

Review

History of ethnography: Straitening the records

Chidi Ugwu

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of the Social Sciences University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

Received 22 May, 2016; Accepted 28 July, 2016

Scholars who hold onto the view that Morgan pioneered formal ethnography and Malinowski systematized participant observation seem to be glossing over significant information on the history of ethnography. It, obviously, does not hold to say that all the efforts before Morgan were amateurish and unsystematized, and therefore brand them pre-ethnology – for there is on record at least one pre-Morgan scholar, Joseph François Lafitau, who fulfilled our present definition of ethnography more than Morgan managed to do later. Further, some give Branislow Malinowski the credit for the systematization of participant observation (the cardinal method in ethnographic fieldwork) for his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands from 1914 to 1918. Some records show, however, that Frank Cushing – who had finished his own fieldwork about 30 years before Malinowski's (1879 to 1884) – had done the things for which some scholars still regard Malinowski as the pioneer of scholarly participant observation. Following a critical re-reading of typical writings on the history of ethnography, the study shows that all the materials in which the history of the systematization of ethnography begins with Morgan, and in which the systematization of participant observation begins with Malinowski, need to be reviewed.

Key words: Branislow Malinowski, formalized ethnography, Frank Hamilton Cushing, Joseph François Lafitau, Lewis Henry Morgan, pioneer participant observer.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of ethnography, some scholars have attempted a chronological gradation in which all such efforts to report about human groups prior to Lewis Henry Morgan (1818 to 1881) are classified as 'pre-ethnology' (Okpoko and Ezeh, 2005 to 2011). The idea is that all that were done before Morgan were amateurish because they lacked the systematized rigor of what was later, in 1834, to become known as ethnography, from the earlier term, anthropography (Cunningham, 1997).

Lots of anthropology literature present Morgan as pioneering formal ethnography with his study of some

Native American groups especially the Iroquois (Kottak, 2008). Branislaw Malinowski (1922 to 1942) is also popular – especially in most of the English-speaking world whose education has been heavily influenced by the British legacy – as ground-breaking in formal ethnography for being the first to undertake participant observation in a manner that fulfilled the most advanced scientific requirements (Metcalf, 2004). This study is targeted at showing that some of the accounts of the history of ethnography especially those that present Morgan and Malinowski, in one way or another, as path-

E-mail: chidi.ugwu@unn.edu.ng.

Authors agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

breaking, are, in one way or another, insupportable. To do this, the study employs a critical re-reading and comparative analysis of typical materials available on the history of ethnography as a methodological process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnography is a method of social research in which the researcher immerses themselves in the subjects' social setting to perceive things as they really are in order to recount and interpret their observations in a manner that will help their readers understand what it is like to be a part of the setting studied (Bernard, 2006). Ethnography evolved in the landscape of, mostly, non-Western, traditional societies as Western scholars sought ways to more effectively investigate diverse 'other' non-Western peoples. The ethnographic method has been evolving, though, and since the end of colonial rule across many societies, it became common to encounter researchers who use it in studies that are not necessarily targeted at a total social system. For this, a definition that holds it as an exploration of any particular social issue from the perspective of the people concerned (Lavenda and Schultz, 2010) might well capture what ethnography entails today.

Herodotus (484 BCE to 425 BCE) is recorded to have written the first ethnography in anything like the present sense. Many early travelers, traders, missionaries, and government officials conducted informal inquiries among peoples and written about their experiences as well. All such writings before Morgan have been designated 'pre-ethnology', implying that they were non-formal and amateurish (Okpoko and Ezech, 2005 to 2011). That typology is guided by the claim that the pre-ethnologists did not fulfill the advanced rigors of systematic research. Malinowski's work is, in that breath, often presented as path-breaking for "taking ethnography to new heights" with his participant observation among the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New-Guinea (Sanjek, 1996). It can be seen, then, that the accepted definitions of ethnography will not permit a justification of the sorts of pioneering claims made for Morgan and Malinowski in any defensible way.

