



GAZE

An African Ethnography of American Anthropology

REVERSED

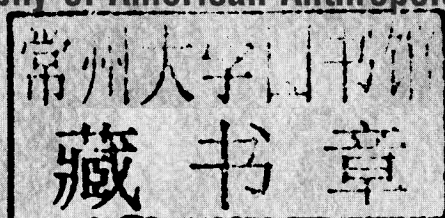
MWENDA NTARANGWI



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**MWENDA NTARANGWI**

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## Preface

This book is a personal journey into the heart of anthropology; representing my own pathways as an African student entering American higher education in the early 1990s to study a discipline that I knew very little about. It is a story about my initial entry into an American academic space very different from my own experience in Kenya, where we followed a British system of education. It is also a story hemmed within a specific discourse and views about anthropology that can be best represented by remarks from fellow graduate students who wondered what I was doing in a “racist” discipline. This story, woven through a series of mini-stories, explores the practice of American anthropology at home and presents a side of American anthropology often absent in books and journals. When I started the journey into anthropology through which this story is woven, I was not conversant with American academic politics, especially the perceptions of anthropology held by other scholars and students. Consequently, I became quite disturbed by the “racist” label placed on anthropology by fellow graduate students in other disciplines, particularly those in sociology and political science. Troubled by this label, I consciously embarked on a journey to find out more about the discipline.

Other than the glimpse I got into the subject after reading an introductory textbook, I had little knowledge of anthropology as a discipline—how it worked, where it came from, or how it related to other disciplines with which I was familiar. Yet I knew that Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, had had a brush with some form of anthropology that enabled him write his treatise titled *Facing Mount Kenya*, in which he chronicled the life of his

Kikuyu community. Renowned anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski added legitimacy to Kenyatta's book with an affirming introduction that emphasized the value of "native" perspectives in anthropology. Malinowski's emphasis on "native" perspectives came at a time when anthropology was continually facing the paradoxes and contradictions that other social sciences had been dealing with. On the one hand, the discipline was following a rigorous scientific study of human societies and cultures, while on the other, the discipline was being used to advance notions of social Darwinism that regarded non-Western cultures as inferior. In this regard, Malinowski was championing the fact that Africans such as Kenyatta had something important to contribute to the discipline. Kenyatta's philosophy of self-governance and a respect for traditional cultural practices is not far from many anthropological principles that I have now come to embrace as a trained anthropologist. Interestingly, despite Kenyatta's book being one of the very first ethnographies written by an African in the colonial context, he did not promote anthropology as a discipline in Kenya even after becoming the country's first president.<sup>1</sup> My journey into anthropology was by all standards an adventure.

I entered into graduate school in America to study anthropology in the fall of 1992 and graduated in spring of 1998. Even though my anthropology department in graduate school followed the four-field approach (having cultural, linguistic, archaeology, and physical anthropology subdisciplines), I focused on cultural anthropology. Studying in such a context allowed me to acquire a richer understanding of the discipline. And now, in retrospect, I see that it gave me an advantage as a professor who was introducing undergraduate students to the discipline.

I was in graduate school at a very dynamic phase in the discipline of anthropology in general and in American anthropology in particular. Even though I took courses that allowed for a glimpse into the history of the discipline, I almost felt as though I were entering into a movie theater when the feature film had already been running for a while. How else could I explain having to read E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes on the one hand and George Marcus, James Clifford, and Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres on the other? I was reading about British social anthropology and its functionalist approaches while also reading about challenges directed at the authority of ethnographic representation of social reality or of White feminist projects' insensitivity to the plight of women of color.<sup>2</sup> It was a time of questioning the authority of the grand narratives that had shaped much of Western anthropology for the first six decades of the twentieth century. I was in graduate school during the postmodern phase in anthropology, where

emphasis was more on the practice of representing culture and the process of conducting research than on the content of the research itself.

