witchcraft as a “culturally acceptable view of reality” (Thomas 1975: 100).

The following anecdote that I experienced many years ago can be symptomatic of these changes in social perception of the term “witchcraft”: at the end of the eighties I mediated between a local television channel that

8. It is exactly the same with other knotty terms such as “tribe”. See for example GULLIVER (1969: 2, 7, 8, 24, quoted in MAFEJE 1971: 254).

wanted to do a report about witchcraft and an older woman named Cecília who lived in a little Catalan town and was professionally engaged in the world of the occult. She had a large clientele and having been initiated into traditional witchcraft practices, she did not hesitate to progressively incorporate new concepts and techniques of new age spirit throughout her professional life. The report by the television was released with the title “Coses de bruixes” (“witches’ things”)⁹. When Cecília saw the report on TV she was initially bothered about being treated as a “witch”. But later she thought it over, liked more and more that denomination, and ended up presenting herself to her customers as a “witch”. After all, professionals of the occult who within the new context of the so-called “urban witchcraft” did not have any hesitation in presenting themselves as “*bruixas*” (“witches”) before their audiences began to appear in the Spanish media at that time. The same happened in the Anglo-Saxon area where the emergence of the Wicca movement resemantized the term “witch” in a positive way.

If some specialists consider witchcraft as something fixed in time, as a residual phenomenon of the past that therefore refers to backwardness, the problem is actually in the same researchers who deem it so. That witchcraft is something that can be closely linked to modernity is something that already has been shown by many anthropologists (Geschiere 1997; Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998; Rutherford 1999; Parish 2001; Sanders 2003; Grillo 2009). This is true for the African case and it is also so for those particular cases of witchcraft that we know in the West, and which are not limited to the Wicca movement. If we compare the witchcraft of our postmodern world today with that which we find in many African societies there are notable differences, among others the degree of social relevance. But despite this, there is nothing that hinders us from associating witchcraft with modernity and postmodernity.

Terms may easily possess a “floating meaning”, *i.e.* they can express at once old and new meanings which in addition to conceptual differences, can even show contradictory aspects occasionally, and “witchcraft” is no exception to this reality, in the same way as the term “witch” (Hutton 2004: 432). In this respect, the distinction which Hilary Putnam makes between “concept” and “conception” can also serve us. As he said, quoted in Tambiah (1990: 125), the concept “temperature”, for example, has not always had the same conception in Western history. The same can be said for “witchcraft”. Applying the term to certain aspects of the African reality should not imply that we have to assume all the same conceptual contents of the term “witchcraft” for this reality as it is understood traditionally for European cases. On the contrary, by taking into account the African empirical examples—in addition to the fact that it also represents an important incentive for the research of witchcraft in Europe (Thomas 1970)—what we are

9. “Cosa de bruixes”. TVE Panorama. Released by TVE on 30/5 and 16/7 of the year 1988.

doing is conceptually enriching the term “witchcraft”. It has not to be restricted to a closed and idealized notion as it has been transmitted in the West. We already know that witchcraft is not manifested in the same way in Europe, in Africa or in other parts of the globe. Thus, for example, in our fieldwork in Africa, we are not any more surprised if people speak of “good witchcraft” to us, and therefore we must have already superseded that traditional identification made between witchcraft and evil, an identification based on stereotypes of a theological good/evil polarity and which, actually, such as Ronald Hutton (2004: 433) stated, is also not even fully applicable to the European case.

In the context of the colonial (or neo-colonial) ideology, it is true that people exploit the discredit of a tag—that of the “witchcraft”—to discredit colonized societies. However, the problem is not in the tag itself, but in the fact that with it we qualify societies already discredited in advance. Here we have to do with an unsatisfactory use of concepts for ideological reasons.

There is also another argument to keep in mind in order to maintain the term “witchcraft” for African realities: to not fall into the “ideology of difference” that some African scholars have rightly denounced for the Western scientific practice. Thus, for example, as regards to African music, the musicologist Kofi Agawu complains about the obsession that the West shows in particularizing “African music”. According to him, there is a persistent focus in Euro-American discourses on “African rhythm” while, on the other hand, the capacity of Africans in domains such as harmony, melody, and musical forms are made invisible (Agawu 2003: xx). Kofi Agawu speaks here of the “ideology of difference” (*ibid.*: 64). This ideology particularizes the Other, even extolling its uniqueness in some concrete aspect. But this implies at the same time its exclusion from what is considered important and what is identified with the West. Therefore, based on the ideas of Mudimbe, D. Masolo (2000: 360) stated “exoticizing the Other by ascribing to it uniqueness has become the hidden hand of subtle marginalization”, something which is very characteristic of colonial discourse.