A comparative look

Lafitau vis-à-vis Morgan

It has been the tradition among many anthropologists to begin the discourse on the development of formal ethnography from the nineteenth century American lawyer, Lewis Henry Morgan (1818 to 1881). Morgan used some of the techniques associated with ethnography today to investigate the kinship systems of

some Native American groups with the aim of comparing it with those of the European-Americans. His *The League of Ho-de-no-sau-nee or Iroquois*, resulted from that study (Seupin and DeCorse, 2008). But it has to be noted that Morgan was not the first to undertake an ethnographic study (in the formal, systematized sense of it) because Joseph François Lafitau is reported to have already done so, incidentally among the Iroquois, even in a more thoroughgoing fashion than Morgan managed to do about one and a half centuries later (Lafitau, 1724, 2012).

Lafitau was a French polyglot and Jesuit missionary who trained in theology, humanities and rhetoric but is best known for his writings on the Iroquois and his comparative anthropology (Fenton, 2003). At age 31, Lafitau requested to be sent on a mission to Canada. He spent nearly six years (1712 to 1717) among the Iroquois at Kahnawake (which the French had rechristened Sault-Saint-Louis). There, he familiarized himself with Iroquois language and culture. Lafitau's two-volume work, *Moeurs des sauvages Américains, comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps (Customs of the American Indians compared with the customs of primitive times)*, resulting from his Iroquois studies, was published in 1724. In it, he theorized on the importance of age grading and the pulse of Iroquois politics in the town council. He also theorized on the Iroquois rules of residence, social organization, kinship and exogamy, and analyzed the importance of women in Iroquois society (Fenton, 2003).

Lafitau began to systematize a form of ethnology that had also manifested in the works of earlier scholars such as Andre Thevet (1502 to 1520) and Marc Lescarbot (1570 to 1642) (Moore and Fenton, 1969). These early French writers had done some comparison of societies, although hugely relying on second-hand sources from merchants and missionaries; and, by referring to 'savage cultures' as being in early stages of development (Fenton, 2003), they had started advancing evolutionary views. But Lafitau departed from all the grand comparatists in his stress on the importance of describing cultures in terms of themselves (thereby making an early case for relativism). In his view "the 'savages' of the New World were men, the Iroquois were people in their own right not to be compared with the Europeans" (Moore and Fenton, 1974, 1750).

In what has turned out to be one of the major guiding principles of participant observation today, Lafitau had pointed out that customs could only be understood in the original language of those who practised them; and for this, he had learnt the Iroquois language (Fenton, 2003). Having earlier theorized on Iroquois kinship rules, he had pointed out the difference between Iroquois classificatory system of kinship nomenclature from the French, which was descriptive (although he is not recorded to have particularly used "classificatory" and "descriptive"), more than a century before Morgan (who may not have read

Lafitau's Iroquois work that was only translated to English in 1974 (Moore and Fenton, 1969) took it up.

Largely ignored by the Enlightenment scholars, Lafitau's reputation was to be rehabilitated in the last century especially by French scholars. In late 1930s, Arnold Van Gennep critically appraised Lafitau and his period, applauding his systematic sense and pointing to him as the first of the modern ethnographers for his work on the Iroquois (Fenton, 2003). Similarly, Gilbert Chinard (1913, cited in Moore and Fenton 1969) comments on Lafitau's use of the comparative method in the field of anthropology. Cunningham (1997) refers to Lafitau's description of the Iroquois as the "first modern field ethnography".

It is interesting that Lafitau, who preceded Morgan by more than a century, was not attended with much of the limitations associated with the latter. Morgan did not live among the Iroquois in an extensive way an ethnographer who wanted to report the group from their point of view would; Lafitau did. Morgan did not learn Iroquois language; Lafitau did. Morgan collected much of his data second-hand; Lafitau did all first-hand.

Morgan had relied on a native Iroquois interpreter, Ely Parker. Although collecting some of the data himself, he also relied heavily on secondary sources— such as information from missionaries and state bureaucrats – for not just the publication mentioned above but for his other later works (Bernard, 2006; Ezeh, 2010). Morgan worked hard as one of the pioneer anthropologists, but he did not go far enough in terms of building on the methods charted by earlier ethnographers such as Lafitau. Later anthropologists however showed that they realised the need to do so. What Lafitau and Morgan had in common, in any case, is that none formally trained as an ethnographer; but they would not have, since anthropology was not yet established as a full-fledged methodology taught course in their times.