I chose to enter into anthropology while in Kenya when searching for a discipline that would allow me to understand popular culture from a holistic approach. Anthropology, my academic mentor and friend in Kenya told me, was the best academic field for me. I was at the time studying and teaching at Kenyatta University, one of the very first public institutions of higher education in Kenya, named after Jomo Kenyatta. My mentor mentioned that anthropology was the discipline that would accommodate my interest in people, their cultures, and even the various reasons they gave for their daily activities. By choosing the field of anthropology as a graduate student, therefore, I was hoping to expand my academic purview to include a holistic approach to lived experiences and the human condition through popular culture that I had come to enjoy as a subject of study. It came as a shock to me, then, that a number of my graduate school colleagues in America would be so critical of a discipline in which I was now cultivating a great interest. Yet at some level, I did appreciate the critiques made against anthropology, especially when I took them in the spirit of listening to my critics in order to polish up my trade.

Not everything I encountered about anthropology was negative. I found inspiration in a number of texts that I was reading in graduate school, including Kenyatta's book in which Branislaw Malinowski states that "Anthropology begins at home" and that "we must start by knowing ourselves first, and only then proceed to the more exotic savageries."<sup>3</sup> The excitement that these words stirred in me gave way to a number of questions. If anthropology truly begins at home as Malinowski states, how come, as I had thus far observed, anthropology tended to focus on the "exotic"? How come only a small percentage of fieldwork and scholarship by Western anthropologists focused on their own cultures, and when they did, it was among individuals and communities in the peripheries, their own "exotics" such as those in extreme poverty, in gangs, and others outside mainstream culture? How come calls by well-known anthropologists such as Paul Rabinow to "anthropologize the West . . . [and] show how exotic its constitution of reality has been" seemed to have not brought forth much fruit?<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Rabinow's own fieldwork took him to many parts of Africa, a continent that continues to be a popular location for anthropological research. He, however, never quite "anthropologized the West," even though his most recent work on reason and knowledge does look at things Western. In the absence of Western studies of their own cultures, anthropology seemed like a discipline shaped primarily



by its focus on its object, an object based on some sense of alterity. Despite all my doubts, however, I was quite drawn to the discipline.

My graduate training in anthropology, therefore, became a two-pronged activity: on the one hand, I gained anthropological skills through courses offered in the department of anthropology as well as interactions with my professors, and on the other, I was determined to challenge the projection of anthropology as a profession that solely focused on the “exotic.” To accomplish the latter, I planned on showing that I, as an African student of anthropology, was acquiring the same tools that Western anthropologists possess but was also keen to direct those tools not to the study of some exotic culture but to the urban and cosmopolitan culture of the Swahili. My doctoral research in anthropology focused on the Swahili popular music genre of *taarab*. Indeed the Swahili had stunned earlier European scholars of East Africa for their lack of the “tribal” identities that were used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to characterize communities that Europeans had encountered during their numerous explorations of Africa. Despite this departure from the focus on the “exotic tribal” culture, however, my field of interest remained quite removed from the Western metropolis where anthropological theories and methodologies were framed.

Over the course of graduate school, I became more and more convinced that my own interactions and understanding of American anthropology provided a great opportunity to change this skewed pattern of anthropological study and apply an ethnographic lens on a Western culture. I became especially interested in the practice of American anthropology, within which I was already embedded. That is, my study of that subject had earlier been set in motion by the practice of journal writing that I had started the first day I left Kenya for America and had continued over the six years I was in graduate school. Inadvertently, I had started an anthropological study of anthropology by keeping records of my observations, interactions, participation, and studies of America. It was these field notes that allowed me to turn an anthropological lens on anthropology and anthropologists in America.

The content of this book constitutes a reversal of the ethnographic gaze that Western intellectuals have used to conventionally produce anthropological knowledge, especially about non-Western peoples. As an African anthropologist writing about American anthropology and anthropologists, I create an ethnography that represents a drastic role reversal especially because Africans and Africa have been among the quintessential objects of Western anthropological inquiry and writing for decades. The book enters into the growing anthropological conversation on representation and self-

reflexivity that ethnographers have come to regard as standard anthropological practice—a participation that I believe will open up some new dialogues in the field by allowing anthropologists to see the role played by subjective positions in shaping knowledge production and consumption. Recognizing and acknowledging the cultural and racial biases that shape anthropological study in general, this book reveals the potential for multiple voices and views in shaping the discipline and consequently decentering it from what Faye Harrison has called the Anglo-French axis.<sup>5</sup>

