

Beyond Positive Sciences: an Anthropological Approach to Market Analysis in North-Western Ghana

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Summary

Western science has often been thought of as an universally applicable, dominant and neutral knowledge system. Recently this view has been challenged by various scientists, who try to revalue the subjugated knowledge systems of local people by appreciating its characteristics. But this upgrading of endogenous knowledge often is but another example of the hegemonic position of Western science: it evaluates local situations with Western criteria, neglecting the cultural paradigms of the people involved. This article is a plea for a new multidisciplinary and intercultural research approach which takes as its foundation an understanding of the local culture and paradigms on which selected topics can be analysed, rather than a traditional disciplinary approach in which, afterwards, a foreign cultural component is being inscribed. This appeal is supported by material from a local market in North-western Ghana, where the Lobi peasants sell their harvest to the Wala traders.

Samenvatting

De positieve wetenschappen voorbij : een antropologische benadering van een marktanalyse in Noordwest Ghana

Lange tijd werd de westerse wetenschap beschouwd als een universeel toepasbaar, dominant en neutraal kennissysteem. Deze uitgangspositie wordt sinds enige tijd in vraag gesteld door verschillende wetenschappers, die proberen om de onderdrukte lokale kennis-systemen te herwaarderen door hun eigen karakteristieken naar waarde te schatten. Maar deze opwaardering van endogene kennis verwordt vaak tot een herbevestigen van de hegemonische positie van de westerse wetenschap: het evalueert lokale situaties met westerse criteria en negeert de culturele paradigma's van de betrokken volkeren. Dit artikel is een pleidooi voor een nieuwe, multidisciplinaire en interculturele onderzoeksbenadering die steunt op en vertrekt van een begrip van de lokale cultuur en paradigma's. In tegenstelling tot de traditionele disciplinaire benadering - waarin, na het elaboreren van de eigen discipline, een culturele component wordt ingecalculeerd - wil deze benadering vertrekken van de cultuur, om pas in tweede instantie specifieke topics te analyseren. Dit pleidooi wordt geruggesteund met gegevens van een lokale markt in Noordwest-Ghana, waar de Lobi-boeren hun oogst verkopen aan de Wala-handelaars.

Introduction

Descartes created, some centuries ago, his philosophy regarding the worldly reality as being composed both of the human capability to reason and of an extensiveness of matter, defined as a natural reality without any mystery, namely, a reality which can be analysed, modelled and divided geometrically into quantities. Since then, scientists have contributed to the moulding of the Western world and its knowledge practices which are taken for granted. It results in a Western world believed to be built on a basis of rationality, science and technology.

Modern science is characterised by its view of Nature, based on the classical Newtonian terms: nature is a system with a periodic order, in which phenomena can be elucidated in terms of linear, single or multiple relationships of a systematic nature. These are causal relationships within the given system. The conviction that the human mind was independent of nature, made it

possible to define parameters and variables and to use

differential equations to define processes that may change smoothly over time (15). Confronted with the contingencies of reality and the easy epistemological blurring of more subjective and ideological modes of knowledge (2) science cannot but take a constructed reality as a starting point in its attempt to reach the 'real reality'. Driven by an ethos of 'Entzauberung' or denaturalisation the scientific mind applies a paradigm which opposes nature and culture (or mind), and privileges unity, homogeneity, repetition, identity and stability in the measurable, isolated phenomena under study. It thus excludes by definition difference, heterogeneity and openness of the system under study.

The Cartesian approach of the world, drawing on a pragmatic idealisation of mathematics and statistics

(believed to be direct products of pure ratio), founded a science of “facts” and “conditional implications” (if X... then Y...), free of values, liberated from cultural or social conditioning, and above all universally applicable. Axioms, schemes of analysis, categories of classification, formulas, scientific disciplines and so on were to be transferred to various spatial or historical contexts. Economists consider scarcity and the market transaction along demand and supply as a most natural situation, and a key paradigm (1). Even today, in a context of abundance thanks to technology, scarcity remains the initiator and engine of the free market system, understood through its related concepts of market transparency, supply and demand, (in)elasticity of prices and the like.