Cushing vis-à-vis Malinowski

Lafitau's form of ethnography, later to be known as participant observation, continued to advance from the efforts of an American, Frank Hamilton Cushing. Cushing, whom Cunningham (1997) identified as "the first participant-observer in folklore and anthropology", lived in a Zuñi pueblo from 1879 to 1884 to study that American Indian group of western New Mexico. It is noted that Cushing went into the locus of his study with the intention to study the group. As Lindsay (1910) records it, Lafitau had also requested his superiors to post him to Sault-Saint-Louis (originally Kahnawake), the land of the Iroquois near Quebec, having got interested in that group from what he read of them in reports of other travelers, missionaries and merchants. So, it follows to also say

that scholarly interest in the Iroquois was Lafitau's primary motivation for going to live among them.

Cushing published the results of his research, *Zuñi Fetishes*, in 1883 (Green, 1978). Cunningham (1997) notes that that publication saw Cushing bringing in three innovations to ethnography:

1. Learning the language of the host society
2. Living among them and
3. Besides working with resident informants, he also made first-hand observation of everyday life in the society for a period of five years.

Meanwhile, Lafitau is recorded to have done all these among the Iroquois for six years. It could only be argued that Cushing's ethnography might have been deeper in terms of level of integration. Since Lafitau lived among the Iroquois as a Christian missionary, it could be said (although it does not necessarily follow) that he might not have entered indigenous social networks as Cushing would have managed to. Indeed, so deeply did Cushing enter the Zuñi social networks that he got initiated into one of their warrior cults (Green et al., 1990; Metcalf, 2005). His colleagues from the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC were initially shocked that he could do such a thing. It was only later that the director of the Museum saw the value of Cushing's work and became his sponsor (Barnard, 2004). The English churchman, George Basden, was later to take after Cushing in terms of gaining initiation into a religious cult among the Igbo of the Anambra axis in southeast Nigeria where he did an ethnographic study in the early twentieth century (Basden 1983). In the 1990s, John McCall, an American anthropologist, was also to achieve such initiation into a masquerade secret cult among the Ohafia, another Igbo subgroup (McCall, 2000).

Some writers hold that Malinowski took the ethnographic technique of participant observation to new heights through his study of the Trobriand Islanders. He had changed from his original discipline, physics, to anthropology in 1910 and began his fieldwork for a PhD in anthropology among the Trobrianders of Papua New Guinea, east of New Guinea, at the onset of WWI (Eriksen, 2004). According to Sanjek (1996), Malinowski liked to imply that his discoveries resulted from unique circumstances, so increasing his own originality. At the outbreak of WWI, Malinowski was in Australia to attend a conference with his supervisor, C. G. Seligman. Being from Poland, he was therefore an Austrian subject and so was on enemy territory because Australia was a British colony at the time, and Britain and Austria were in opposing alliances. Short of being taken prisoner, his suggestion to be allowed to go and take up his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands was granted by the authorities (Eriksen, 2004).

Comparing Malinowski with Cushing, Sanjek (1996) notes that Malinowski was better in his 'ground-breaking' Trobriand Island fieldwork of 1914-18. Not only did he learn the language, Sanjek explains, but he more actively entered the scenes of daily life and made the speech in action he heard and recorded there the basis for his ethnography. Moreover, continues Sanjek, 1996 he maintained detailed field notes that he analyzed topically while still in the field, and constantly reread to plan further research activities. Malinowski (1984: xvi) himself describes his method as follows:

The main field of research was in one district, that of the Trobriand Islands. I have lived in that one archipelago for about two years in the course of three expeditions to New Guinea, during which time I naturally acquired a thorough knowledge of the language. I did my work entirely alone, living for the greater part of the time right in the villages. I therefore had constantly the daily life of the natives before my eyes, while accidental, dramatic occurrences: deaths, quarrels, village brawls, public and ceremonial events, could not escape my notice.

