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Publication date

2012

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Proceedings of the ECICC-conference Guyana 2001. - Vol. 1: Multiplex cultures and citizenships: multiple perspectives on language, literature, education and society in the ABC-Islands and beyond

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Geschiere, P. (2012). The return of culture: anthropology's temptations. In N. Faraclas, R. Severing, C. Weijer, & E. Echteld (Eds.), *Proceedings of the ECICC-conference Guyana 2001. - Vol. 1: Multiplex cultures and citizenships: multiple perspectives on language, literature, education and society in the ABC-Islands and beyond* (pp. 17-27). Fundashon pa Planifikashon di Idioma (FPI) / University of the Netherlands Antilles (UNA).

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THE RETURN OF CULTURE – ANTHROPOLOGY'S TEMPTATIONS¹

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An important turning point in African studies in the 1980's was the emergence of culture as a central concern in fields where it had been quite marginal until then. Development experts began to emphasize culture as crucial to any intervention or project. Economists got into the habit of invoking "culture" as a final explanation, turning it into some sort of black box that had to explain why African societies continued to falsify their neat models of how development should be realized.

For anthropologists this new attention to culture was somewhat confusing. It had always been a central notion in our discipline, especially in US anthropology. So the sudden popularity of the notion in the development industry and elsewhere opened up promising perspectives. However, this came at the very time when leading anthropologists – again, especially in the US – began to warn us of the dangers of then current notions of culture, insisting that anthropology had to liberate itself from its heritage, notably from this central concept. James Clifford (1988), for instance, attacked the essentialist tenor of classical anthropology's take on culture. In his view this notion inspired a search for an authentic core that not only risked to isolate the discipline from modern changes, but also turned culture into some sort of timeless mould in which people seemed to be imprisoned. Similarly Arjun Appadurai (1996) pleaded for a complete ban on the term culture – in any case as a noun – since it could so easily inspire a "culturalist" approach in which cultural difference seemed to be a given. Appadurai warned, moreover, how dangerous such a view on culture could be in the present-day world where globalization processes seemed to be closely intertwined with ever fiercer eruptions of communal violence.²

In associated disciplines of the social sciences and beyond, the notion of "culture" had not attained such rigid connotations as it had in some branches of classical anthropology. One of the great merits of, for instance, Mineke Schipper's work on

¹ This text is a revised version of a contribution to a special issue of *Thamrys* (11, 2003), 'Africa and Its Significant Others,' in honor of Mineke Schipper, Amsterdam: Rodopi, p.85-95.

² See also Appadurai's 1999 article on ethnic killing as the ultimate form of "identification" (in the sense of fixing somebody's identity).

oral literature and proverbs is that she consistently highlighted the dynamic nature of culture and its inherent tensions (see Schipper, 1977 and in press). Recently, anthropologists have tried as well to develop more fluid, open models of culture under the influence of insights from literature studies and the upsurge of "cultural studies" in general. However, such a search for more open interpretations of this central notion can easily disappoint our colleagues from development studies who, with their new interest in culture, expect us to deliver a neatly packaged concept in a clear-cut format, that should be above all easily applicable across a wide range of societies. The question is how anthropologists can be as successful in propagating their new, more fluid concept of culture as their ancestors were in propagating their much more monolithic and static version?

Anthropologists and the myth of African authenticity

18 It was especially in the 1980's that the anthropological notion of culture came under attack within the discipline itself. A leading figure in this debate – that started in the US, but soon spread to Europe as well³ – was James Clifford, a specialist in literature studies who during his career became ever more involved in the field of anthropology. His target was the anthropological view of culture as a system, neatly bounded in space: each society with its own culture and each culture with its own essence. A very influential exponent of this view was Ruth Benedict, who in her classic *Patterns of Culture* (1953) so neatly opposed the Pueblo Indians with their "Appolinian culture" to the Plains Indians with their "Dyonisian culture". Benedict opened her second chapter with a tragic quote from an old chief of the "Digger" Indians ("...as the Californians call them..."):

"In the beginning God gave to every people a cup, a cup of clay, and from this cup drank their life.....They all dipped it in the water.... but their cups were different. Our cup is broken now. It has passed away"
(Benedict: 19).

Such an evocative statement would do very well in one of Mineke Schipper's rich collections of proverbs or oral literature texts. Yet, in her work it would always be related to inherent tensions – between genders or on other contested ground – and, thus to the dynamic aspects of a culture. This suggests also that if "cup" stands for culture in the quotation above, it is not that easily broken. In many contexts so-called "traditional" patterns show a surprising resilience and creativity in interaction with modern changes.

