‘Stealing with the eyes’, a post-modern assault on anthropology

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In an age when Western science is condemned as an expression of colonialism and white supremacy it is not surprising that these feelings of moral outrage should be extended to anthropology. Traditionally, anthropology has had a special interest in the study of tribal or ‘primitive’ societies, which are small face-to-face communities with subsistence economies and simple technologies, without writing, money, or the state. They have a very limited division of labour and are organised mainly on the basis of kinship, age, and gender. They were not isolated or unimportant oddities, and for most of history have been the predominant type of human society across the globe, but were increasingly subject to control by the great empires of the ancient world, and in more modern times were subject to mainly European colonisation. While there were sometimes descriptions of these societies by government officers, missionaries, and assorted travellers the lack of writing in tribal societies meant that a detailed examination of them required that professional anthropologists should go and live with them for one or two years of fieldwork. They had to learn the unwritten indigenous languages, and compare their findings with those of other anthropologists to build up a general theoretical understanding of how such societies worked. This was a vital contribution to our understanding of what it means to be human, and for a hundred years or so anthropological fieldworkers, mainly European and American, accumulated a vast store of ethnographic information. It was also a priceless record of these societies in their traditional state before they were radically transformed by the various forces of modernisation.

In the nature of things, anthropologists were only able to carry out fieldwork in these societies when law and order had been imposed by colonial governments, but a modern highly politicised generation of academics has taken this as the opportunity to treat anthropology as itself a colonialist enterprise. As the Pitt Rivers Museum has recently proclaimed, ‘Coloniality divides the world up into “the West and the rest”, and assigns racial, intellectual and cultural superiority to the West.’ The very obvious fact that human societies exhibit differing degrees of complexity is described as the creation of ‘Racialised hierarchies linked to intelligence’ whereas of course the true aim of a modern anthropology should be the creation of ‘an inclusive space welcoming to all’ (cited in Hallpike 2024).

In short, anthropology is now seen as a threat to the dignity and well-being of tribal societies, just another form of colonialist oppression of the powerless. For example, an

American anthropologist has recently said that making audio recordings (even when the indigenes themselves have sold these recordings) displays an 'extraction mindset' comparable to mining companies extracting mineral resources from the land. She therefore decided not to record any of the interviews she obtained in her fieldwork so as not to continue 'the legacy of extraction' (cited in Weiss 2022).

This 'extraction mindset' has, rather more graphically, been called 'stealing with the eyes', an expression that came about in the following way. A young man called Will Buckingham became interested in anthropology at university, and decided he would like to go to the Tanimbar Islands in Indonesia to study the work of their traditional sculptors. He had no qualifications in anthropology besides his desultory reading in the library stacks which gave him a love of relativism. He also knew little about Indonesia or the Indonesian language, but rather surprisingly got permission from the Indonesian Government to carry out his study for a few months in 1994-5. In 2018 he published his account of living in Tanimbar, *Stealing with the Eyes*, whose title was inspired by his meeting with the native sculptor Matias Fatruan:

> Matias held up his hand. He spoke softly. 'I do not think that you have come to steal with the hands', he said. 'I think that you have come to steal with the eyes.'
> Matias's gaze was steady. I looked away guiltily.
> *Curi mata*: stealing with the eyes. The accusation was inescapable. What else did Westerners do, the whole world over, if not this? They roved here and there, taking other people's lives and homes as things to be photographed, consumed, ferried back home. Wasn't anthropology itself no more than a vast enterprise of stealing with the eyes? Wasn't the entire world, under the guise of knowledge and science, a cabinet of curiosity for the West? (Buckingham 2018: 54).

But readers of his book may well wonder what qualifications he has to judge anthropology at all. We have seen that when he went to Tanimbar he had no qualifications in anthropology, and only a slender knowledge of Indonesian, he only spent a few months there, and his book is a very amateurish piece of ethnography that is mostly concerned with the meetings he had with a series of individuals and tells us very little about Tanimbar society and culture. But while he calls anthropology 'this queasy enterprise at the tag end of colonialism', it so conflicted him with its moral ambiguities that eventually he became seriously ill with fits of vomiting, giddiness, headaches and fever; doctors could not help him, and he only recovered by abandoning anthropology altogether and writing books of popular philosophy instead.