Recently, the universality of sciences (Western in origin, but which have spread almost globally) has been questioned seriously, particularly by physicists, engineers and anthropologists (3,6,9,11,14). They claim that the universality of science, in its aim and approach, is but one more example of the projection of a Western social context of dominance and control on ‘the other’ and of the subjugation of non-western knowledge systems. But rather than being a denaturalised or neutral phenomenon, the production of science and technology is a social process influenced by decisions (such as what funds are to be given to which research), observations (very much dependent on the scientists’ theories and implicit assumptions), generalisations (among others, based on subjective criteria) and methodology (not free from rhetorics, politics, personal power, gender relations). The existence of one single and universally valid scientific truth or method is being questioned: it is argued that procedures and results may be opportunistic and contingent on social factors; scientific truth and success of an approach or paradigm are also socially negotiated by actors who operate within a social network of politics, economies and institutionalised power. In this regard D. Hess (10) speaks of Social Constructivism; Pfaffenberger (13) redefines science and technology as a totalising social fact (a terminology stemming from Marcel Mauss).

Sensitive to these critics on the putative universality of science (such as by Gusterson(8)), laying bare the ritualistic nature of scientific experiment, or of statistics (such as by Nader (12)), considering the latter as the modernised version of the traditional diviner, some of the scientists working in various civilisational contexts have tried to take up the cultural differences into their standard methodology. New concepts are created, new ways of interacting with ‘the other’, new strategies to implement innovation processes. Some tried hard to improve the existing knowledge of traditions proper to ‘indigenous people’, although they were only “extracting traditional knowledge from its context, so that it matches categories of information determined by the needs of the scientists” (4). They consider indigenous knowledge as useful data to be incorporated in the established Western science. It confers a snug feeling to the newborn ethnoscientist to be rooted in local knowledge.

I will argue that much of the present field of ethno-science research in a multicultural environment, especially agricultural and economical investigations in the South, remains one more illustration of the hegemony of Western science: starting from current Western scientific premises, ethnoscientists often appreciate local knowledge so far as it fits into the mainstream Western scientific framework. In contradiction to ethnoscience, this article pleads for a new multidisciplinary and intercultural research approach which takes as its foundation an understanding of local culture and paradigms on which selected topics can be elaborated, rather than a traditional disciplinary approach in which, afterwards, a foreign cultural component is being incorporated. One case study is presented as support for my argument.

Methodology

During one year (September 1996 - August 1997) anthropological fieldwork was carried out in North-western Ghana. I participated as much as possible in the various activities, daily and more ritualised ones, of the different categories and groups of people. Together with a continuous monitoring of farming and market activities of a compound family in the small community of Baleofeele in the Upper West Region, an approach ‘from within’ was attempted at in order to develop an analysis based on the paradigms of the Lobi people themselves. Many semi-structured interviews were carried out with traders from Wa (the regional capital), with government workers and regional ministers. The research aimed more at qualitative than quantitative data collection, and preferred an in-depth analysis of a small group of people rather than a large-scale, more superficial survey of a large group.

Results

The geographical and sociocultural setting

The Upper West Region of Ghana, with its wooded savannah vegetation, is eco-climatologically part of the Sudano-Sahel (5). The short and single rainy season from June to October with an average rainfall of 968 mm contrasts with the long dry season (16). Because rainfall is unreliable, it is not unusual for drought to occur in one particular area during critical periods in plant growth which may then reduce drastically the harvest, while the neighbouring area may be doing well. According to a World Bank survey, Upper West Region’s scores for most human welfare indicators are among the lowest of Ghana, far under the national Ghanaian average (16).