Clifford's critique of the classical notion of culture follows similar lines. He sees its main danger as being that it encourages anthropologists to look for an authentic core

³ See, for instance, Baumann, 1996 and Van Binsbergen, 1992; see also Gschiere, 1989.

that would constitute the essence of an "other" culture.⁴ Modern transformations of such cultural patterns have therefore often been disregarded by anthropologists in their search for authenticity. Clifford emphasizes that such an outlook risks making the discipline blind or even averse to the study of cultural dynamics and innovations. His main target is the famous French proponent of "structural anthropology", Claude Lévi-Strauss with his nostalgic view on the dying authenticity of "other cultures". To Lévi-Strauss, the *tropiques* are so *tristes* because all the rich cultural variation of, for instance indigenous societies in Brasil, will unavoidably be bulldozed out of existence by one uniform world culture with Coca-Cola and McDonald's as its main exponents.⁵ To Clifford, such a pessimistic view means that anthropologists allow themselves to be blinkered: they risk ignoring the often surprising cultural variation and creativity that continues to mark modern developments. Or, as Appadurai (1996) puts it: "a cultural perspective on recent processes of globalization shows that these are only not only marked by increasing homogenization (it is true that coca cola and blue jeans have conquered the world), but at the same time by continuing or even renewed cultural heterogeneity." To give an example from close by: Dutch society around the turn of the century has certainly not become more culturally homogeneous than, say, fifty years ago. On the contrary, people are much more preoccupied by cultural difference. Or, as Clifford puts it: the "exotic" is around the corner; one does not have to travel to the Pacific or to Africa to find it anymore.

Clifford, therefore, opposes to Lévi-Strauss' "essentialist" notion of culture, a "Caribbean" culture concept inspired by Aimé Césaire. In the Caribbean world no culture can claim historical authenticity. On the contrary, each cultural history is marked by constant mixing, hybridization and emergence of new forms. For anthropology, the great challenge is therefore to study culture as constantly "emergent", as a continuous process of hybridization from which new forms are born. Against the pessimistic view of the inevitable modern *telos* of one, homogeneous world culture, Clifford emphasizes that there are different pathways through the modern world. However, anthropologists can only hope to grasp these often surprising – or even shocking – cultural dynamics, if they relinquish their closed concept of culture and opt for a more open notion of "culture," not as a fixed and closed system (a "cup of clay" that "breaks" when it has to change); but rather as a more or less loose set of parameters and principles, subject to constant hybridization and renewal. One of the obvious criticisms of Clifford's challenging hypothesis is, of course, that it was not that new. And it is true that the anthropological interest in contact and change goes back to Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the founders of the discipline at the beginning of the 20th century. In the study of culture in Africa as well, one can mention a long list of venerable anthropological ancestors whose work fit into this

⁴ Cf. the title of John Beattie's introductory book with initiated generations of students to anthropology: *Other cultures* (1966).

⁵ Cf. the title of Lévy-Strauss' influential travel book *Tristes tropiques* (1955).

tradition. Yet, it is clear also that in this line of thought change was supposed to come from outside the society under study. Until far into the 1960's, internal social order and social control re-affirming the status quo remained central themes of structural-functional anthropological theory, as the dominant paradigm in the discipline. This was one of the reasons why anthropologists had difficulty in distancing themselves from "the modern traditional oppositions which still remain so powerful in social sciences in general, despite decades of fierce criticism of this and other simplistic dichotomies that have defined the field. In principle, the evolutionist and unilinear implications of this binarism do not mesh well with the keen interest that many if not most anthropologists have always maintained in cultural variety and relativism. Yet the emphasis in functionalist anthropology on the social and cultural coherence of rural society fit very well with the image of "the" African village as "traditional", more or less outside of history, and most of all "resistant" to change, especially to "modern" change.⁶

20 The success of this older, anthropological vision is apparent from the fact that it continues to emerge in the work of authors in very different fields, notably in development studies and economics. A good example in the 1980's and 1990's was the success of Göran Hyden's vision of the resilience in Africa of the "economy of affection" that would still provide a basic level of social security for the peasantry, and even for the urban elite in the face of the uncertainties of the modern sector. Hyden's views – launched with gusto in his 1980 book – attracted a lot of attention in the circles of development experts, including those in the Dutch Ministry of Development Co-operation.