I organize the book around six chapters that build a case for an ethnography of anthropology in which I am at times the observer and the observed—the participant-observer. Chapter 1 starts with a contextualization of ethnographic studies of the Other in Western anthropology and my own encounter with anthropology as a discipline. I then weave in the story of my arrival in America, framed within flashbacks of my own encounter with Americans and with anthropology while I was in my native country, Kenya. That story explores the impressions that my earlier encounters with Americans left in my mind and explains how they prepared me for anthropological training in America. I then share my methodological approach as I discuss the “crisis” in ethnographic writing that many cultural anthropologists have used to develop the more reflexive anthropology—a crisis into which my story also fits and one that had almost reached fever pitch when I was in graduate school.

In chapter 2, I argue—through a step-by-step account of an ethnographic research project in which I participated along with other graduate students—that it is hard for anthropologists to study their own communities because of inherent power dynamics and asymmetry. By extension, I argue that it is easier for Western anthropologists to work in non-Western cultures because of the asymmetrical power relations that advantage anthropologists over the local people. I show that even though the research process in our group project was a failure, we made a good public presentation of it, giving credence to those critics who have often regarded ethnographies as works of fiction.

In chapter 3, I turn the observation lens onto anthropologists and examine how they seek out and represent their research subject. I provide three different but related frameworks to see “anthropology in action” and to explain how this action is shaped or shapes the ethnographic project itself. I begin at the basic anthropological level with an analysis of an undergraduate anthropology association’s meeting flyer and its hidden racialized imagery. I ask how anthropology students as members of the larger society bring to anthropology certain cultural habits and mental tendencies that “discreetly” creep into their mundane work. I then follow this analysis with a discussion



of anthropology's quintessential romance with alterity by showing how some anthropologists—unable to conduct field research in Africa—never give up on their pursuit of Africans but rather follow them to the American metropolis. I end the chapter with an analysis of the ethnographic moment often favored by anthropologists, wondering how field notes that are twenty and thirty years old can be used to make comments about contemporary societies.

In chapter 4, I reflect on my own culture by using my anthropological training as I returned home to Kenya after two years in America. I seek to see how anthropology prepares one to study or “objectively” observe his or her culture by asking if indeed anthropology does equip one with a new set of lenses to view and critique one's own culture. I explore this issue by recording my reactions and observations of a culture that, because I was raised in it, I took for granted but am now able to look into it with a new set of eyes—a perception that I cultivated through anthropology and the experience of living in another and/or different culture. In this analysis, I focus on my own challenges in adjusting to my own culture, not as a product of a planned ethnographic study but as an individual trying to make sense of home after a few years of dislocation. I discuss the value of objectivity—the heightened sense of observation and analysis that comes from anthropological training and the changed social relations I found at home as well as from my observations of American culture upon my return from Kenya. In doing so, I enter the anthropological discourse on reflexivity and positionality, but I do so from two spatial locations.

In chapter 5, I provide an analysis of anthropological association annual meetings as symbolic sites that allow for an understanding of anthropology as an academic enterprise as well as a mirror of the history and practice of anthropology. By using my observations and my participation at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, the Pan-Africa Anthropological Association, and the Association of Social Anthropology in the UK and the Commonwealth, I argue that just as America has become an economic and political empire, American anthropology has consolidated a lot of power and in the process has peripheralized other anthropologies, forcing them either to respond to its whims and hegemony or to lose their international presence and appeal. The American Anthropological Association (AAA), I argue, is an important cultural phenomenon that begs for an ethnographic analysis.

I conclude the book in chapter 6 by contextualizing my own academic identity within African studies by providing an analysis of some of the efforts that have been made by anthropologists, especially in Europe and North

America, to address the imbalance of power in the epistemology of and their own relationship to the anthropological subject. What is the relationship between anthropology and area studies— for instance, African studies? What lessons can anthropology learn from the experiences of African studies in an era of increased marginalization of area studies and heightened focus on global and transnational processes? I share examples of the kind of discussions going on within the AAA regarding possible strategies to engage with other anthropologies through collaboration and partnerships with organizations, departments, and individuals. As a discipline built on collaboration at the very basic frame of its operation, anthropology seems naturally suited for such collaboration and even charting the way forward in providing models of responding to global changes and area-specific academic practices. The recently launched programs on the World Council of Anthropology Associations (WCAA) network, the World Anthropology Network (WAN), and the Commission on World Anthropologies (CWA) network provide a good basis for this discussion. Using some examples of the practice of anthropology in contemporary Africa, I further argue for a systematic process of training and collaborating across national and continental boundaries in order to build world anthropologies. My hope is that anthropology has entered a new era that challenges the traditional focus on Otherness and alterity.