The main ethnocultural groups of the region are the Wala, the Sissala, the Dagaba and the Lobi. In Wa district, the focus of our research, the majority of the people are Wala with in the villages as well as in towns an important minority of Dagaba and Lobi.

Several centuries ago the town of Wa developed into an important trade center where long distance routes from South Ghana and Southern Ivory Coast to Burkina Faso and Mali were crossing. With Wa as its nodal point, a web of small villages was established as family chiefs started to move into the uninhabited or new

arable land. As first settlers, the Wala became the landowners, a position granting them political power and feeding ethnic superiority feelings towards alien immigrants. The Wala specialised in interregional trade, under the rule of chiefs, elders or patriarchs, side to side to mainly the Dagaaba class, paying tribute to the Wala landowners. As traders the Wala easily adopted Islam in the 18th century.

From the late 1910s, Lobi from Gauoa area (in South East Burkina Faso) immigrated into the southern area of Wa district (7). They came in greater number in the 1950s due to the upheavals prior to independence and to land shortage. In contrast to the Wala bringing their homesteads with the extended family in clusters of houses, the Lobi stay in widely dispersed compounds under the guidance of a 'jidaandow', the landlord, who is genealogically the eldest man of the house. Whereas most Dagaaba in the region have converted to Christianity, the Lobi of Wa district remained attached to the land cults and ancestral cults they brought from Burkina Faso. Moreover, the Lobi and Wala basically practice a bush fallow subsistence farming, with maize, millet, sorghum and yam as major staple crops. Less important crops include beans, cowpea, groundnut and rice. Recently, the Wala are adopting commercial farming practices such as cotton cultivation.

The market as locus of economic transactions

As commercial centre Wa is part of a dendritic market system, and it constitutes both a place for the local small-scale transactions, and a pivotal link between the national and interregional flow of goods (see figure 1). On the district level, three types of markets can be distinguished: the district market of Wa, the small village markets (e.g. Taanvare, Vieri and Dorimon), and the in-between level of the subdistrict market (e.g. Wechiao and Lasea-Tuolo). Markets in the area form clusters and cycles of six, each day being named after the place where the market takes place.

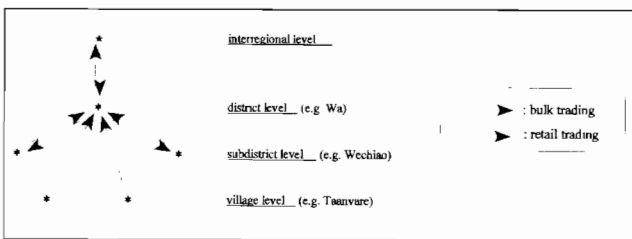


Figure 1. - The different types of markets, their dendritic structure and the flow of goods between the different levels.

While the retailing of imported goods (like shoes, torches, bananas, coconut) occurs mainly in the district and subdistrict markets, the subdistrict and village markets serve as an interface, where the Lobi women sell a minor part of their crops (sorghum, millet, yam, sheabutter) and charcoal to Wala women. The transactions and the fixing of the price follow a particular pattern witnessing to economic supremacy of the Wala and expressing at the same time social despise for the Lobi. On the small footpaths leading to the market, the Wala women await in small and always identical groups (three, four women, each of them specialised in a particular product) for the Lobi women coming from their

compounds. After ignoring the arrival of the sellers for some time, continuing their talk among each other, the Wala start insulting the Lobi, especially regarding aspects of clothing, hygiene and honesty. They then announce the price and conditions ("Look, we give you 1000 cedis for 20 pieces of sheanutbutter, and every twenty first piece is for free"). Very much neglecting the protests of the Lobi women, they start counting the pieces while cheating the Lobi women through very tricky methods of counting. When the counting and the handover of the goods are finished, the Wala women proceed with the conversation they had before the Lobi came, only to remember after some time that they still have to fulfil the payment, which may even be delayed to the next market day. Following another protest by the Lobi women, which is immediately refuted by the Wala under the cloak of being good friends, the two parties separate.

