

Critical historical reading of colonial anthropological studies

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Abstract

There is no doubt that colonialism, in all its forms, old and new, has employed various methods to dominate and control weaker nations. While the use of weapons was a decisive factor for occupation, such domination would not have been possible without the exploration and study of these societies—their customs, traditions, cultures, lifestyles, as well as the diversity of their languages and religions. This gave rise to a new field of study known as anthropology.

In this study, we aim to critique colonial anthropological studies and examine the nature of the relationship between anthropology and colonialism. We seek to either affirm or refute the idea that anthropology is a colonial science. Additionally, we explore anthropology's role in supporting colonialism and the extent to which anthropology benefited from the colonial movement. Conversely, we ask whether anthropology has provided any benefits to colonized peoples. Furthermore, we investigate whether colonial anthropological studies have contributed to the ethnic and sometimes sectarian divisions currently experienced by societies in the Global South.

Keywords: Anthropology, colonialism, domination, identity, civilization.

Author: Bougrine Issa, Email: a.bougrine@lagh-univ.dz**Introduction:**

It is said that if there is one branch of human sciences that has remained largely unquestioned, it is undoubtedly anthropology. This discipline, whose ideas crystallized during the second half of the 19th century, initially appeared innocent. However, its

emergence coincided with the rise of modern European colonialism, and its use as one of the primary tools to dominate vast territories and populations around the world rendered it one of the most problematic sciences of that era. Anthropology was employed in a deliberate manner, as European research in the 19th century focused on studying societies outside Europe through a historical-anthropological approach.

The origins and early history of anthropology are closely tied to colonialism, as studies were conducted on societies to understand their structural composition and cultural nature, thereby facilitating their colonization. Consequently, anthropology became a distinctly colonial tool aimed at easing the process of domination and subjugation of peoples.

Through this study, we aim to shed light on the relationship between anthropology and colonialism. How valid is the theory that anthropology is primarily a colonial science? What significant contributions did this field make in supporting Western colonial domination and control over many societies worldwide? And finally, did colonial anthropology provide any benefits to the colonized peoples?

1. The Concept of Anthropology:

Anthropology is an English term derived from Greek origins. The word Anthropology is divided into two parts: Anthropos, meaning "human," and Logos, meaning "science" or "study." Thus, anthropology is the science that describes the human species' biological and cultural characteristics across time and various locations (Fahim, 1986, p. 14). In other words, it is the study of human nature and the changes in physical traits, skin color, customs, traditions, religions, cultures, and other aspects of life. It is essentially the natural history of humankind (Fried, 2000, p. 127).

Anthropologists divide the field into two main branches: Physical Anthropology, which studies humans from a biological perspective, cultural or Civilizational Anthropology, which focuses on human creations and cultural practices (Shamas, 2004, p. 14).

2. The Emergence of Anthropology:

The study of humanity in its various aspects dates back to ancient times, with contributions from the Greeks, Romans, Chinese, and Arab Muslims. However, in its modern sense, most anthropologists agree that the actual emergence of anthropology began during the European Renaissance, particularly in the latter half of the 15th century and the early 16th century. This period marked a shift toward exploring previously unknown regions, especially Africa, Asia, and the New World.

The development of anthropology was closely tied to the phenomenon of geographical discoveries, which originated in Europe. During this time, the study of humans transitioned from philosophical methods to a scientific and experimental approach (Shamas, 2004, p. 26). This shift involved moving beyond studying the works of Greeks, Romans, and Arab Muslims to engaging directly with other peoples and observing them up close.

European explorers described the local tribes and communities in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, documenting their customs, traditions, lifestyles, and material cultures. These descriptions often served the purpose of facilitating the domination and control of these regions (Mehraz & Al-Arjawi, 2020, p. 27). One of the most significant journeys was that of Christopher Columbus to the Caribbean Islands at the end of the 15th century. His voyages fundamentally altered perceptions of humanity by revealing the diversity of the human race.

The word "anthropology" itself emerged in Europe in the writings of naturalists during the 18th century and refers to the study of the natural history of humans. The German naturalist Johann Blumenbach is considered one of the first to introduce the term anthropology into the curriculum of natural history, using it in the third edition of his book published in 1795, titled "On the Natural Varieties of Mankind" (Fahim, 1986, p. 15).

