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A possible role of the ethnography / ethnology / cultural anthropology in the formation of a modern agriculture in Africa – A Futuristic Vision by an „Africa-centric” Hungarian Ethnographer

Eredeti közlés/Original publication:

lecture at the conference: Africa Summit 6, Budapest, 2011. május 17–18.

Elektronikus közlés/Electronic publication:

AHU MAGYAR AFRIKA-TUDÁS TÁR – 000.000.278

Dátum/Date: 2013. április 25. / April 25.

Az elektronikus közlést előkészítette

/The electronic publication prepared by:

B. WALLNER, Erika és/and BIERNACZKY, Szilárd

Hivatkozás erre a dokumentumra/Cite this document

Biernaczky, Szilárd: A possible role of the ethnography / ethnology / cultural anthropology in the formation of a modern agriculture in Africa, *AHU MATT*, 2013, **pp. 1–8. old.**, No. 000.000.278, <http://afrikatudastar.hu>

Eredeti forrás megtalálható/The original source is available:

Az Afrikai Kutatási és Kiadási Program elektronikus archívumában / In the electronic archives of the African Research and Publication Program

Kulcsszavak/Key words

mezőgazdasági projektek Afrikában és a néprajzi ismeret, magyar történelmi sors és Afrika-centrizmus, modern mezőgazdaság és hagyományos termelési formák, állattartás és hagyományos kultúra a dél-szudáni pásztornépeknél, utak a hagyományok felől a modern mezőgazdaság felé, agricultural project

in Africa and the ethnographic knowledge, Hungarian historical fate and Africa-centrism, modern agriculture and traditional forms of production, herding and traditional culture among the South Sudanic pastoral peoples, ways from the tradition the modern agriculture

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AFRICAN - HUNGARIAN UNION
Visegrádi u. 9.
H-1132 Budapest, Hungary

Budapest, 18th May 2011

**A POSSIBLE ROLE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY
/ ETHNOLOGY / CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
IN THE FORMATION OF A MODERN AGRICULTURE
IN AFRICA**

A Futuristic Vision by an „Africa-centric” Hungarian Ethnographer

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I am not an expert on economics, neither I am an engineer, my direct field of research are African folklore studies and African oral history, my education is first of all in ethnography, ethnology and cultural anthropology. (My musical education, and also my diplomas in Hungarian and Italian literatures I hardly use directly nowadays).

It inclined me to speak that professor Endre Kanizsay, who sits here with us now many years ago told me how useful would be to have an expert in ethnology while he was working on a huge – several billion dollar – agricultural project in Sudan. The reason was that such an expert could pay attention in due time for the whole technical staff of the project how and when peoples of traditional religions celebrate their festivities and how such events suck away the labour during the weeks of the harvest...

My actual remarks go back to the once-upon a time comment of my dear colleague and learned friend. But I would focus rather on one of the most actual contemporary principle which is changing the world from Euro-centrism to Afro-centrism. It means that everybody tries to

seek ways like Africans how there could be find good or even best solutions for the Africans themselves. At least to the degree as we, including me as well, Europeans can feel and act like Africans. But let me add to this on the base of the knowledge of the Hungarian history that in the one thousand years we Hungarians could feel many times and long centuries like Africans here in Europe, during the Turkish, Austrian and Soviet domination.

So if I really want to try to put myself on an Africa-centrist standpoint than I have first of all to emphasise the strongest element of my educational background, i.e. cultural anthropology, which as a single discipline learns to us to step over linguistic-cultural boundaries and that we have to do everything to learn the representatives of other cultures, if needed than we must meet them in their homes on the other side of the globe and sit down with them into the dust of their courtyards. And then as the second step I must to try to learn and really understand them based on the deep knowledge of my own culture and mother tongue.

To my actually forming or born-in Africa-centrism it is added that in the past Joseph Bol Chan was studying in Hungary and also Peter Adwok got his degree partly with my help here, so from my Shilluk friends from Sudan I have learned their culture, I collected from them tales and songs and we together translated and transcribed them from Shilluk into English and Hungarian.

Now at the occasion of this great conference I remembered them and I vision their new state.

As far as I know there are vast and very suitable for agriculture territories in their country, at the moment still unused or under limited use. But in the same time that country with up to date agriculture could feed many other African countries as well. Right now I remember the fact known almost only to Hungarian ethnographers, that at the end of the 19th century two Hungarian Jesuit missionaries and from them first of all László Menyhárth, in a couple of years created on 4000 hectares such a flourishing agricultural area in nowadays Mozambique which could feed population of whole regions. Unfortunately because of their early death this very experience in the African past disappeared almost without trace.

In South Sudan (or in North Sudan or elsewhere in Africa) by targeting the imagined modern agriculture one should need not only modernization but also water regulation on large scale. Such works

would create conditions not only for large irrigation schemes but at suitable places one could generate energy and naturally one could provide sufficient and high quality drinking water as well. Part of such schemes could be the new settlements into which designs – already in the phase of planning – the traditional forms, buildings, complexes, material culture could be considered, quite different from the usual European forms.

