

The Eteji Self-Righting Trees and Ethnographer's Epistemological Bias

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Abstract

When writers on research method worry about the dangers of religious bias in ethnography they appear to be concerned with sectarian subscriptions of the inquirer. A personal experience among the Orring, a Nigerian minority glottocultural group, whom I did the fieldwork for my advanced degrees shows that the risk of religious bias is much greater than that. Paradoxically an unbending effort at a form of scientific objectivity that leaves no room for a phenomenon that may not lend itself to familiar physical explanation may itself be hazardous to objectivity in ethnographic work. Because my view of anthropology inclines to the agnostic model that puts the discipline outside any particular sectarian sympathy, I nearly missed the opportunity to investigate a rare religio-metaphysical event in my host community simply because it seemed to agree neither with rational nor even conventional religious explanation of the physical world. It was the unlikely report that two previously felled trees got restored without any material counterforce. When somehow I finally I went on to study the event employing multidisciplinary assistance from physics, theology, etc., it became clear how wrong my initial reaction had been. If what is intended is a holistic study of society all extraneous suppositions should always be discounted at the level of data collection.

Introduction

Although an ethnographer may mean well, his religious background may affect his choice of research topics in a related domain. While on a participant-observation sojourn among the Orring for my PhD fieldwork that ended in 2004 I nearly missed the opportunity to investigate one of

the strangest reports one could hope to come across. My agnostic disposition initially made me to see the issue in a different light.

How many ethnographers would be apt to take as serious topic for investigation a report that a tree stump which is now growing shoots was that of the same tree which one year previously was rooted up by a tropical rain storm? And that for the restoration in question no human counterforce was used? Such was my unenviable plight. It was not a case of being challenged to investigate or make more generally accessible meanings out of an aspect of a people's belief system. One was not confronted with some myth, either. There is a rich corpus of literature on the subject of myth *per se*, both in anthropology and in related disciplines. One of the current views is that myth is a metalanguage with which culture as a symbolic system is accessed (Chandler & Munday, 2011: 274). So, if what I was confronted with is myth it would have been easier to handle.

What I was invited to witness was what was supposed to be an actual botanico-physical phenomenon if of a kind that is agreed by all to be a rarity. Everyone agreed that there had been no precedent to this even at any other time in the history of the community.

During my initial trip to the research station I advised myself that the report was a hoax and returned to my classroom work, some 100 kilometres northwest at Nsukka. I felt it would have been a different issue and one that was worth the trouble if the matter were presented as, for instance, as a component of the people's mythopoeia. But no. I was instead invited to see this more or less the same way that someone who is used to using a fossil-fuel-powered motorcar might some day be shown a model that is powered by ethanol. Guided by what is generally known about gravitation, I thought that a stump of an uprooted tree which has been lying flat on the ground to be restored to an upright position without any known physical counterforce would be impossible. But then I made the mistake of forgetting that the pitfall of such absolutism of theory was what Karl Popper had noticed since 1940s and warned against, whatever might be the opinions of his opponents. We as humans involved in whatever intellectual pursuits may only know so much about a subject at a time and never enough to pronounce all-embracingly on it. Indeed the philosopher, Colin Tudge (1999: 174-176), has been making the point that the presumed orderly working of the universe, in which, for instance, the principle of gravitation is rooted, can no longer be taken without queries, given chiefly Einstein's formulations on Relativity. All those

theories such as quantum mechanics and gravitation which anticipate a stable ordering of the universe must either be correct and Relativity is wrong, or the other way around. In some interesting sense, it all leads back to good old Popper and his warnings on absolutism of theory.

Research Method

It was a sojourning trader on palm-bamboo basket, the foremost product of women in the locality, that first brought me the news about the self-righting trees. He is a Yoruba. I had taken up residence in Eteji (known to the rest of Nigerians with its more familiar anglicized form, Ntezi) returning there during the research instead of my own Igbo area any time my other professional duties permitted. It was the only strategy through which I could carry out a frighteningly expensive participant observation of this society which nevertheless I was so determined to conclude.

Eteji is one the two communities of the Orring minority glottocultural group who were the subject of my study; the other being Lame (known better by the name Okpoto which available evidence, suggests was given to them by their more populous neighbour, the Igbo). Groups related to the Orring are also at other parts of Ebonyi State like the Eteji and Lame, and at Cross River State and Benue – all in Nigeria southeastern districts. But all together they are less than a million people.

The British colonial government tried to help the Orring preserve their identity after merging those of them in the present Ebonyi State into a single multiethnic administrative unit known as Abakaliki Province. Their Igbo neighbours had a different tactic after the British left as a result of which assimilation, linguistically and culturally, set in. It was such skewed acculturation, at the expense of the Orring, that I thought was ethnologically noteworthy, and have been labouring to account for.

The Self-Righting Trees

What made me change my attitude to the story of the trees that came back to life was entirely fortuitous. When I came to spend the weekend in my research station, John – one of the most steadfast of my indigenous Orring informants – was visiting me as usual. It was my determination to impress it on him that he should always draw my attention to any major event in town whatever might be his own attitude to them that drew down an entirely new dimension to the tree matter. He informed me that he really saw when the trees laid on the ground. They did so for one year. He saw them because the compound on whose front they laid was that of his kinsmen, so he was always going there for one reason or the other.

There was, in John's belief, no doubt that the trees had just had a mysterious restoration.