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## Imagining Anthropology, Encountering America

### Introduction

Anthropologists' accounts of how they navigate their first moments in the field have given us clues to understanding the fieldwork enterprise.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, some anthropologists have often problematized their own subjectivity in the field (e.g., race, gender, class, or ethnicity) and the way it affects their process of data collection and analysis.<sup>2</sup> Following these "revelations" as well as various "crises" in the profession, some critiques of anthropology have come to regard ethnography as a contingent fiction that neatly packages otherwise disparate parts of culture and obscures the power relations and poetics of writing about a culture or cultures.<sup>3</sup> Such a critique may account for the move by some anthropologists to write against culture<sup>4</sup> or to share more about their subjectivity, struggles, and faults of the fieldwork process that produces ethnographies of various communities, peoples, and cultures.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite this subjective and reflexive turn in anthropology, few anthropological accounts tell us about matters such as how anthropologists conduct their lives at home; how they navigate race, class, and gender in their own institutions and communities;<sup>6</sup> or how they see those subjectivities playing out in their own fieldwork. Further, because "revelations" of the politics and poetics of Western ethnographies are predominantly provided by the Western anthropologists themselves by virtue of their preponderance in the discipline, readers of such ethnographic accounts or memoirs get to see only the parts that the authors choose to reveal or share. These "revelations" become "censored excerpts of the ethnographic enterprise" and, as a result, "rather



than leading to the dismantling of canonical anthropologies, most critiques of the discipline have resulted—unwittingly—in the very reinvigoration and worldwide expansion of these standards through elite centers of anthropological production.”<sup>7</sup> In a way, Western anthropologists end up “laughing” at themselves and the foibles of their fieldwork without really undermining their own authority and legitimacy as the default “representers” of the realities of the Other that they study. In other words, these representations of self as vulnerable and inadequate in the conducting of fieldwork do not in any way weaken the products of the fieldwork: the ethnographies.

Through an ethnography of anthropology, I present in this book an aspect of the “hidden/unrevealed” sides of Western anthropology that do not usually show up in the numerous accounts of field experiences that are present in the reflexive ethnographies and memoirs that are now a standard part of anthropological literature. I focus my analysis on anthropologists’ subjectivities as they “practice” anthropology within academic departments, at professional meetings, in classrooms and lecture halls, and through ethnographic writing—all of which constitute the “other side” of anthropological practice that is often absent in scholarly papers, ethnographies, and memoirs. I embark on this project by asking a number of questions, including the following: (1) How different are anthropologists’ lives at home in their own institutional and cultural contexts from their lives abroad while conducting the research that they subsequently share in their memoirs and ethnographies? (2) What part of the anthropologist’s identity revealed in ethnographies is shaped by his or her own culture and how can it provide a window to an understanding of the general anthropological enterprise? (3) How do students of anthropology navigate the challenges of ethnography while undergoing training in their own institutions before they go “out” to the “field” to undertake their major ethnographic projects, and how might these projects inform each other? (4) Are “mini-ethnographies,” conducted at home to fulfill research methods course requirements, symbolic representations of dissertation fieldwork carried out in any discipline? (5) How do anthropologists interact at annual professional meetings, and what does that interaction say about anthropology as a discipline within the larger terrain of academic practice? Is the annual meeting a ritual similar to the Balinese cockfight analyzed by Clifford Geertz, in which symbolic and interpretive analysis can decode meanings and lead to an understanding of an anthropological culture?<sup>8</sup> (6) Are anthropologists, as Melford Spiro has argued, alienated and hostile to their own Western culture so much that they compensate for it by idealizing other cultures through noble savagism?<sup>9</sup>