Here we should inject some ethnographic reality into his notion of 'stealing with the eyes'. Professor James Fox, of the Australian National University, and a leading authority on Indonesia, has this to say about it:

The problem I have with Buckingham is that *curi mata* does not have the literal meaning that he has imposed upon it. An approximation of *curi mata* in English might be 'to steal a look': hence, in different contexts, it might mean 'to glance' or 'to preview' or possibly even 'to spy.' He obviously didn't have enough command of eastern Indonesian Malay to understand his informants and therefore as a philosopher has been able to erect his argument based on his misunderstanding

Rather obviously, observing people in alien societies and writing down the results of one's experience, so-called 'stealing with the eyes', is not stealing in any meaningful sense of the word because it doesn't deprive anyone of anything. As it stands it is just a morbid and fantastic expression of liberal guilt. But the American anthropologist's refusal to record interviews, and Buckingham's aversion to gathering ethnographic data both seem to be getting at something rather different, the belief that extracting information from native informants that is of professional value to the anthropologist is a kind of profiteering at the expense of the informant, people from rich countries doing well on the backs of people in poor countries by writing books and gaining professional prestige from their experience.

This is a sentimental and trivial view that simply fails to understand the realities of the fieldwork situation. The people with whom the anthropologist is conducting fieldwork are not compelled to provide him with ethnographic information, and are perfectly free to ignore him, or to tell him to mind his own business, or tell him off if he offends them. In fact they often find the strange anthropologist an interesting novelty and in many cases approve of what he is doing. So when the Konso of Ethiopia asked me why I had to come to live with them, I replied that I would write a book that would tell their grandchildren how they had lived, which pleased them very much and has subsequently become true, and my book is considered a very valuable resource about their traditions. I always paid informants for texts they dictated to me, and for objects they sold to me, and for many other services, and gave them a good deal of medicine. When I left the village where I first lived the elders gave me
back a month's rent because they said they had enjoyed having me there, and hoped I would
become a big man in my country. The Tauade of Papua New Guinea wanted me to come and live with them so that I could sell them sugar and tobacco. Most of them had no interest in giving me texts but I had one very intelligent informant who was most

interested in what I was doing and gave me an immense amount of information without which I could never have succeeded in writing my detailed account of Tauade society. Over a couple of years he also received a good deal of money, and gave me his grandfather's skull as a leaving present.

In general people enjoy talking about their own society and customs to those who take a sincere and intelligent interest in them, and welcome the opportunity to explain them to outsiders. On the other hand, one must obviously behave with tact and politeness, and respect their customs. For example, I spent some time in my early months mapping the large village where I was living, when I was told that people were becoming upset. I immediately stopped doing any more mapping, and waited until I had a better command of the language. Then I called the elders together and told them that the wise men in my country would want to see a map of the village to prove that I had lived there. They were quite happy with this explanation and told me to do as much mapping as I wanted to.

On another occasion it came on to rain heavily after dark one evening in the growing season, and some of the men ran out naked into the fields to check that the rain water was flowing properly in the irrigation channels. I went out with them and they felt that this was an intrusion, as they conveyed to me tersely the next morning by saying "The day is yours; the night is ours". It is also quite normal to quarrel with people if they have behaved offensively. With the Tauade, one day a man brought along his wife to see me. Her arm had been broken by a man who hit her with his axe, and I bound up the injury and wrote a letter to the Assistant District Commissioner explaining the case and the culprit was jailed. A little
while later her husband held a small pig killing to celebrate his wife's recovery, as was traditional, and I went along with the rest of the village. As the distribution of pork proceeded it became clear that I was not going to receive any, as I was entitled to, so I was absolutely furious and challenged her husband: "Anamara, why have you not given me pork today, I know your customs. I bound up your wife's wound and wrote a letter to the *kaubada*, why have you not given me pork?" He was speechless, so I continued "I'll tell you why. You are just a wild pig"and turned away and walked off. He rushed after me waving a ten dollar

bill with Amo, my chief informant, who said that Anamara wanted to wipe out the insult. So we returned to the *kiava* where he presented the money to me, and I said that that settled the matter and went back to my house. Amo soon joined me, roaring with laughter, and said that I was a real Tauade. I felt closer to the people as a result, and the incident certainly raised my stock among them because I had behaved in a way that they would have done.

Writing ethnographies of tribal societies was inevitably something that only literate outsiders could accomplish in the first instance, but it was always inherently collaborative because it depended on co-operation by the people being studied. With the passage of time and the spread of education it then became possible for the native peoples to make positive contributions to their own ethnography. So when I returned to the Konso in 1997, thirty years after I had completed my first field study, I found that an educated Konso had written a history of the Konso people, an extremely valuable resource which I frequently quoted in my revised edition of my own book on the Konso (Hallpike 2008). He and all the other Konso who helped me would have found the accusation of ‘stealing with the eyes’ not just absurd but incomprehensible.

To sum up, then, writing an accurate account of a people who have no written records or literature allows them to leave a voice behind them in human history instead of vanishing, silent and anonymous, into the mists of time. It is also a major contribution to our understanding of the human race by showing how we think and behave in a wide variety of different conditions and also helps explain how we reached our present circumstances. As it is, anthropology has been one of the most humane exercises in the history of Western scholarship and I am very proud to have been able to make a contribution to it.

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