Sanjek referred to Malinowski as a better participant observer than Cushing, but the basis for that conclusion does not seem to be clear-cut. It is on the basis of the method here described that Malinowski is identified as the path-breaking participant observer. Malinowski is recorded to have taken up ordinary workaday residence among the Trobrianders for four years, learning their language and making first-hand observations of their everyday life. Cushing is also reported to have taken up workaday life in a typical Zuni pueblo in that Mexican mountain-top community. He had lived there, for five years, had learnt their language and had entered the network of their ordinary social life to the extent that he got initiated as a priest to one of their deities. He also made elaborate field notes (Barnard, 2004).

Malinowski used the first-hand data he collected through a painstaking ethnography to situate functionalism as a social theory. That is also one of the basis upon which his efforts are said to be path-breaking (Haralambos and Holborn, 2015). But functionalist thinking – whereby parts of a social system are analyzed with respect to their effects on the whole system – predated Malinowski by several centuries. In Europe, organismic analogy set off from antique Greek philosophy which had borrowed its more pristine form from ancient Egypt. It appeared in the writings of Ibn Khaldun (1332 to 1406) and later featured in Montesquieuian jurisprudential writings in 1748 (Ritzer, 2012). It was Auguste Comte (1798 to 1857) who reintroduced it more explicitly into sociological studies in Europe (Giddens, 2009). Herbert Spencer (1820 to 1903) then converted it into an explicit mode of functionalist analysis (Ritzer,

2012). Before Malinowski, Emile Durkheim (1858 to 1917) had gone on to situate functionalism with ethnographic data that he collected among the Arunta people in Australia (Haralambos and Holborn, 2015). Durkheim did an ethnographic study of the Arunta, an aboriginal Australian group, describing how their religion *functioned* to create and maintain social solidarity. What could be said of Malinowski is that his efforts were more elaborate, demonstrating how different domains of the Trobrianders' social life were working in concert to maintain the whole social system in equilibrium. But, as we see, nothing seems to be really path-breaking about his efforts.

Further, some writers present relativism in anthropology in a way that suggests that it was Malinowski that exposed its import in social discourses (Okpoko and Ezeh, 2005 to 2011). However, in his *Moeurs des sauvages Américains, comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* first published in 1724, Lafitau had noted – against the grain of the evolutionary paradigm in his time – that “the Iroquois were people in their own right”, emphasizing that every social system should be considered in its own right (Moore and Fenton, 1974). Through his works, Cushing also sought to highlight that every group had cultural resources sufficient for them (Green, 1978). Relatively, Malinowski held that every culture should be judged in its own right, and that the social researcher should depend neither on the standards of other societies nor on histories that lack coeval evidence but on records produced on social systems that had been investigated as is (Bernard, 2006). But, as we have seen, he was by no means the first to demonstrate that scholars should allow relativism to guide their practice.

Conclusions

For his study among some Native American groups, Lewis Henry Morgan is credited in some circles with being the first to do a formal, systematized ethnography. But available records so far show that the French man, Joseph-François Lafitau, was the first to undertake systematized ethnography, having studied the Iroquois with ethnographic methods that were – even in today's terms – evidently more thoroughgoing than Morgan's. Some writers hold that Branislow Malinowski should take the credit for the systematization of participant observation (the cardinal method in ethnographic fieldwork) – he did his 'pioneering' study from 1914 to 1918. However, some records show that Cushing, who had finished his own fieldwork about 30 years (1879-1884) before Malinowski's, had done the things for which some scholars regarded the latter as having broken the path to systematized participant observation.

Evidently, there is a lack of agreement in the history of ethnography, in terms of who pioneered what. If entering targets' social life, learning their language and observing them from the inside in order to report about them from an insider's view point defines participant observation, then Joseph François Lafitau (1681-1746) is, from available records, the arguable pioneer. If we say a solely scholarly status must be part of the criteria and then disqualify him because of his missionary status, then that credit will go to Frank Cushing (1857 to 1900). If we say that theorizing with facts garnered from the ethnographic experience must be part of the criteria for determining that pioneering status, then it, again, goes Lafitau who used his observations to theorize on the Iroquois rules of residence, kinship and exogamy, and analyzed the importance of women in Iroquois society.