To answer these and other related questions I analyze American anthropology, anthropologists, and the “culture of anthropology,” from a vantage point of a student of anthropology in training and later as a professional anthropologist teaching in America and sometimes Africa. I trace my own experiences and immersion into the culture of American anthropology mediated through textbooks, ethnographies, feedback, coursework, and professional meetings. My analysis encompasses my life before, during, and after graduate studies in anthropology—from the beginning, with my arrival from Kenya to start graduate studies in cultural anthropology in a large research university in the Midwest, to my subsequent transformation into a professor at a liberal arts college in the Northeast, teaching students in both the United States and sometimes Africa. This “African” ethnography of cultural anthropology continues the reflexive turn in ethnographic writing but also challenges some of the more unquestioned positions found in anthropological culture that have not promoted diverse participation and democratic decision-making procedures in the identity and praxis of the profession.<sup>10</sup>

Africa and Africans have been the subject and object of anthropological study for decades. And because anthropology as a discipline reflects the worldviews and experiences of its practitioners, the image of Africa and Africans has often been shaped by specific Western notions of alterity. I seek to bring an African perspective into understanding anthropology, primarily endeavoring to use the tools of anthropology to decipher the underlying anthropological culture that has so much impacted the ways that Africans are studied and perceived. By using the term *Africans* here, I do not mean to generalize Africanity but rather to appreciate the shared history of Africans as being the object and subject of an anthropological inquiry that seems to be replicated irrespective of the particular African culture being studied. Using the same research tools that Western anthropologists have used to study Africans, I look at anthropology within the subjective positioning of being an African myself—or being what Faye Harrison has termed an “outsider within.”<sup>11</sup> It is this subjectivity, this position of being African, that informs and allows for a specific perspective of an outsider looking into anthropology.

This book critiques dominant tenets of reflexivity, where issues of representation are reduced to anthropologists’ writing style, methodological assumptions, and fieldwork locations—which in turn mask the inherent power differences that make it easier for anthropologists to study other people (“studying down”) than to study themselves (“studying up”), as was envisaged by Laura Nader in her seminal essay on “studying up.”<sup>12</sup> Through an ethnography of life on a university campus, of my interactions with anthropologists

and students in anthropology, of my observations and participation at annual anthropology meetings, of my teaching anthropology courses to students, and of my reading anthropological accounts recorded in academic books and journals, I contextualize my analysis within larger debates in anthropology about race, class, power, epistemology, and the representation of the Other. I seek to continue the ongoing debates in and outside anthropology about representation, ethnography, and anthropological knowledge production that contributes to the process of “liberating the discipline from the constraints of its colonial legacy and post- or neocolonial predicament.”<sup>13</sup> In this regard, I am particularly inspired by anthropologists whose works I had to find for myself in graduate school—such as St. Clair Drake and Faye Harrison<sup>14</sup>—and who have produced important ethnographies as well as important critiques of anthropology from the vantage of alternative epistemologies and standpoints.<sup>15</sup> Unlike most ethnographies, however, this current project focuses on lives of my fellow anthropologists in their own spatial locations and in the first language of the research subject. It is, therefore, an ethnography of anthropologists for anthropologists in ways that many ethnographies are not. It is a reversal of the anthropological gaze that presents anthropology as a cultural critique of both Western culture and the discipline itself (an anthropology of anthropology itself) as well as an effort toward, in Harrison’s words, “reworking’ the field.”<sup>16</sup>

### Anthropology through the Back Door?

My own encounter with anthropology as an entity of intellectual curiosity came through a cultural anthropology textbook I read during my master’s degree study at Kenyatta University in Kenya. My professor and mentor, Chacha Nyaigotti-Chacha, upon considering my desire to pursue a more holistic study of music, concluded that I would benefit from anthropological training and thus lent me a copy of Ember and Ember’s introductory text, *Cultural Anthropology*. I read the work within a week—the fastest I had ever read any book, let alone a textbook. Its content intrigued me; it spoke directly to my own academic yearning for an approach that would incorporate multiple facets of life in an analysis of a cultural product like music. The authors talked about a holistic and contextual approach to culture in which the researcher assumes the position of a learner. Professor Nyaigotti-Chacha had himself started his doctoral studies at Yale in linguistics but was drawn to the anthropology department, to which he transferred with the support of Professor Keith Basso. Unfortunately, Professor Basso left Yale