One of the reasons was that Hyden's work seemed to provide an explanation for the failure of so many development initiatives on the African continent. In his view, African peasants are still "uncaptured" by the global market economy because in the face of very unfavourable market conditions or strong pressure from the state, they still have an "exit option" into the "economy of affection" – that is, into the subsistence economy of the village that is still supposed to provide basic social security. Even urbanites set great store in maintaining their contacts with the village because they feel that it provides, in contrast to the modern sector, at least some social security. Of course, this bold statement raised severe criticism – the main one being that in many parts of the continent Hyden's vision of the continuing viability of subsistence agriculture would be far too optimistic. However, he did realize that "the economy of affection" was often under increasing strain. Yet, his basic idea is sound. At the time, in many parts of Africa the rural population was still not completely dependent on the market; they could still reproduce at least part of their subsistence economy with their own means; and this gave them – in contrast to populations in

⁶ See for a more detailed overview Geschiere, 1989 and 1997.

other parts of the world – at least some scope for pursuing their own interests in face of interventions from outside (whether by development experts or by civil servants). Moreover, the vision – even among urban elites – of the village as the ultimate provider of social security made (and still makes) it possible, as Hyden put it, that “the norms of the economy of affection” [such as solidarity between kinsfolk] penetrate into the functioning of modern institutions [the State] – or to put it in more concrete terms: a senior civil servant can hardly refuse to give a job to his cousin from the village, if he (the civil servant) sees the village as the community whose resources and good will he may ultimately have to fall back upon.

Sound as the basic idea may be, there are serious problems with Hyden’s vision of the sphere that should in the last resort provide some sense of social security: the so-called “economy of affection”. And here we return to the problems that arise from the classical anthropological notion of “culture.” Hyden’s vision of the “economy of affection” seems to be heavily influenced by the classical anthropological image of the African village as being generally well ordered and resistant to change. In this view, although the African village may experience temporary crises, after such crises are resolved the socio-cultural order is re-instated.⁷ Hyden’s “economy of affection” seems to know no internal contradictions and, therefore, no dynamics. It is a timeless safety net, that can only be affected by changes from outside.

It is clear that such a monolithic image is attractive to our colleagues from more policy-oriented disciplines – development studies, development economics – when they venture to integrate “culture” into their interpretations and models. No wonder that Hyden was so popular, at least for some time, in the fashion-conscious circuits of development co-operation. Precisely because of its supposed predictability, Hyden’s “economy of affection” could be included in generalizing – often statistical and model-minded – approaches. It is clear also that this image had its dangers: precisely because it is so undifferentiated, the model of the “economy of affection” as an informal safety net could easily serve as some sort of excuse for the notorious “Structural Adjustment” dictates by the IMF and the World Bank that imposed so much hardship on African populations.

If we take a less simplistic approach, it becomes clear that a more differentiated view of the “economy of affection” as a dynamic and hybrid configuration, constantly reshaped by creative initiatives “from below” is no doubt more enlightening, if one wants to understand the kaleidoscopic array of possibilities and opportunities that it contains. But how will an anthropologist, who wants to study culture not as a system but rather as something “emergent” and in constant “hybridization”, deal with economists and development experts when the latter ask for his/her advice in matters of “culture”?

⁷ Max Gluckman (1954) called this “repetitive change” over against the “cumulative” change that would characterize, for instance, Western societies.

An example: "witchcraft" and change.⁸

The popular obsession, in many parts of the African continent, with a supposed proliferation of old and new forms of occult aggression – the idea that "witchcraft is running wild" – can offer ambiguous, but therefore all the more interesting examples of the dilemma described above, which sets the advantages of using more open notions of culture against the problems that these more open notions bring with them. "Witchcraft" is of particular interest here, since it is often viewed as one of the most "traditional" aspects of local societies expressing a fierce resistance to change. For the classical anthropologists it was a most effective form of social control that mainly served to re-affirm the social order: the fear of being accused (or attacked) served to bring people to heel. Two brief examples may show that such a static view is difficult to maintain in view of the impressive resilience and creativity of witchcraft representations and practices, in interaction with "modern" changes.

My first example concerns the spectacular story of the banana-boom and a successful invention by Obasi-Njom, a particularly powerful *juju* among the Bakweri in Southwest Cameroon – so vividly retold by the British anthropologist Edwin Ardener (1970).