There is therefore also the danger of falling into this trap by attempting to deny the validity of the term “witchcraft” for African cases. If “witchcraft” basically means a set of practices and beliefs that are concerned with the use of purported supernatural powers applied to the everyday world, why do we want to reserve the term “witchcraft” for the West? It is obvious that witchcraft’s manifestations will not have the same characteristics in Europe as in Africa. But, as I said before, it seems more effective to modify and/or gradually extend the concept through the new data that we may get from African cases, rather than consider the term definitely fixed and therefore invalid beyond European reality. This is precisely what we do with other terms, such as “family”, “youth”, “house”, etc., despite being clearly marked by the Western worldview in their uses within social sciences. And nobody is advocating for their elimination in the research beyond Western

context. After all, as Peter Geschiere (1997: 223) wrote, “these notions, now translated throughout Africa as ‘witchcraft’, reflect a struggle with problems common to all human societies”.

Dynamics of Alterization Processes

Anthropological practice in African societies cannot be separated from the general dynamics of alterization processes that condition the gaze between the One and the Other. These processes of alterization are characterized by representing and treating the Other through procedures such as synecdochization, exoticization, undervaluation, overvaluation, misunderstanding and exclusion.

Synecdochization

This metonymic resource plays an important role in the characterization of the Other. Through synecdochization, the part of the whole, something that is only a particular aspect, is generalized. In this way a particular behavior of some individuals is applied for the whole collective or a definitory value is given to a particular feature of a determined cultural practice although this feature may be only due to circumstantial contexts. It is what happens, for example, when a particular group of immigrants, in general, is associated with delinquency, for the mere fact that some of its members have committed crime. It is very easy to detect this strategy of alterization by the way the West views determined cultural practices found in Africa. There is synecdochization, for example, when in the West it is spoken about the controversial issue of female genital mutilation and although there are different manners of practicing it, people always think in the most extreme form of the so called “pharaonic circumcision”. But this kind of severe genital mutilation happens in 15% of the cases (Boddy 2007: 48), while in the other extreme we find less harmful practices consisting in cutting off the hood of the clitoris (*sunna* circumcision) or in making a few scarification marks on the clitoris. These last techniques are in fact less aggressive than male circumcision, a custom which is not only tolerated by the West but also, in occasions, even encouraged for the African context (Martí 2010).

Exoticization

Exoticization is a tendency to see a particular group through those cultural features or traditions which clearly diverge from those of the observer. In this subjective construction of the Other, common aspects which both groups share are not taken into account or are minimized, and the real social

relevance of the exoticized tradition is not relativized. Exoticization enhances that of the Other which appears strange in the eyes of the subject. This strategy of alterization is very easy to observe, for instance, in such phenomena as Orientalism and much other -isms like ruralism, folklorism, gypsyism, etc. In the West, exoticization is a very common feature of the social perception of other cultures. Regarding Africa, in the representation of its societies by the West it is not difficult at all to find cultural traits which are highlighted and given much more social relevance than they actually have precisely because of their oddness for the Westerner: nakedness, “weird” body modifications, “ancestral” dances performed in context of animist beliefs, etc. These “exotic” cultural features can be even distortedly generalized for a whole group through synecdochization.

Undervaluation

The undervaluation of the Other simply occurs when, according to the cognitive framework of the us, determined features that have lower value than those of the us are ascribed to this Other. Otherness is frequently configured on negative value judgments in relation to the Other. That is why we speak of ethnocentrism and all possible related terms which account for socially subjective visions about that Other: vertical ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism, androcentrism, anthropocentrism, etc.