If using observed data to erect 'grand theory' is to be part of our criteria for determining that pioneering status, then the credit may go to Morgan for his evolutionary writings. But given that Morgan did not undertake participant observation, we may give that credit to Emile Durkheim for being the first to use scholarly participant observation to situate a functionalist analysis of how the religion of the Arunta Aborigines of Australia helped to create and maintain social solidarity and equilibrium in their society (his study was published as *The elementary forms of the religious life* in 1912).

This study attempted here to show that those who hold onto the notion that Morgan pioneered formal ethnography and Malinowski pioneered formal, systematized participant observation seem to be glossing over significant information on the history of ethnography. We have seen that it does not hold to say that all the efforts before Morgan were amateurish and unsystematized, and therefore brand them pre-ethnology – at least we have seen one pre-Morgan effort that fulfilled our present definition of ethnography more than what Morgan managed to do. The point of this paper is that all the materials in which the history of the systematization of ethnography begins with Morgan, in which the systematization of participant observation begins with Malinowski, need to be revised.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

- Bernard R (2006). Research method in anthropology: qualitative and quantitative approaches. Lanham: Altamira Press.
- Barnard WM (2004). Parent Involvement in Elementary School and Educational Attainment. Children and Youth Services Review, 26, 39-62.
- Basden A (1983). "On the application of Expert Systems", Int. J. Man-Machine Stud.19:461-477.
- Cunningham K (1997). Ethnography. In Folklore: an encyclopedia of beliefs, customs, tales, music and art, edited by Thomas Green, 247-249. Santa Barbara & California: ABC-CLIO Inc.
- Eriksen T (2004). What is anthropology? London: Pluto Press. Provide link.
- Ezeh PJ (2010). A survey of socio-anthropological thoughts for African students. Enugu: Lifegate Publications.
- Fenton W (2003). Lafitau, Joseph-François. In Dictionary of Canadian biography, University of Toronto/Université Laval. Available at: http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/lafitau_joseph_francois_3E.html
- Giddens A (2009). Giddens sociology. Cambridge: Polity Press. Provide link or source
- Green J (1978). Zuñi: selected writings of Frank Hamilton Cushing. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.
- Green J, Sharon G, Frank C (1990). Cushing at Zuñi: the correspondence and journals of Frank Hamilton Cushing, 1879-1884. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Haralambos M, Holborn M (2015). Sociology: themes and perspectives. London: Harper Collins.
- Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). In H. J. Birx (Ed.), Encyclopedia of time: science, philosophy, theology, & culture. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/sagetime/spencer_herbert_1820_1903/0
- Kottak CP (2008). Cultural anthropology. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lavenda R, Schultz E (2010). Core concepts in cultural anthropology. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Lindsay L (1910). Joseph-François Lafitau. In The Catholic encyclopedia. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08739a.htm>
- Malinowski B (1922/1984). Argonauts of the Western Pacific. Illinois: Waveland Press.
- McCall John C (2000). Dancing histories: heuristic ethnography with the Ohafia Igbo. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. (208 pp.)
- Metcalf P (2005). Anthropology: the basics. New York: Routledge.
- Moore E, Fenton W (1974). Introduction to customs of the American Indians compared with the customs of primitive times by Joseph-François Lafitau, ix- cxix. Toronto: Champlain Society.
- Moore E, Fenton W (1969). Precursor of scientific anthropology. Southwestern J. Anthropology 25(2):173-187.
- Okpoko PU, Ezeh PJ (2005 & 2011): Methods in Qualitative Research, 1st and 2nd Editions. Great AP Press Publishers Ltd, Nsukka (172).
- Ritzer G (2012). Sociological theory. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Sanjek R (1996). Ethnography. In A. Barnard and J. Spencer (eds.), Encyclopedia of social and cultural anthropology. London: Routledge.
- Seupin R, DeCorse C (2008). Anthropology – a global perspective. New Delhi: PHI.