This science rapidly developed during the 17th and 18th centuries, eventually becoming an independent discipline with its own foundations and principles at the start of the colonial movement in the 19th century (Shamas, 2004). Supported by geographical societies, especially in London and Paris, explorers and adventurers began to travel to various regions, particularly Africa. Among the most significant journeys that greatly contributed to the development of this science and benefited the colonial movement were those of Mungo Park at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, Frédéric Cailliaud in the years 1818 and 1820, René Caillie in 1824 and 1828, as well as Barth, Stanley, Livingstone, and many others. These expeditions, which provided crucial information about African peoples (Demoulin, 1931, p. 341), were among the major factors facilitating colonial penetration into the continent.

From the aforementioned development of anthropology, particularly as an independent discipline, we are firmly convinced that in its early stages, it was a supremacist and colonial science. The role of the anthropological school, which emerged under colonialism and served its interests, cannot be denied. This school provided the necessary information that enabled colonial powers to dominate those colonized peoples, plunder their resources, and exploit their wealth and assets.

3. Colonialism:

Colonialism is the political and economic exploitation, as well as the cultural dominance, experienced by countries that are typically less developed in economic and social terms compared to the dominant classes of the colonizing nations, which are more advanced (Al-Atabi, 2015).

Colonialism was not a product of the modern era; rather, it dates back to the earliest existence of humanity. The Persian, Roman, and even Chinese expansions in ancient times exemplify this form of continuous territorial expansion by empires (Bouhson, 2011, p. 45). Modern colonialism, which emerged during the Renaissance, was primarily driven by economic motives (Leclerc, 1990, p. 21). It was initially led by Spain and Portugal, followed by France and England in the subsequent phase. This type of colonialism is often described as brutal exploitation in various fields, particularly in what was termed in anthropological studies as the "primitive world." It was characterized by the marginalization of the indigenous populations of the occupied regions and the exploitation of their resources and wealth (Mehraz & Al-Arjawi, 2020, p. 28).

4. The Relationship Between Anthropology and Colonialism:

Anthropology is tasked with studying the "other," understanding its characteristics and cultures, and then categorizing and classifying them, all in preparation for colonization and the plundering of its wealth (Bouhson, 2011, p. 46). Therefore, the mutual benefits between colonialism and anthropology cannot be denied. Just as anthropology provided significant services to the colonial movement, it also benefited from it, with colonialism playing a major role in the advancement of anthropological studies and methodologies. It is well known that the 19th century was a period of colonial expansions aimed at colonizing other societies to establish control over them and exploit them politically, economically, culturally, and religiously. As a result, anthropological studies flourished with both theoretical and practical goals, using these small societies as the subject of study (Al-Othman, 2002, p. 72).

Anthropology became a tool in the hands of colonial powers in European countries, which, with the expansion of anthropological research, saw a remarkable geographical expansion that carried the discipline beyond its narrow confines, allowing it to establish a foothold in every corner of the world. The geographical territories studied exceeded the original scope of Europe many times over. The era of old colonialism was characterized by the search for colonies, markets, labor, raw materials, and new markets to dispose of their surplus products, none of which were available in their own lands. All of this was the foundation of the early colonial policies. Colonialism, in general, was not only

military in nature but also cultural, with culture often being its most prominent weapon (Al-Atabi, 2015).

The science of anthropology, under the influence of colonialism tinged with a Christian (missionary) religious outlook, began to study the peoples it would colonize from every angle in order to understand how to interact with them and, consequently, dominate them.

Colonizers, influenced by missionary institutions, relied on anthropologists to study the religions, social and psychological traits, and economic resources of the peoples they sought to dominate. This was done to understand how these peoples thought, how they lived, what their goals were, and what might attract people in these societies. Undoubtedly, the studies conducted by anthropologists on these countries greatly benefited colonial circles by facilitating their control over them. As a result, this led to the launch of the major colonial movement, which extended to more than half of the Earth's surface.