As we know from the African case, undervaluation from the Western perspective has not only been applied to very concrete cultural features that deny, for instance, the value of technical or artistic relevance of the cultural production of the black African, in general¹⁰, but also even deeming them “naturally inferior to the Whites” (Hume 1826 vol. 3: 236), without forgetting the well known Hegel’s denigrating thesis about Africa (Camara 2005). Many of the cultural traits which are seen as exotic may also serve to undervalue their bearers. Thus, for instance, the examples that I have previously given of nakedness or certain kinds of body modifications are seen not only as something strange but also as backwardness signs that serve to undervalue not only “culture” in general but also its bearers. In addition to this, it is also important to have in mind that the undervaluation of the Other, either in the area of “race”, ethnicity, gender, social class, etc. constitutes the main strategy to morally justify exploitation. Therefore, in the History of Jamaica written by Edward Long, after having placed the black African apart from the rest of humanity, the author justifies slavery

10. For example: “[Black African] seem almost incapable of making any progress in civility or science” (LONG 1774 vol. 2: 353); “No busquéis en África una civilización bien definida: nada de arquitectura; nada de historia; ninguna tradición; carencia de escritura, de industria; los cantos y la música nada dicen: es, en una palabra, la raza del período cuaternario de la tierra, que vive aún en pleno siglo XIX” (IRADIER 1887 vol. 2: 440).

on the island saying that “[their] brutality somewhat diminishes, when they are imported young, after they become habituated to cloathing and a regular discipline of life” (Long 1774 vol. 2: 354).

Overvaluation

There is no doubt at all that in alterization processes undervaluation is more frequent than its opposite, precisely because of the inherent ethnocentrism that characterizes the worldview of any human group. But this does not preclude that cases of overvaluation also appear. This, for example, is observable in those romantic views such as the “noble savage” concept or the idealization of the rural world by urban culture. We have a very interesting precedent of the Rousseauian idea in a book written in the 17th century by Walter Hamond (1640), a ship’s surgeon, in which he praises the virtues of the inhabitants of the island of Madagascar and considers them the happiest people in the world¹¹.

In any case, overvaluation by the West regarding African cultures can be easily seen in such fields which belong to the easy and relaxed life and have little to do with the Weber’s stifling iron cage, such fields which can escape the inherent rationality of the modern world and do not constitute the hard nucleus of the competitive capitalist society. Music, dance or even sexuality or sensuality, for example, are aspects of human behavior in which the Western worldview has little difficulty in conceding that the Other, the non-Western societies, may stand out. People may say then that Africans have dance or music “in the blood, that they have even” a superior sense of rhythm (Ward in Agawu 2003: 56-57); there is a jealous undertone in the belief of the sexual potency of black males and we actually know, that when Oskar Baumann in his work about Bioko spoke of the “heitere Sinnlichkeit der echten Negerin” (“cheerful sensuality of real black women” [Baumann 1888: 128]) that is something that the West comes to terms with, without any problems.

Misunderstanding

Another important element of the alterization processes is misunderstanding. Here the examples that can be observed regarding the Western view on African societies are never-ending. Polygamy, in its polygynic form, is very often understood in a simplistic manner as something that focuses on lubricious sexual privileges of men, while anthropology actually knows that there are multiple functional explanations of it and that in determined

11. What is especially interesting is that the book was designed as propaganda for England’s efforts to occupy Madagascar (WRIGHT 1943: 112).

contexts women as well as men may seek advantage in polygyny. In the same vein, the meaning of female genital mutilation goes much further than the “patriarchal oppression against women” and often has even nothing to do with it. In the West there is a great misunderstanding regarding these kinds of practices, something that has, for instance, been denounced by the Kenian Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi (2004: 293) in criticizing the stance taken by Western feminism on this issue (Boddy 2007). We could follow on with the veil that Muslim women wear, whose manifold meanings are very often ignored in the West and it is only seen as a “static practice which symbolizes the oppressive nature of patriarchy in Muslim societies” (Hoodfar 1993: 16). There are many examples for misunderstanding: cannibalism, which has very often been taken as something real when it had to be understood in symbolic terms; ancestor cults or other systems of beliefs like the Bossonisme in Ivory Coast roughly confused with witchcraft (Duchesne 2000); and so many concrete cases in which the occasional no linear correspondence between terms of African languages with European ones is the reason of the misunderstanding¹².

