

An opportunity for anthropology to escape from its colonial history

[Government](#), [Colonialism](#)



The discipline of anthropology appears to be in a state of predicament, equally in its approach to classroom and fieldwork, which is noticeable in the break-up among the anthropologists and non-white people traditionally studied. Over a period things have changed from armchair anthropology to more intensive fieldwork approach. However, an anthropologist willing for field work may sometimes find himself in trouble as he or she may be restricted by the government or may be precluded by the other scholars of the country they seek to enter. Sometimes the anthropologists may be imposed from other more accepted disciplines like sociology or economics to gain recognition and to overcome resentment from the group the anthropologist has chosen to study. An anthropologist may sometimes be challenged for his writings by the people of the community chosen to study who question the rationality of this research.

Just as the Europeans relished a superior position in a colony, the majority of anthropologists occupied a central position through social, political and economic superiority over the people they studied. Most of the Europeans derived legal, socio-economic and other benefits in the form of higher position jobs, good salary and fewer taxes similar to the anthropologist, who was offered a research grant and finally ended up with high-status jobs. No care or attention was paid to the fact that the supremacy enjoyed within a colony was based on the exploitation of natives. The era from 1980 to 1990s, witnessed a considerable rise in the anthropological studies concerning the colonial past with the anthropology of colonialism mostly added after 1985. Ever since anthropological studies on colonialism were recognized it inspired many of the young researchers to explore the discipline of colonial studies.

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Pels (1997) was of the view that the study of colonialism fills the gap between history and anthropology.

Memmi rightly notices that it is often not easy to get away from a certain definite situation mentally and also to reject the ideology while enduring to live with its actual relationships. Prof Talal Asad says it is more or less a simple plot characterized by a much larger narrative which is found to have a rich arrangement of characters and situations. When the Europeans dominated the world, many of them made profitable associations with the colonized people. To modernize the world around them the European soldiers, priests, tradespeople and officials with other men of power who remained at home, aided in the conversion of their non-European subjects forcefully. The story verifies that how they assumed their early confrontations with the Europeans in native cultural expressions, how they repelled, adjusted to, conjoined with, or tested their colonizers and how they struggled to rejuvenate their disturbed lives. However, it also tells of the conditions of reinvention increasingly defined by new forms of power, work, and knowledge. It speaks about the Europeans imposing supremacy and authority not as a momentary suppression but as a clear process of transfiguration, in which old morals and values were razed and replaced by new ones perceived as a story of change which is without historical morals, universal scope and prevalence. It was during this time that the discipline of anthropology had begun to develop.

Anthropologists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown Radcliffe regarded as pioneers has given the theory of functionalism, though both were

distinctive but were substantially similar in their views, resuscitated the discipline of anthropology in 1922 and had a major impact on the most of the studies prevailing at that time. Traditionally in many societies, culture is perceived as integrated whole-systems of adaptation by a social group to its surroundings. People in favor of colonial power influenced readers and expanded the awareness about the ways of life, which provided adequately for the universal needs of individuals and societies.

Hussein Fahim and Katherine Helmer argue that “ the growth of indigenous anthropology in non-Western Countries because anthropology had originated and developed in the Western world and the increasing number of anthropologists trained and operating outside this tradition raised new issues within the discipline and also the colonial past”. Fieldwork conducted by anthropologists have increasingly become less politically receptive in lesser developed nations. Anthropological research among some countries has been constrained due to which many of the native anthropologists has restricted and allied their research to nationally assigned sustainable goals. Majority of the third world countries have witnessed the rise of indigenous anthropology as a result of which many native anthropologists have preferred to limit their scope of research to their social issues and culture

Native anthropology is based on traditional theories grounded by non-Western principles and presumptions similar to what contemporary anthropology is based on and has reinforced modern ethics and beliefs. The colonial anthropological studies seem placed against the native anthropology. Gough says, while tracing out the foundation it seems to

appear that from the very beginning we are colonized by a tripartite environment, firstly concerning responsibilities towards the people studied, secondly to our contemporaries and thirdly to the authorities who employed us or aided our research. In several situations, we appear to be in a state of dilemma as a result of a clash between the range of responsibilities and the authorities that support the research, while the second set of loyalties to our subject as an objective and an attempt, are being rigorously tested and exposed. Therefore in some countries, native anthropology developed, a significant nation being Japan, which was free from colonial shackles and their theories do not follow the imperialistic colonial contour.

The second argument relates to how colonial governments and other administration was a constant support to anthropological research. There was government support for the anthropological research during the colonial administration both by France and England called Imperial Anthropology. The contention prevailing among the association of anthropology and colonialism influences various researchers to re-evaluate the effects of the relationship that the discipline of anthropology persists with the other social sciences and which further induces to reassess the research methods, customs and ethics. Closer to India and its colonial history shows how anthropology and colonial administration was linked so rigidly that it could not drop its colonial moorings because of continuing financial support. There have been positive and negative contributions, but Anthropology depended on government support and was largely unable to escape the colonial mindset and superiority of the colonial rulers.

The third argument relates to the objectivity of the researcher “ In any scientific argument, the objectivity of the research depends on the orientation of the researcher and in general it is observed in social sciences especially anthropology that the bias of the researcher cannot be avoided”. “ The first defined the individual’s social and personal attributes as a bias to be overcome by both indigenous and foreign scholars through critical awareness and methodological rigor”. Pushing indigenous anthropology to its limits could result in extreme biases. Barnes and Mott were of the view that division of discipline along cultural lines would intersect with the goal of creating a universal and effective statement which could further lead to research on similar topics.