5. Stages of Colonial Anthropological Studies:

Colonial anthropological studies can be divided into three main stages, during which anthropology evolved from studies and reports prepared by explorers and travelers, to studies and reports compiled by military officers and leaders of military campaigns, in addition to scientific and missionary expeditions. In the third stage, specialized academic scientific studies emerged, all of which served colonial control in one way or another:

5.1. The Exploratory Studies Phase:

This phase typically precedes the beginning of colonization. The studies during this phase focused on understanding the geographical location, the nature of the terrain, customs and traditions, and gathering ample information about the society, including the nature of exchanges, trade routes, important resources, traders, and markets, as well as all aspects of daily life. These exploratory studies required a series of expeditions, initially organized by non-researchers such as consuls, traders, and spies, who recorded their observations and conclusions about what was happening in these countries and sent them as reports to their home countries (Fawry, 1997, p. 85).

5.2. The Military Studies Phase:

These are descriptive studies carried out by officers and leaders of the occupation operations, which began almost in the early years of the colonization process. Their goal was to create topographic maps and produce daily reports on military campaigns, containing detailed information about the tribes, their population numbers, the nature of their activities, behaviors, morals, temperaments, and ethnic origins. It is also important

to acknowledge the role of the scientific missions that accompanied the colonization process. These missions played a dual role: researching and excavating material artifacts from ancient periods to link them to the colonization effort, and studying languages and dialects to serve colonial purposes (Bouhson, 2019, p. 70). Additionally, missionary expeditions also focused on religious beliefs and practices, working to spread Christianity in its various denominations. Their reports documented much information about the different religions and beliefs of the colonized peoples, providing various roles that facilitated the process of control and occupation (Al-Atabi, 2015).

5.3. The Phase of Specialized Scientific Studies:

These are studies that can be classified as academic, specialized writings. Although they are academic in nature, they remained in service of colonial interests. These studies were organized in terms of methodology and analysis, and during the colonial phase, they developed into anthropological and sociological writings. They focused on gaining precise details in the study of social structures, with attention given to the tribal system, as well as the religious, social, and economic roles of religious institutions (such as *zawiyas*) and cultural institutions. Indeed, these studies provided a strong impetus for further control over these societies and were used as a knowledge framework in many colonial administrative measures (Bouhson, 2019, p. 71).

6. A Critical Reading of Colonial Anthropological Writings:

Colonized societies during the colonial period were subjected to description and study. The nature of the individual, their behavior, language, religion, way of life, and ethnic composition were all objects of description and theorization. These studies were more closely linked to colonial interests than to objective perspectives, especially considering that those conducting these studies were not anthropologists but explorers, adventurers, military officers, and leaders of military campaigns. The first observations from these military reports and studies include:

6.1. The Superiority Complex:

Studies from the 18th and 19th centuries regarding societies in the "Other World"—as Europeans referred to it—were often characterized by racism. Many colonial theorists, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, and even writers and thinkers like Alphonse de Lamartine (Lamartine, 1864, p. 64), Victor Hugo, and others, analyzed and thought according to standards that devalued non-European peoples, considering them outside the civilized and historical context of advanced Christian Europe, which they viewed as superior in all aspects of life. Many thinkers of that time were aware that they were witnessing and shaping a historical era marked by the superiority of the European race over all other

racess (Grammaison, 2008, p. 12-13). The phenomenon of slavery is perhaps the most prominent example of this. Additionally, the idea of colonization had long been in their minds. They believed in the need for geographic, economic, and cultural expansion, and viewed their mission as one of bringing civilization to the "savage," "barbaric," or "primitive" peoples, as they labeled them. In their view, they had appropriated a long history of successive civilizations in these societies.