Such views of confrontation between townswomen and village-folk, of well-informed traders and ignorant farmers, of dominant roles and subordination, suggest a rather classical pattern of interaction between the group of economically well-experienced traders and the small-scale subsistence farmers ignoring all about cash trade. Having a better insight in (inter)regional prices, through collective price fixing and control, able to limit the number of traders, even through blatant cheating, the Wala women seem to exploit economically the Lobi women, thereby manifesting their feelings of social superiority. Whereas Lobi women almost compulsorily wear poor dresses, Wala women display rich clothing, wear make-up and emphasise well-rounded forms of the body. In this way they seek to demonstrate their wealth.

The revenge of the Lobi

The basic economic view that the Lobi are despised and economically exploited by the Wala is principally one of the Western observer struck by the peasant's economically inferior position in the market confronted with professional traders. In Western societies, most foodstuffs are (re)distributed through diverse mechanisms of the market. In Lobi-society however, food is first and foremost a social good to share and to exchange, in view of weaving and reweaving basic social ties. It creates a regeneration of the social web, and a homage to the ancestors, who are the real owners of the land and of the farming from sowing or planting to harvesting. The jidaandow, the landlord, is the guardian of the produce (especially millet, sorghum and maize) of the land. He is the mediator, the linking figure between the descendants on earth, and the ancestors below. It is through his hands that the ancestors give the food to the people. The harvest is collected into and distributed over three types of granaries (see figure 2): half of the production is kept in the two or three major granaries (type A, left part of the figure) of the landlord as the representative of the ancestors. This type A produce will be mainly consumed collectively by the whole village on the occasions of funerals, rituals, initiation festivals, group labour on the farms, bridewealth payment. Part of it will be used to feed the own compound, after redistribution to grana-

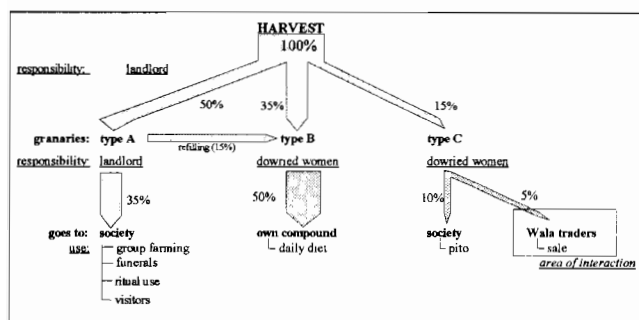


Figure 2. - Flow-chart of the harvest, showing its distribution into granaries, its use and its destination.

ries of type B (horizontal arrow in the figure, connecting the left with the central part).

Thirty-five percent of the original total harvest is divided into several granaries of type B (central part of the figure). The grains of each type B granary fall under the responsibility of a dowried woman, who processes it into food for the whole compound. However, the grains remain under the overall guidance of the landlord. After exhausting the B-granaries by feeding the compound, the landlord orders his eldest wife to refill the B-granaries with grains from the A-granaries (about fifteen percent of the total yield), totalizing the amount of the harvest used for the feeding of the compound to fifty percent.

Far less important are the type C granaries, the private granaries, in which the remaining fifteen percent of the harvest is kept (right part of the figure). They are the grains which are given to the dowried women for their own private use. Two thirds of this is used to brew pito, the local sorghum beer, to sell in the markets, or for other social activities, or for use in the own compound. The remaining five percent of the total initial yield is introduced into the sphere of the commercialised, monetarised market exchanges with the Wala-traders, as mentioned earlier.

Although only fifty percent of the harvest is used directly for subsistence in the own compound, only five percent enters the commercial sphere of the market. What happens to the remaining forty-five percent?