It is very typical what I have learned from my Shilluk friends: in the past decades because of the lack of water management one could do no reliable censuses as those who were responsible to count people could only approach the local extended families living on places surrounded by water and from a distance they could only ask the head of such families how many they are. He told a number, probably a much smaller number as they were in fact, fearing taxation.

But naturally not a reliable census is the most urgent task right now. Knowing the big mistakes of the past made on the African continent one should create balanced circumstances.

So the agriculturalist but in the same time also herding Shilluk, Nuer, Dinka, (A)Zande and other ethnic groups should keep their herding traditions even during modernization of their agriculture. It is well known from Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard British anthropologist that among the Nuer, Zande, Dinka, Luo, from Diedrich Westermann German but many times in English publishing anthropologist that among the Shilluk, or from Francis Manding Deng Southern Sudanese, Dinka writer and researcher that among the Dinka, even from many other scholars that among the different peoples of the South Sudan: herding is not only part of the economic activity of those people but in the same time it plays generally an important role in their traditional culture as well.

The above mentioned researchers observed that boys still before initiation as herdsmen can run daily even as much as 80–120 kilometres, they choose their favourite cow or ox, and this special tradition is directly linked with their love life, love poetry and marriage.

Beside this it would be very important to have in mind the above mentioned example of the Hungarian Jesuit, László Menyhárth, to create such a structure of crops during the modernization of agriculture which would be balanced between staples produced for the local or African markets and of those secondary crops for overseas

exports and also of those crops used by the industries. Naturally it could get a separate chapter how to create under such a new structure of agriculture a certain frame for production and trade of food taking into consideration the traditions.

Such a complex and futuristic plan could have the name „The White Nile Project”. Besides the economic, technological, agrarian and other aspects I would suggest that in the preparational works there should be also aspects of ethnography, ethnology and cultural anthropology considered.

As the first step one should collect and take together the very often scattered literature applying to the peoples of South Sudan, written mostly in English and German, to a lesser degree in French.

We also should have take in consideration that in the past decades because of the well known historical events the related research activities became scarce.

As the second step one should do ethnographic surveys in country-wide extents to learn how much the traditional family values, social, cultural momentums like the extended family, poligamy, clanic social system, the treatment of twin births, rituals and customs related to the births, initiation, love, marriage, labour, deaths, rituals and feasts of the year or the survival of the Shilluk (or other traditional) kingdom, etc, etc, are still valid.

As the third step one should get relatively accurate results concerning the social transformation and modernization reaching all the peoples of the world including South Sudan in the last 150, but especially in the last 60–80 years in the fields of the traditional society, economy and culture. And of course we would include and understand all change generating momentums from Christian or Moslem proselytization to the mechanization, from the gradual spread of the European style schooling to the appearance of the latest products of the modern world industry.

After the third, especially important step *the fourth step* could outline under the consideration of the actual social circumstances, first of all what kind of modern land distribution would be adequate to form modern types of settlements under consideration of the existence of the extended families (possibly of polygamy), a kind of modern kraals, a sewage system, the required industrial and agricultural units (agricultural machine parks, local water management at supply units),

communal services, and naturally a high level canal system required by the mentioned elements, etc.

As a summation I would like to tell you that the questions raised by me are related directly to South Sudan where I had personal ties from Budapest. However it is obvious that any African country, any African people rich in arable lands and in water the „White Water Project” could work. So in North Sudan, known by me much less, most probably such a scheme and project could work as here just like in South Sudan waste territories and waste volumes of water are at disposal for a so called „Blue Nile Project”. Especially that the recent researches have shown how the rural peoples of this huge area are linguistically divided. Even among Arabic speakers are many local dialects, there are different cultures, traditions to organize local communities. It means that even in this case the multiple linguistic-cultural patterns of Africa are at work.

We should add to this a novelty, that in the planning process the knowledge of the traditional world, it means, the positive participation of an expert of ethnography is absolutely necessary. It is widely known and recognized – that the cultural anthropologists, representing solely they mother countries as former colonial powers – in some cases played a politically motivated, internationally badly received role, which could be partly counterbalanced by such a future activity, at least from the scientific point of view. And of course things could develop much better if local but in the whole world known scholars like the by his ethnicity Dinka Francis Manding Deng would participate right at the beginning of such projects.

For the accomplishment of the White Nile/Blue Nile or of a White Water Project there would be available quite a number of Hungarian experts in agriculture, industry and trade and without doubt there would be willing cooperation from the side of the significant Hungarian scientific community in the field of ethnography, and of the developing discipline of cultural anthropology.

My last remark: At the third and very well attended Budapest–Gödöllő conference *Tradition and Modernization in Africa Today* held in 1989 on the last day’s plenary session I held a lecture with the title: *African Utopia – Anno 2089*. The main goal of this contribution was to expose the idea to redefine or if necessary to redraw the African borders from the colonial past in a federal system, taking into consideration the linguistic-cultural groups. This very idea or rather

geopolitical consideration was seldom effectuated, worldwide outside of Africa to a certain degree only in the post-Soviet region and in the unified Europe. But in Africa almost nothing happened despite the wars. We only can hope that somewhen in the foreseeable future thanks to the economic recovery will come the time when people will not suffer from the lack of prosperity and even the smallest cultures will get finally the due attention and respect what they deserve.

(Budapest, 18th May 2011)