"In the 1950's the introduction of Obasi Njom's "medicine" among the Bakweri achieved a major breakthrough: it abruptly destroyed the witchcraft ban on individual enrichment. Until then, the Bakweri were often depicted as possessed by a strange apathy, and even as a group that soon might be extinct. This was all the more tragic as they live in a very fertile area, on the slopes of a huge volcano, Mt. Cameroon that rises up steeply from the coast. However, the fertility of these volcanic soils proved to be a mixed blessing. In the 1890's, the Germans, the first colonizers of Cameroon, quickly expropriated these rich lands. Within a few years, German firms created a huge plantation complex here. Most of the Bakweri refused to work on the new plantations. They withdrew to poorer areas, higher up on the mountain. In their place, immigrants from other parts of the colony (and also from neighbouring Nigeria) profited from the new opportunities to earn money in the unfolding colonial economy.

The Bakweri themselves invariably blamed their lack of initiative on their fear for *nyongo* witchcraft. *Nyongo* witches were believed to transform their victims into some sort of zombies (*vekongi*) who had to work for them. Such an imaginary made anybody who came into wealth suspect: his new – and therefore quite enigmatic – riches could only

⁸ I realize that the use of the term "witchcraft" has unfortunate implications: it offers a problematic translation of local notions that have often a much broader array of meanings. However, this Western term – like parallel terms such as sorcery or magic – has now been appropriated on such a scale by people throughout the continent that it is even more problematic to refuse to use them (see further Geschiere, 1997).

come from the zombie labour and, therefore, he had to be a *nyongo* witch. Such fears were condensed in the Bakweri abhorrence of the new type of houses with tinned roofs, which in many parts of West Africa were for long the main new status symbol. Among the Bakweri, however, such a house was considered to be the mark of a *nyongo* witch. People hardly dared to sleep in such a house for then one could stumble upon the zombies.

At first sight, these Bakweri representations seem to fit in very well with the current image of "witchcraft" as a "traditional" barrier to development. What is confusing, though, is that the Bakweri themselves insist that this *nyongo* witchcraft is a novel thing to them. Their ancestors did not know it. In olden days witches were supposed to "eat" their victims (especially their own kin). This *nyongo* trick to turn victims into labouring zombies was only introduced more recently, and it came from the neighbouring Douala. This group lives around the present-day city of the same name, now Cameroon's economic capital and since the 16th century the main gateway for the European trade along this part of the coast. For the Bakweri themselves *nyongo* was anything but "traditional"; on the contrary, it was a by-product of the introduction of new forms of enrichment due to the impact of the new Atlantic trade.⁹

However, more abrupt changes were to follow. In the 1950's, a new opportunity opened up for the Bakweri to participate in the Atlantic trade. Due to better transport techniques, it became possible to cultivate sweet bananas for the European market. Many Bakweri farmers reacted favorably to this new opportunity. A true "banana-boom" followed so that suddenly ever larger sums of money circulated in Bakweri land. However, this sudden enrichment made also that villages threatened to explode because of all the *nyongo* accusations. In the face of such increasing tensions, the elders – under direct pressure of the young men – decided to send a delegation to the Banyangi, 150 miles into the interior, to go and fetch Obasi Njom, because this *juju* should be able to handle the whole thing. At first the Banyangi refused. They wanted more money. But finally when more money was raised, they accepted to come. In the 1980's, my own informants still remembered their spectacular entry: a fierce procession of wild dancers in long, black robes; in their midst a dancer in trance with a big crocodile mask: he was possessed by Obasi Njom."

⁹ Indeed, the Douala themselves often relate *nyongo* (in their language more often called *ekong*) to the Whites and the slave trade (see De Rosny, 1981 and Geschiere, 1997).

Ardener describes the subsequent events in almost lyrical terms. Obasi Njom "flushed" out *nyongo* witches all over the place; he forced them to confess and to hand in their medicine; thus their witchcraft was neutralized. At the same time a true building rage took off. Everywhere in the villages "modern" houses – of course, with tinny roofs – were built. Ardener often had trouble hearing what his informants were saying because of all the hammering and sawing. Within a few weeks, Obasi Njom had broken through the fear of *nyongo* and the distrust of individual accumulation of wealth. But it was only because of this "powerful *juju*" that the Bakweri were able to profit individually from the banana-boom and access new opportunities for participating in the globalized dream of "development." This state of affairs prevailed until the World Trade Organization forced factory farmed bananas grown under near slave conditions on the US United Fruit company's Latin American plantations onto the European market, which effectively destroyed small-holder banana production for the global market in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. The "*juju*" of neo-liberal orthodoxy eventually triumphs over the *juju* of Obasi Njom!

