

Why Anthropology, and what is Small Anthropology?

Dr Shawn Sobers

First let's deal with the question - Why Anthropology?

Why have I adopted anthropology for my go to methodological references of how I position my work? Considering the below quote by Galtung, I often ask myself, "Why indeed?"

"A painting used to hang in the ante-room of former President Kwame Nkrumah. The painting was enormous, and the main feature was of Nkrumah himself, fighting, wrestling, with the last chains of colonialism. The chains are yielding, there is thunder and lightning in the air, the earth is shaking. Out of all this, three small figures are fleeing, white men, pallid. One of them is the capitalist, he carries a briefcase. Another is a priest or missionary, he carries the Bible. The third, a lesser figure, carries a book entitled 'African Political Systems': he is the anthropologist."

Johan Galtung (1967) as quoted in Kuper (1996)

As an African heritage Rastafarian visual artist, why indeed, given Galtung's damning indictment, have I chosen this affiliation, and referred to myself as a 'Visual Anthropologist', as opposed to 'Visual Artist', or simply 'Photographer, Filmmaker, Artist', or another title that is less historically problematic? By aligning myself with anthropology, am I supping with the devil?

The common perception of anthropology as a discipline is one of bearded Caucasian men travelling to far off lands full of dark-skinned people, conducting ethnography by gathering images, artefacts and observations of their 'native' behaviours, customs and rituals. Some anthropology is still like that, but it is also much more, and has the potential to be much more. No longer inclined to only travel to "exotic" lands, anthropologists are now also staying closer to home, exploring the habits of life and culture of their own people, in their own backyards (Powdermaker 1966, Oakley 1996), and no longer viewing culture in terms of binary oppositions, through the patronizing evolutionary spectacles of the eroding primitive and progressive civilized. Also, many modern anthropologists are the former studied, and

are returning the gaze (Jacobs-Huey, L. 2002). Jomo Kenyatta, the revolutionary founding father and first Prime Minister of Kenya, was an accomplished anthropologist, and many who once may have been the object of anthropological study have come to reclaim the discourse and speak for oneself, rather than having assumptions and values imposed upon them by others. As articulated by Tuhiwai Smith (2006: 4);

“To acquiesce is to lose ourselves entirely and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us. To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves. The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope.”

Modern post-colonial Visual Anthropology as an idea, possibly even more than the current state of the discipline in reality, fits with my own personal approach to creativity, which is one of making art as visual forms of social enquiry in relation to topics in the wider world, rather than art for its own aesthetic sake. However I do admire diverse forms of art including work by artists who adopt the principle of art for art’s sake, and do not try to impose my own approach on the students I teach, as they need to find their own path in their creative lives. I do though tend to adopt the ‘art as enquiry’ philosophy for my own creativity, as that is my personal motivation to make something, even if the enquiry is not obvious in the final resolution. It is a personal motivation, not an evangelical one.

Being creative is a form of epistemology, making work to ask questions, not necessary to provide answers.

I am a practitioner of a trio of related discourses, each of which relate directly to my educational background - Visual Arts & Media (BA), Media Anthropology (MA), and Participatory Media (PhD). Through these creative approaches I explore my interest in people (whether they live far or near), how they work, what their motivations are, and how culture is formed. I am also interested in creativity in all its forms, and the intersection between these three disciplines, which I see to be Visual Anthropology, is a relevant field in relation to my interests, enabling me to frame my creative practice in terms of relevant/key critical debates, and how to frame them as a personal creative practice. I am interested in the tension of being aware that anthropological photography was perhaps the first types of images I saw as a child that inspired me to think about other cultures and to embrace my own African roots, whilst at the same time grasping the realisation later in life to how the

problematic many of these images are with regards how they may have been captured, and the inherent related power dynamics. ¹

I do however adopt Visual Anthropology with caution, fully aware of the need to further decolonize the discourse, and position my own corner of the practice in emancipatory rather than imperial terms.

Visual Anthropology is not consigned to only documentary forms of visual resolution, and can also embrace constructed images, abstract forms, fiction, and other approaches to creative processes. In my own work, the visuals created are not used as mere methods of data gathering for later anthropological renditions in text: they are the final renderings in themselves, occasionally with small amounts of accompanying text. Reflecting, exploring and commenting on culture is too complex and dynamic a process to be owned by a singular genre such as documentary (especially within photography), and as well as reflecting reality, a reflexive anthropologist also constructs reality through creativity. As expressed by Nigerian writer Ken Saro-Wiwa;

“The writer cannot be a mere storyteller; he cannot be a mere teacher; he cannot merely X-ray society’s weaknesses, its ills, its perils. He or she must be actively involved shaping its present and its future.”

What is Small Anthropology?

With the traditional forms of anthropological practice being the study of humanity, (making large universal [social] scientific claims on the nature of existence and human behaviours, and the problematics of power of representation that project entails), I argue that now in this post-postcolonial and post-structuralist era, a more humble (and less ‘masculine/heroic’) form of anthropology can be practiced.

I argue that rather than one learned scholar going into a field to observe and represent the many “others”, rather a one-to-one (individual to individual) approach to anthropology can be practiced through dialogue, in encounters that aim to be mutually potent for both parties in the dialogue – not an interview with a respondent, but a conversation between equals.

¹ To see two visual responses to these ideas visit:

<http://www.shawnsobers.com/post-traumatic-slave-syndrome-afrikan-kinship-system-series/>

and

<http://www.shawnsobers.com/returned-gaze-afrikan-kinship-system-series/>

Small Anthropologies is based on an unapologetic qualitative discourse, rooted in the arts and humanities, (more social than science), and the pedagogic belief that every interaction between humans within a context of related phenomena can enlighten both parties to some aspect of the human experience.

As Paulo Freire (1977: 61) says;

“If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one persons "depositing" ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the discussants. Nor yet is it a hostile, polemical argument between those who are committed neither to the naming of the world, nor to the search for truth, but rather to the imposition of their own truth. Because dialogue is an encounter among women and men who name the world, it must not be a situation where some name on behalf of others. It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another. The domination implicit in dialogue is that of the world by the dialogues; it is conquest of the world for the liberation of humankind. Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love.”

Whether it is a chance encounter or an arranged meeting, every interaction has a planned or post-rationalised methodology. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the Rhizome (1980), which celebrates a non-hierarchical application of knowledge, Small Anthropology recognises and embraces the messiness of human relations, interactions, knowledge transfer and impacts to transformation. The child playing with twigs is no less an expert than a professor in a university. It all depends on what we are looking for, how open to wonder we remain, what questions are asked, and first and foremost, our ability to listen.

The methodology of small anthropology is still being developed, and I look forward to the journey.

Yours, a cautious anthropologist.

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