Outside the monetary sphere of the Ghanaian Cedis, there is the sphere of the gift and the cowrieshells, a highly valued traditional way of payment which strengthens the Lobi with their large stocks of shells in comparison to the Wala-trader, who is enriched with very futile cedis. The remaining forty-five percent of the harvest enters this second sphere of exchange in which the gift and the structure of the social web are the guiding principles. A major part (type A granaries) is exchange for labour, especially on the occasions where the age groups of young men associate to work on the farms of elder men, in particular on the land of the (future) father-in-law of one of the age-mates. Such exchange of labour strengthens the age group and the relations, commitments and debts linking several compounds of one community into one social web.

Another big share of the harvest of the type A grana-

ries is destined for funerals and funeral rites. Definitely the main social activity during the lean season, it is of utmost importance for a Lobi to be able to be very generous on the occasion of the funeral of a relative. An abundance of food and pito, including the wasting of food in a ritualised fighting between the remaining members of the family, creates an atmosphere in which social prestige and remembrance are generated through the generosity of the descendants. Other main outgoings of harvest occur in the donation of food to visitors and friends (type A) and the brewing of pito (type C) to be sold on special occasions such as funerals, sacrifices, initiation rituals and, of course, the village and subdistrict market. In this sphere all these transactions of foodcrops occur as gifts or as exchange for cowrie-shells, creating a socio-cultural and ritual environment which empowers and renews the Lobi community as an entity, and puts it in opposition to the Wala society on a double occasion.

On the village and subdistrict markets, a distinct, less visible trading, parallel to the Wala-Lobi trading occurs within the members of the Lobi community: at the outskirts of the market square large pots of pito are sold, on the exchange-value of one pot of pito for ten cowries or its equivalent in cedis (and not vice versa), absorbing most of the cedis gained from the interaction with the Wala-trader into an environment in which the cowrie, as a symbol of the Lobi culture from within, tames the government-introduced cedi by putting it in a position of low-appreciation. It is a symbolic revenge. A Lobi is proud to pay his pito with cowries, or to change his exogenous cedi for the Lobi produce par excellence, the pito. A pride which is even more visible in the second example of the revenge of the Lobi: the funeral ground. On this ritual occasion of three or four days, every Lobi shows off through his attempts to please the ancestors - so that they will be willing to accept the newborn death - by throwing out cowries to the musicians and gravediggers who prepare the departure of the deceased to the ancestors, for his brothers and sons who will continue his life on earth, and for the corpse itself. In this process of regiving the ancestors the earnings acquired with the produce they gave you, it is a moral defeat if you have to show your appreciation by giving out cedis.

Conclusion

This analysis is a plea for cultural relativism, as an art and principle of interpreting the meaning of science, technology and trading relative to the understanding of local communities. Looking through the sectoral glasses of economics, the expected result of an oppressed Lobi is confirmed: because of the hierarchical, dendritic market-structure which is reflected in power relations between the different levels in that structure (16), including the interface of (the higher) Wala and (the lower) Lobi on the subdistrict and village markets, the observer easily presupposes an oppression of the peasants by the traders. In other words, although the analysis incorporates sociological arguments into the economic framework, it evaluates the local situation of interacting people mainly in Western

terms, eventually leading to the conclusion that the Lobi need a reinforced and dignified position in the market. In the mean time it denies the fact that a 'better position in the market', or a 'better relation' with the Wala-trader, or a 'better monetary situation'- according to a Western vision- implies a degradation as a Lobi because joining monetary trading is leaving the own sphere of non-monetary exchange, of social acceptance and social regeneration. Forced to fulfil some minor needs of money (payment of taxes and hospital fees) the Lobi will call on commerce with the Wala traders. On the other hand objectives of bigger monetary gains (to buy a bicycle or fancy clothes) have to be fulfilled outside the own culture, e.g. by going South to do

wage labour on cocoa plantations. But the major part of transactions occur within the Lobi society, neglecting the temptation of the Ghanaian Cedis, the rules of Western market economy or the expectations of the foreign observer.

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