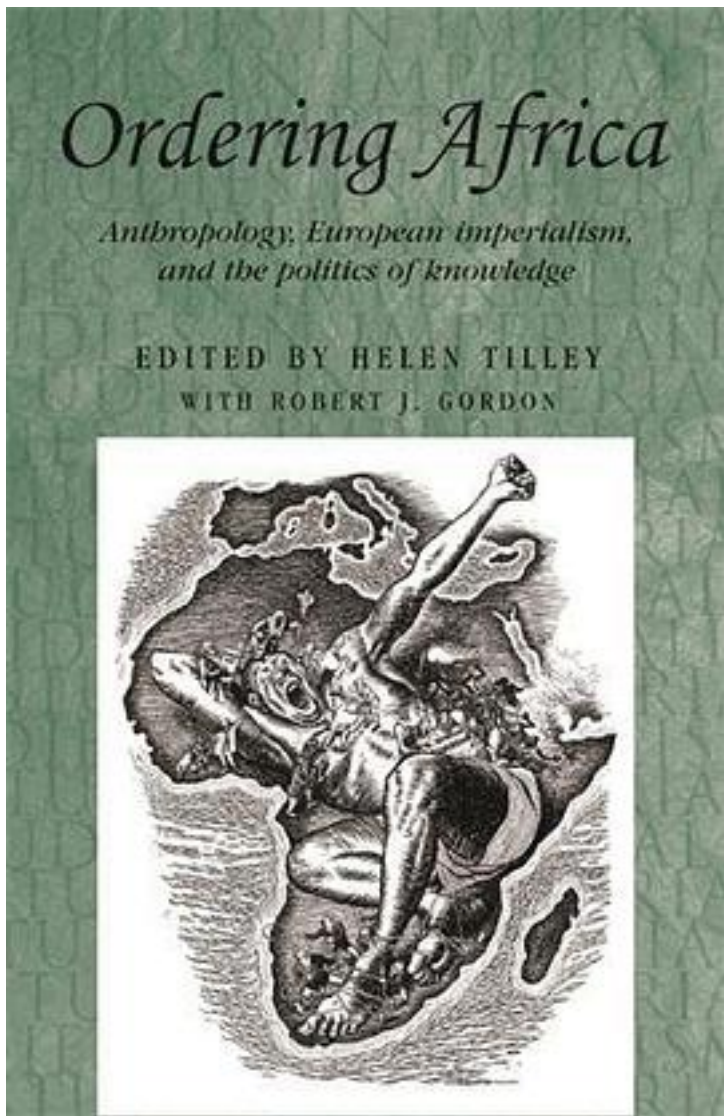


Ordering Africa



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Author's response

My thanks to the IHR for inviting me to respond to Justin Willis's generous and astute review of *Ordering Africa*. Willis sees the volume as an attempt to 'exonerate' anthropology: I would put it slightly differently. We were hoping not just to examine the many facets of the discipline's colonial past, but also to explore its effects within the African continent itself. As such, it remains an unfinished project. If we do this work carefully and accurately, new questions about anthropology's role in European colonialism come to the fore, not least whether it ever undermined or destabilised the cultural and legal foundations of colonial rule. After all, anthropologists occupied a much more important place in sub-Saharan Africa in the decades surrounding decolonisation than they did in the period during and after the Scramble for Africa. Was this just a coincidence, a correlation with the end of empire that had little causal connection? Or was there something about the kind of sociological research that was being done in colonial Africa, its underlying precepts, methods and findings, that helped to carve out a space for the political 'winds of change' to sweep across much of the continent?

Answering these questions may help us to explain features of 20th century African history that are still inadequately understood. Since readers can consult my introduction to get a sense of the book's framework and content, I thought I would use this opportunity to elaborate on a few topics that relate more to anthropology's fortunes over the last 50 years, including its parallel entanglements with recent political invasions in the Middle East. This ought to complement the perceptive analysis Willis has already provided. I must confess that I remain puzzled as to why anthropology is still so often singled out to bear the brunt of popular criticism for the way experts aided and abetted European empires. Given the paucity of their numbers and their often indirect and sometimes feeble impact, such rhetoric seems to exaggerate anthropology's role in reinforcing colonialism while ignoring or downplaying the activities of other specialists. Certainly natural scientists, engineers, physicians, lawyers, and eventually economists were present in many colonial territories in much larger numbers and, arguably, had far greater effects on subject populations in both the short and long-term. Yet, unlike these other fields anthropology continues to be haunted by its colonial and military past: its practitioners often recapitulate high-stake debates about the ethics of their profession and its imbrications with existing forms of power. The American Anthropological Association's (AAA) critical response to the US Military's plan to incorporate ethnographers into its 'counterinsurgency' efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan serves as a case in point. While the military's 'human terrain' teams consist of an array of experts in what it calls 'cultural knowledge', including demographers, sociologists, political scientists, and historians, the bulk of public commentary has focused on anthropology. This is partly because a cultural anthropologist, Montgomery McFate (Yale PhD, 1994), and a political scientist employing ethnographic techniques, David Kilcullen (University of New South Wales PhD, 2000), have helped to define and launch the programme. But it also has to do with the fact that anthropology itself is still the academic discipline most closely associated with cross-cultural understanding. (1)