Exclusion

Exclusion is another modality that we can take into account within the dynamics of alterization processes. By exclusion, the Other is excluded from what is considered as belonging to “us”. This process is based on the vision of the Other in a deterministic and homogenizing manner, according to a limited set of features which are defined or characterized by the aforementioned strategies of alterization. For a long time in Europe the cultural production of the so-called “primitive” was excluded from such concepts as “art”, “literature”, “knowledge” or even “religion” and terms like “customs”, “crafts”, “myths”, “worship of divinities”, “magic” etc. were used instead. In Western history we find cases that today would easily make us blush from shame: Black Africans were excluded from history (Hegel), from rationality (Kant) or even from humanity, something that—not forgetting the important precedent of Moses Maimonides (1856 vol. 3: 434) in the Middle Ages—we can find from time to time in writers of previous centuries: “When we reflect on the nature of these men [black Africans], and their dissimilarity to the rest of mankind, must we not conclude, that they are a different species of the same *genus*?” (Long 1774 vol. 2: 356).

12. In respect to this, for example, Gerhard KUBIK (2004: 333-334) gives us a very illustrative case in which the understanding of “mask” as the “*makisi*” *ngangela* term, as we normally do, obscures our comprehension of their rites, given that the meaning of “*makisi*” is much more complex.

A very important reason for the problem of knotty terms lies in the way we view and treat the Other through the aforementioned alterization processes. These processes help configure the meanings and connotations of these terms. And obviously, precisely these words, through the academic legitimacy that they flash around, help maintain a distorted view of the Other. This is true not only for traditionally problematic terms like the ones that are dealt with in this article, but is also extensible to the anthropological gaze in general.

It is clear that the problems we have with terms like “tribe” and derivatives as well as with the adjective “ethnic” are not only caused by reasons conceptual definition. Regarding this latter term, whether we speak of “ethnic food” or of any other cultural manifestation labeled with the same adjective, such as “music” or “clothing”, for example, these concepts, beyond what they denote at first sight, acquire their full meaning through the above mentioned alterization strategies. They are cultural manifestations which are easily understood as cultural heritage. From the Western perspective, these “ethnic” manifestations are generalized *a priori* as something that belongs to an entire population although this does not necessarily have to be the case (misunderstanding), they receive a representativity value to such an extent that this “ethnic music” of a determined (ethnic) group is understood as “their music” (synecdochization), although actually the musical practices of this population may be much richer and varied. These cultural manifestations are overvalued for being “exotic” or strange in the socio-cultural context in which they are presented, although in this context they are very easily interpreted in a different way from what they really mean in their original place (misunderstanding). This may, for example, happen with Tibetan music performed in concerts in Europe and therefore valued by esthetic criteria while in its original context it is understood as merely ceremonial music.

But despite the value given to these cultural manifestations because of their exoticism, they are actually undervalued as well, given that in stratified societies, such as the Western, “the ethnic” will never be comparable with what is considered the proper culture. “Ethnic” also implies exclusion of what does not need any adjectivation: “the music”, “the food”, “the dress”, etc. We saw it in the example mentioned above with the comments on the disk of Johnny Alf: “One thing is ‘ethnic music’ and the other music with a capital M.” And these considerations are even valid for the term “ethnic disorder” also mentioned at the beginning of this article, although it has nothing to do with the notion of “cultural heritage”. “Ethnic disorder” is something that by its oddity has its epistemological value within the Western psychiatric community. But nevertheless, it will never reach the same status as the common disorders of the Western society such as depression or schizophrenia, or even a disorder like anorexia nervosa that, while there

are some who rightly consider this disorder a culture bound syndrome, people rarely speak of in terms of “ethnic disorder”. It goes without saying that ethnic disorders are easily misunderstood by health specialists outside the socio-cultural context where these disorders occur. To sum up, we could hardly understand the full significance and social use of “ethnic” without taking into account the synecdochization, exoticization, undervaluation, overvaluation, misunderstanding and exclusion procedures.

Misunderstanding is something consubstantial of the little accuracy of many supposedly *etic* anthropological concepts when they are applied indiscriminately to non-Western societies. This is one of the problems that has been pointed out for the term “tribe”; it is vague, but we also know that if we do not like it, it is because it implies exoticization and undervaluation, traits that ultimately lead to understanding of a whole population (synecdochization) at the margins of modernity (exclusion). On the other hand, attempts to deny the validity of a general term like “witchcraft” for African cases, that have been supported by some researchers also have to do with alterization strategies such as synecdochization and exclusion. According to this view, people give the concepts like *ngbwo* (Fang), *apeth* (Dinka), *tfu* (Wimbum) or *mangu* (Zande), for instance, a representativity for the broad world of the occult although it is considered that they have enough consistency in order not to be subsumed within the general term of “witchcraft” and therefore excluded from it. But if the validity of the term “witchcraft” should be reserved only for the reality of the West we are falling into what Agawu called the “ideology of difference”. Refusing to use the term “witchcraft” for African cases would be the same as pretending to understand the music of many African bands under the umbrella of the “world music” label—a label that is reserved for the “third world”—instead of using such categories as “rock”, “pop” or “jazz” that we apply for Western popular music.