The bias is seen as a central problem in the discipline as a whole. The subject of anthropology seems to be much influenced by cultural perceptions of the western world which further affect the choice of topics, how one approaches a particular problem and even interpretation of the research data. The differences between deep-rooted intellectual traditions and customs of Japan and Europe have preceded diverse research concerns in the two scholarly groups. As compared to the third world nations, the situation among the Japanese seems to be different as Japan evolved as an imperial power and colonized its neighboring countries and their customs cannot be compared with the other African countries. The writings among the majority of the British anthropologists regarding African customary laws remained unsuccessful to identify the mutiny among the modern institutions. Instead, the scholars further replicated the hegemonic discourse of colonial

administrators (which as a result was seen as the discourse of African nationalists). Therefore, customary laws created by the British appear to be an advanced form of the natural customs.

Anthropology and Colonial Racism

It is seen that the anthropologists who critiqued colonialism, built theoretical models. It is considered to be more or less a moral duty of anthropologist to stand up against any discrimination and at the same time evaluate, assess and eradicate the actions which fostered it. To defend its hegemony, it is observed that discrimination of any sort is supported by the group. Memmi argues that “ there are three ideological bases of colonial racism: one, the gulf between the culture of the colonialist and the colonized; two, the exploitation of these differences for the benefit of the colonialist; three, the use of these supposed differences as standards of absolute fact. The anthropologist’s behavior and conceptual formulations participate in all three”.

The discipline of anthropology has influenced most of the countries and widened the gulf between non-western and western culture by facilitating information which braces the rational construct acquired by those in power. A noteworthy example to this could be observed in the study put forward by Evans Pritchard on Witchcraft which biased western people ineradicably that every native believed in witchcraft with racist comments that even continues to persist today. This is despite the fact that Anthropologists assess different cultures and try to document the variations in cultures and other civilizations.

Secondly, it has been observed that some anthropologists, personally and professionally cause the exploitation of the people they study for their interest. Sometimes they do not even take in to account the assurance and other commitments being made to the people being studied. They rarely take any obligation towards the people, and in fact, they safeguard their act of inappropriateness through a choice of scientific objectivity. Anthropology deals with the lived experience of the community being studied, and it needs to be sensitively portrayed by the trained observer. In a primitive community, it becomes even more important as the informer and the observer need to be culturally sensitive and objective. The personal interest of the colonizer nor the long-term vested interest of the researcher should play a part in and skew the observations. Gultang also discloses a similar connotation regarding the mistreatment and discrimination offered by other social science researchers for their benefits. They sometimes stimulate the discrimination among the people in their writings. Gultang linked the practice and labeled it as scientific colonialism. He further stated that however, the center for obtaining all information about a nation is located outside the boundaries of a nation. One of the most crucial aspect following colonialism is found to be the notion that gives attention to the unobstructed right of a researcher to recover data of any kind which could be viewed as a similar process where colonial power is thought to have right over commercial goods or other valuables in a particular region.

The approach of unbiased observation ineffectually deprives the one who is being observed and further brings them down to an inferior position. It is

when the researcher begins to refuse to go beyond the pretense of outward behavior and suits themselves to be a part of the day to workings of the observed; impudently accepts that the overall understanding of the one being examined is more effective. Sometimes the anthropologists considerably compound or acknowledge previously prevailing relationship of discrimination despite claiming to play a fair and unbiased role. Such an act poses resentment among many of the non-white scholars as most of them believe that they have been selected for study by the science of savages. It further creates a feeling of inferiority among the non-white when they are compared with Europeans.

“ Objectivity” under these circumstances is considered by many non-White people as an affront. Some anthropologists reported informants’ response to be considered as one of the objects for research. Levi-Strauss refers to the relationship that exists between the objective approach being applied by the anthropologists and the irrevocability of dehumanization within a colonial context as obscenity of being ethnographic. However, there is no guarantee that the indigenous anthropologist trained in the schools of anthropology will be more objective than the colonial or imperial anthropologist. It is important among the third world anthropologist to redefine the way western scholars have traditionally portrayed them. Simultaneously it is required to identify the positive aspects and also to recognize the flaws to bring a change.

Conclusion

In the past, colonialism has more or less defined the relationship among the non-white and anthropologists. Few social science scholars assumed their

study on people as a form of privilege as a result of their good relations being maintained with the dominant group in a community. It is observed that majority of the scholars remained biased due to the deep interest of colonizers.

The customary anthropologist's condition, which could be defined by the functions being performed by the colonizer, once renowned in a past period seems to be dying. The radical thinking currently examines the period being dominated by western colonization among some people and their innovative ideas. The people of Africa, Asia and Latin America and the ethnic minorities in North America are currently challenging the morality of an anthropologist, forcing a critical reconsidering of some of the assumptions. The questions that arise are: Is it possible to apply the discipline of anthropology universally? Can the discipline be applied to utilize distinct self-study among the people? Is the discipline valuable only in providing findings of immobilized and helpless people as compared with those in power? Is it to remain an appendage to western mistreatment of Third World people?

In the modern world to become familiarized with the realities and certainties, it is important for the discipline of anthropology to include several perceptions and perspectives during the study as multiple interests and demands may affect the findings. If anyone who wants to understand the true nature and variations within cultures, it is essential to take in to account both the views of native people and the outsiders. The views from both should be accepted legitimately. It will uncover those anthropologists who seem to dissipate customs, knowledge and norms to safeguard their benefits

and will bound those who lay more stress, particularly on the theory. It can be further observed that newly advanced primitives who wants to remain responsible towards their work, are reminding many of the anthropologists about their roles and responsibilities within a community. Once the anthropologists realize their roles and responsibilities in an unbiased manner only then, they may be allowed to pursue the field work.