When Montgomery McFate urged her colleagues in 2005 to join her in advising the US military, because better cultural knowledge of the region would diminish violence, instability and resentment among occupied populations, she was knowingly and, I

might add, disingenuously echoing the rhetoric of anthropology's imperial past. (2) I say disingenuously because whatever might be said about the US invasion of Iraq, there already existed a vast body of literature on the region's culture, religion, and politics. If indeed the military and elements of the US government were ignorant of this literature, it was less the fault of scholars (as McFate would have it) and more a consequence of political machinations - i.e. ignorance by design or default. (International development agencies, it's worth noting, succumb to many of the same problems. It is no accident that so many of their employees often have only partial understanding of the societies and states they wish to benefit.) The same cannot be said of the various European powers when they decided to occupy and seize legal control of sub-Saharan Africa. There was no such pre-existing body of scholarship from which imperial authorities could draw; this is precisely why advocates of anthropology and other social sciences urged state leaders to support such research. This made anthropology to a certain extent dependent upon colonial structures, yet this symbiotic relationship could develop in unexpected ways: in the earliest decades of the 20th century, for example, many of anthropology's advocates were privately (and sometimes not so privately) ambivalent about colonial policies and their wider geopolitical effects. Edward Evans-Pritchard, for instance, said explicitly that he wished to steer clear of making policy recommendations. Still, he could not help but tell prospective and current colonial administrators that the political occupation itself affected 'moral relations between natives and government'. 'To understand native feelings', he told a gathering of officials in the summer of 1938, 'we have to bear in mind that the southern Sudan was conquered by force and is ruled by force, the threat of force, and the memory of force'. He went on to observe that British attempts to rule through 'native chiefs' fundamentally distorted their social roles by making them accountable not to their peoples (or constituents), but to the conquering nation-state. 'A government chief', as distinct from a socially designated leader, 'acts as the bureaucratic agent of an alien administration. His functions are not tribal functions but government functions, and he tends, in consequence, to become alienated from his people and even to use the support of the administration to exploit them.' (3)

Almost in spite of himself, Evans-Pritchard was offering an analysis of the power relations that underpinned the colonial system, and in this he was not alone. Indeed, it was anthropologists at the London School of Economics who first began to teach courses in the 1930s with the title 'Colonial Studies'. To know this is not to exonerate anthropology, but to begin to understand its conceptual and professional history. There was still plenty of room for diverse political and ideological views within the discipline itself, but as the field's experts moved from studying societies in relative isolation and began to at least take account of the colonial framework in which these societies existed, that very framework was bound to come under more critical scrutiny. Anthropologists might have piggybacked on empires in order to gain access to research subjects, but the very tenets of the discipline ensured that they would be drawn into epistemological and political struggles that sometimes called into question the very nature of the colonial project. (4)

We should hardly be surprised then that so many anthropologists today - after decades of discussion about colonialism and the politics of knowledge - have objected to McFate's proposals on both ethical and political grounds. Her opponents warn that scholars ought to protest against illegitimate wars rather than support them, and they also highlight the intellectual dangers academics face if they ally themselves to the interests and actions of any occupying state. This is not so much a consequence of the field's 'self-flagellation' or the irrelevance of postmodern theory (two criticisms McFate levels at anthropologists), but is more the product of hard-won insights about the chequered relationship that has existed between knowledge and power in

cross-cultural settings. Anthropologists today reserve the right to 'study-up', focusing not just on people, whether subalterns or elites, but also on institutions, structures and systems. A central point of this research is to situate cultural and social phenomena in broad economic and political contexts. It also tries to make visible the policies and structures that sustain geopolitical and social asymmetries. Such an approach becomes much more difficult, even impossible, when scholars are employees of powerful states. Marshall Sahlins recently summarised the problem in Iraq in terms reminiscent of historical critiques of anthropology and empire:

It is clear both from practice and from mission statements of the anthropological and military parties concerned that the military view the anthropologists instrumentally, as a weapon of pacification. In this relation the anthropologist functions as a tactical means, subject to control and manipulation by the military officers in charge of the H[uman] T[errain] S[ystem] teams and the commanders of brigade and regimental combat units. So while the anthropologists justify their role by saying it reduces the lethality of the American presence, their instrumental function is more comprehensively described as making lethal force more effective. (5)

In other words, anthropologists in this context would serve an intelligence-gathering function that enables rather than prevents further domination.

What an inter-territorial and transnational approach (such as the one we pursued in *Ordering Africa*) can reveal is the myriad of intended and unintended effects of anthropological studies. As Willis notes in his review, several of the chapters emphasise the division of labour that existed between state-driven ethnographic research and disciplinary-driven investigations. While the two sometimes dovetailed, more often than not they could pull in opposite directions. Colonial states in sub-Saharan Africa were all ethnographic states to a degree. As members of the colonising community produced cultural insights, these could and often did shape colonial policies. In order to establish a place for themselves within this process, anthropologists often had to criticise existing ethnographic knowledge as incomplete or even wrong. This usually took place after several decades of state building. Not surprisingly, anthropologists' rhetorical claims led to a number of heated behind-the-scenes controversies since colonial officials were often loath, even anxious, to relinquish their role as cultural interpreters.

To understand anthropologists' full impact then we must consider not just the kinds of traditions they helped to invent, the stereotypes they reinforced, or the social dynamics they misunderstood - and indeed they did all these things - but we must also study how their reflexivity and cultural relativism served to challenge a range of colonial absolutes. This is why including the end of empire within our historical analyses becomes so important. It is also why we must understand the different ways Africans - as auxiliaries, translators, research subjects, and authors in their own right - affected ethnographic studies. (Here I would qualify Willis' remark that these individuals had little effect since I think this remains an open-ended question that requires further research. Some of the earliest texts that began to codify 'customary law' in British West Africa, for instance, were written by African lawyers sympathetic to anthropological analysis.) Cultural knowledge became a political tool that people actively fought over on a variety of administrative, disciplinary, and sociological levels. Sometimes these struggles were mundane and quotidian, carried on in the minutes of colonial bureaucracies or among social groups jostling for power within a particular district or territory. But in other cases they were public and sensational, brought to the attention of various audiences through newspapers, conferences, and even radio addresses. I am thinking here of the periodic anthropological and administrative

conflicts over the status of 'witchcraft' in African societies, which is a topic a number of scholars have explored and which I write about in my forthcoming book, *Africa as a Living Laboratory*.

Both the symbolic and the real importance of anthropological and sociological knowledge was obviously not lost on many African intellectuals in the first half of the 20th century since many of them chose to write ethnographic studies of their own. That this same class later disavowed anthropology during the early decades of political independence has helped to conceal a fascinating history of ethnographic dialogue and contestation that affected more than just the discipline of anthropology: it also shaped and at times destabilised the core principles of colonial rule. Vestiges of these epistemological dynamics live on in post-colonial states within Africa to this day; for instance, think of the challenges of trying to juggle both legal and medical pluralism. The task for historians is to develop analytic categories and theoretical frameworks that allow scholars to bridge the divide between empire and independence. This will also place the politics of knowledge in a new light.

Notes

For the AAA's statement see, 'AAA Opposes US Military's Human Terrain System Project' [Back to \(1\)](#)

See her historical survey M. McFate, 'Anthropology and Counterinsurgency: the Strange Story of Their Curious Relationship', *Military Review* (Mar-Apr 2005), 24-38. [Back to \(2\)](#)

E. E. Evans Pritchard, 'Administrative Problems in the Southern Sudan', Oxford University Summer School on Colonial Administration (27 June - 8 July 1938) (1938) 75-77. [Back to \(3\)](#)

To understand these tenets, at least for the British sphere, readers may consult any of the four editions of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* that appeared between 1876 and 1929. [Back to \(4\)](#)

M. Sahlins, comments posted to AAA blog on 9 November 2007, 'AAA Board Statement on HTS', 7 November 2007, [Back to \(5\)](#)

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