All around the compound of these kinsmen of John's are dense groves. The enclosure at the foreground is the first of the traditional assembly grounds known here as *liese* where the various *lepa* political expression of the *kiku* which in turn make up the traditional community meet for celebrations or deliberations. There are five of such *kiku* on top of which is the community or, in fact, the kingdom itself. Cook (1935) a British colonial bureaucrat who was one of the first non-Africans to study this patrilineal group noted their peculiar monarchical structure which stood in sharp contrast to the acephalic one of the surrounding Igbo clans. Below the Orring *lepa* is *lema* which unites the various compounds, *odaada*, from a common, real or putative, ancestor.

This particular *liese* belongs to Ulepa, the eldest in the Eteji kingdom. John granted my request that we go again to the scene where the reportedly *resurrected* trees were. There they stood. The mighty silk cotton tree (scientific name: *Bombax buonopozense Beauv*) now growing new shoots were flanked by stumps of the *kinyif* hardwood trees (scientific name: *Prosopis africana*) which are fairly common in these parts but whose English name – if there is really such – I am yet to ascertain. Mighty cotton tree is not to be confused with the shrub of the *Gossypium* which probably is better known because of the economic utility of its variety of cotton. *Bombax buonopozense Beauv* also known as Bombaceae is indeed one of the hugest trees in these parts. The one at Ntezi has a circumference of more than 5.10 metres. A good measure of its bark had been cut before I measured what remained of the trunk. I could not measure its height since, of course, I became academically interested in it at a point when the lumberjack had sold out its timber. Cotton as the name of the fibre of this tree is anomalous. Its own variety really relates to kapok than what is generally known as cotton. It says something for the size of the Bombaceae that in coastal villages some the biggest dugouts are made from it.

As one faced the trees, the *kinyif* by one's left had dried up, perhaps never to come back to life again. The one on the right was, like the cotton tree, growing some shoots. As John and I stood there talking, one wiry but extremely friendly man of about 50 joined us. John greeted him familiarly. I also greeted him in Korring, language of the Orring, but maybe my accent or appearance betrayed me. The man replied me in

Igbo which, as it happened, was no less heavily accented. He gave his name as Chukwu Eke.

The man told us that it was his wife who first saw the restored trees. The restoration occurred following a storm and on the night of the same traditional week day in the same of month of May as when the tree fell. In such a rainy night in this village, it would be pitch dark, and it was. But as the rain was abetting, a sound redolent of a loud groan was heard. The Ekes thought that someone was entering their compound. They were mistaken. It was Mrs Eke who flashed her husband's torch at the direction the sound was heard. She shouted the strangest announcement ever heard in the town. "I don't believe my eyes. Those trees are standing up again." Mr. Eke summoned the courage and moved closer to the scene. The trees were well and truly standing. He summoned the rest of the members of the compound. There were no footmarks indicating that some human beings must have done the job.

In the following days, the scene was a great attraction to curious visitors. Those who came to buy or sell at the community's market famous for its bamboo baskets made a point of walking the one kilometre or so to see the trees.

A diviner prescribed that the restoration was a sign that some of those who shared from the proceeds of the timber should not have done so. The trees were declared the communal property of the entire Ulepa *lepa* whereas in fact it belonged only to Bileagbadum, one of the *lema*. The money must now be brought out so that a goat, chicken, kolanuts and yam tubers must be bought for communal feast in honour of the restored trees. I also went to witness the feast. The great cotton tree was bedecked in an immaculate white cloth also bought with the feast fund.

Some Explanations

My initial costly agnostic prejudice has not made me change my view that there may be a place for hard science in the how and the why of the trees' restoration although many years afterwards I am yet to get any helpful response from such a sphere. That should, in my view, be possible – if not immediately then in the future. When in September, 2013, a newspaper reported a similar occurrence regarding a palmtree at Item, Abia State, I thought of my Eteji experience (Sampson, 2013). I have already spoken with some of the best in the Western-style physics here in Nigeria but all I keep getting even from them are metaphysical ratiocinations similar to those which everyone else including the locals,

some church missionaries in the place, colleagues back in the University consistently give. Indeed the boldest of the Christian theological opinions on the event came from a non-Orring Methodist missionary – a lady, the Rev. Miriam Ude, living in the locality. After confirming that the trees were really restored, she told me, “It is all part of the end-time signs.” Rev. Fr. Romanus Igweonu, the Catholic priest in charge of the Orring area, was less apocalyptic in his own interpretation but nevertheless had only the supernatural to link the matter with. “Christians will see this as a sign that God is alerting his people of his presence,” he told me.

Conclusion

Absolutism of theory when in favour of metaphysics may be just as dangerous as when it is in favour or against any other thing else. My mistake in my initial reaction to this event is the nearest illustration of the relevance of this caveat. Besides, history invites us to be suspicious of sweeping metaphysical explanations of phenomena, even those happening with cryptic causes. For instance, most respondents, whatever their walks of life, do similarly explain away phenomenon of witchcraft using metaphysics. But it happens that in those occasions when that phenomenon has been scientifically investigated either by African anthropologists (e.g. Offiong 1991) or foreign ones (e.g. Nadel 1976) totally empirical explanations have always been possible.

It seems to me that the event of the Eteji restored trees call also for two other basic research strategies besides that of the more conspicuous metaphysics – that intellectual coquette whom everyone who dares feels able to date. The Eteji event requires an unhurried anthropological inquiry on our own part, plus a thoroughgoing physical study by those who can do that. This surely is not a rejection of metaphysics but only a recommendation that, in the interest of objectivity and growth of knowledge, we do have options besides it.

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