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Of interest in this story is the striking ambivalence of the witchcraft discourse in interaction with modern changes: it produces, on the one hand, the new image of *nyongo* that still seems to confirm the old idea of witchcraft as some sort of "traditional" break on development and change. However, due to the initiative to go and fetch Obasi Njom – whose *juju* powers are so powerful because he can tap the same kind of occult forces – the same discourse was quite abruptly turned around and produced some sort of support to those who wanted to take advantage of the new opportunities for enrichment. Clearly, it is very difficult to try and cast such an ambivalent discourse into a model of culture as a more or less closed and static system. To understand how ideas related to witchcraft among the Bakweri can so easily be harmonized with globalized economic and cultural phenomena – and the same seems to apply in many other parts of Africa – Clifford's view of culture as something "emerging" due to constant hybridization is much more promising.

It is clear that a wide variety of similar hybrid appropriations are also possible. For instance, to me the Bakweri *nyongo* stories were particularly striking since a few years earlier I had heard similar stories among the Maka, 500 miles to the East, in a very different part of Cameroon. In 1971, when I started my field-work in the area, my local consultants told me that only a few years ago in that area as well hardly anybody dared to sleep in a "modern" house (again, "modern" means here, with a tinny roof), because they were certain that such houses were optimal venues for attack by witches. The first year I spent in a Maka village, people, indeed, often made bantering remarks about richer villagers who had slept for years and years in a miserable kitchen, near their wife's fire because they were so afraid of staying in the new house they had

built. However, in 1971, my informants began brushing aside such "silly" ideas. Asked how they had overcome their fears, they would reply that they had simply realized that all this was nonsense. Yet, on closer inspection things proved to be more complicated, as always in witchcraft affairs. One of the most striking developments was that the richer villagers who had built such houses had become associated in all sorts of ways with the dark forces of the *djambe* (a notion that is now always translated as *sorcellerie*). If they were not so sure of their new found powerful defences in the hidden *djambe* world, would they ever have dared to defy the jealousy of their fellow-villagers?

The relation between witchcraft and enrichment is as ambiguous in the case of the Maka as among the Bakweri. But there are clear differences: the Maka did not need an Obasi Njom to break the witchcraft ban on enrichment – possibly because their conceptions of the *djambe* (witchcraft) always emphasized more strongly its double impact: as a levelling force (the *djambe* as related to jealousy, and thus a weapon of the poor against the rich); but also as, at least potentially, a force of accumulation that can protect and even reinforce the dominance of the rich and the powerful. In the Maka case as well, the dynamics of culture in interaction with modern changes seems to be highly unpredictable and full of surprises. Moreover, both examples highlight how directly such cultural dynamics, and their "emergent" qualities, to borrow Clifford's terms, can affect the scope for development interventions – in this case, efforts to make local farmers produce more for the market. Clearly this creative potential of local imaginaries makes it all the more important for development studies to include "culture" into their analysis. However, the problem remains that culture is a highly volatile concept, precisely if one opts for a more open (that is, less systemic) view in order to do justice to the kind of cultural dynamics that continue to mark developments in post-colonial Africa.

Up to the last decades of the past century, anthropology's obsession with being "scientific" – to emulate the natural sciences, which seems to mean working with fixed and well-defined notions, and trying to arrive at regularities – stimulated all sorts of efforts to reduce "culture" to some sort of predictable model. Fortunately enough, over the last two decades the discipline has been more and more influenced by literature studies. Again, Mineke Schipper's way of considering culture to be a creation – rather than a fixed form – can serve as a good example for anthropologists who try to attain a more dynamic and fluid vision of what culture might be. Indeed, in general the facts that emerge from Africa oblige us to opt for a more open view. Post-colonial Africa may have been in crisis for decades now, but it remains a continent marked by a staggering (and sometimes shocking) riches of cultural variation and creativity. It is clear that an "essentialist" concept of culture – as a system with its

authentic core; as a "cup of clay" than can be "broken" – will hardly do in such circumstances.

The question remains as to how we deal then with the increasing pressure from more policy-oriented colleagues (from development studies or even from economics) to offer them reliable and applicable data on how a given "culture" might react to development-oriented interventions or other forms of social engineering. Our nuanced and non-totalizing answer may be clear from the above discussion – even though it may make us less popular with these colleagues. Their renewed interest in culture is, in principle, highly laudable, and should be stimulated as much as possible. Yet it is all the more important that they learn to see it as highly dynamic and full of creativity – that is, difficult to reduce to fixed models or static quantification.

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