Such terms as “tribe”, “tribalism”, “world music”, “witchcraft” and many others, which are accompanied by the adjective “ethnic” or the prefix “ethno”, can be easily understood as knotty terms because of the difficulties that their use poses to the researcher. The problem is not just the ambiguity of the terms—something that happens with many other terms—I would even dare say that the main problem is not only the derogatory connotations that they may have although this is obviously reprehensible. The fact that “witchcraft” is problematic we do know. But it is problematic for African and European cases as well. Pretending to reserve the term “witchcraft” for only the Western context and denying its validity for African traditions does not only mean ignoring a reality, but also plays along with the old colonial gaze, which is precisely fed by the explained alterization strategies. In fact, this is related to the other terms discussed in this article. The main problem is circumscribing them predominantly to the African (or “third world”) reality, what actually implies a distortion in the correspondence between the intensional and extensional register of the terms due to

ideology. This is the very reason why, for instance, the musician Arto Lindsay said that the world music concept is simply hateful, imperialist and racist (Linés 2002: 40). The first and foremost problem, therefore, is the different application of these terms according to whether it is about the Western or African context. This fact also undoubtedly contributes to the misinterpretation of African societies.

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ABSTRACT

In researching African realities anthropologists very often have to face the difficulty of the use of some very problematic terms such as "ethnic" (in expressions like "ethnic music", "ethnic clothing", etc.), "tribe" and derivatives, or "witchcraft" and "sorcery". Such terms are still used but the discomfort that many anthropologists feel when using them is undeniable; they are, undoubtedly, "knotty terms". To what extent can African anthropology do without these terms? What must our attitudes regarding these terms be if we really cannot give them up? These are some of the questions I will be addressing in this article, giving special importance to the troublesome term of "witchcraft". It is clear that anthropological practice in African societies cannot be separated from general dynamics of alterization processes. As I argue in the article, part of the problem of knotty terms lies in the way we view and treat the Other through determined alterization strategies such as synecdochization, exotization, undervaluation, overvaluation, misunderstanding and exclusion. The interest in reflecting on the "knotty terms" issue lies in the fact that far beyond their epistemological implications for anthropology, they have an important ideological and therefore social dimension as well.

RÉSUMÉ

Représenter la réalité africaine à travers des « termes épineux ». — Dans la recherche sur les réalités africaines, les anthropologues doivent très souvent faire face aux difficultés de l'utilisation de certains termes problématiques tels que « ethnique » (dans des expressions comme « musique ethnique », « vêtements ethniques », etc.), « tribu » et ses dérivés, ou « magie » et « sorcellerie ». Ces termes sont encore utilisés, mais l'inconfort que de nombreux anthropologues ressentent lorsqu'ils les mobilisent est indéniable; il s'agit, sans aucun doute, de « termes épineux ». Dans quelle mesure l'anthropologie africaine peut faire sans ces termes ? Comment devons-nous utiliser ces termes, s'il est vraiment impossible d'y renoncer ? Voici quelques-unes des questions posées dans cet article, en donnant une importance particulière au terme problématique de « sorcellerie ». Il est clair que la pratique anthropologique dans les sociétés africaines est indissociable de la dynamique générale du processus d'altérisation. Comme je le soutiens dans l'article, une partie du problème des « termes épineux » réside dans la façon de nous voir et de traiter les autres par des stratégies

d'altérisation telles que la *synecdochization*, l'exoticisation, la sous-évaluation, la surévaluation, l'incompréhension et l'exclusion. L'intérêt de la réflexion sur la question des « termes épineux » réside dans le fait que bien au-delà de leurs implications épistémologiques pour l'anthropologie, ils possèdent une dimension idéologique importante et donc bien sociale.

Keywords/*Mots-clés*: anthropology, epistemology, ideology, knotty terms, terminology, witchcraft/*anthropologie, épistémologie, idéologie, termes épineux, terminologie, sorcellerie.*