6.2. Denial of the Identity of Colonized Societies and Justification for Colonization:

Colonial anthropological studies have often operated under a certain ideology (primarily an Orientalist perspective) in an attempt to deconstruct the social systems of colonized nations, focusing on factors such as language and religion. In other words, they targeted the very foundations of identity in order to facilitate control over those regions. These studies also sought to erase significant historical periods from the history of these peoples, labeling them as backward and reactionary. For example, in Algeria, most colonial anthropological writings tried to erase the period of Islamic history and attempted to link the era directly to the Roman occupation in order to justify and legitimize the colonial occupation. Many of these studies focused on specific regions and employed a divide-and-conquer strategy by dividing society into binary categories (Arab–Berber), encouraging conflict between the two. One of the common assertions made by colonial anthropologists was that Arabs hate Berbers, and Berbers hate Arabs. This binary opposition became a sensitive tool for colonial theorists, who created what is called the "tribal myth," which, according to Philippe Lucas and Jean-Claude Vatin in their book *L'Algérie des Anthropologues*, is an irrational invention based on the arguments of deceitful scholars, aimed at political and economic containment (Lucas & Vatin, 1982, p. 14). By theorizing the origins of the Berbers and emphasizing differences from the Arabs in language and physical traits, colonial theorists initially sought to utilize the tribes by glorifying this ethnicity, considering Arabs as invaders rather than conquerors. They also attempted to downplay the role of Ottoman Algeria, labeling the Ottomans as occupiers, and based their reasoning on the final period of Ottoman rule, during which the state experienced weakness. They attributed this weakness to Islam, describing it as the primary cause of societal backwardness. From this, they sought to understand the function of traditional cultural institutions, such as endowments (waqf), zawiyas (Sufi centers), and Sufi orders, transforming these roles to serve colonial objectives. Within this framework, emphasis was placed on the role of women in society, describing their status, viewing them as inferior to men, and casting shameful judgments upon them. This was the abhorrent colonial perspective through which colonial powers

aimed to fragment society, eliminate its key characteristics, erase its identity, and attempt to link it geographically and historically to the northern shores of the Mediterranean.

6.3. Claiming the Mission of Civilization and Spreading Culture:

In his book *The Division of Labor in Society* (1869), Émile Durkheim described colonized societies as "tribes that have not surpassed the minimum level of organization," meaning they were barbaric, uncivilized tribes characterized by primitivism. This, he argued, necessitated their development through the imposition of the colonizer's culture. These were peoples living in regions labeled as "unknown" (INCONNU), and they even wrote books with such titles, such as "The Unknown Morocco" by Auguste Moulieras (Moulieras, 1895). These studies and others promoted the idea of "civilizing the society" or the "civilizing mission." This description aimed to promote a terrifying image of the peoples of these colonies, where the colonizer imposed a hypothesis through historical and anthropological writings—namely, that Islam could not keep up with science and the modern era, implying that Islam was opposed to civilization. What was written about Islam as a religion and the peoples who practiced it reveals the extent of the conspiracy and the deliberate efforts to create a rupture between Islam as a true religion and the society practicing it. This civilization, which the colonial powers sought to spread, was supported by another army dressed in civilian clothes, which included a group of experts, scholars, and specialists in human sciences (anthropologists) and natural sciences. They used the latest European intellectual advancements of the 19th century for purposes of domination and subjugation. These civilians contributed to planning massacres, openly inciting them, and some even claimed that such actions were the right of the victors. In the name of civilization and progress, they committed many crimes and wiped out numerous human races.

In this regard, we must cite the words of their theorists, as they express most clearly the extent of the destruction and backwardness that befell these peoples. Alexis de Tocqueville, in the report he submitted on behalf of the investigative committee that went to Algeria in 1847, says: "...We put our hands on the endowments designated for education and charitable work, we destroyed the schools that existed, we scattered the gatherings of scholars, and darkness fell everywhere we settled..." He concludes by stating: "We made the Islamic society more savage and barbaric than it was before we arrived." (Tocqueville, 2008). These words clearly and concisely summarize the colonial claim of spreading civilization and enlightenment, which was promoted to justify the occupation of these peoples.

7. The Contribution of Anthropological Studies to the History of Colonized Peoples:

Based on what has been mentioned above, can we definitively conclude and sentence the colonial anthropological studies to death? It is true that the foundation of these studies was purely colonial, and they provided significant services to colonial powers, at least in aiding control, exploitation, and the looting of resources, as well as preventing reactions from the populations in the colonies they controlled by understanding their behaviors and psychology. The colonial powers learned their lessons well from their previous experiences, as France, for example, did not repeat the same tactics of colonizing Algeria in its other colonies, particularly the excessive use of force. However, we cannot deny the role of anthropological studies in preserving part of our history, both the good and the bad. In fact, we owe those studies, despite their flaws, for the role they played in preserving this heritage in all aspects of life. Without them, much valuable information, which people cannot afford to lose, would have been lost. These studies provided us with a vast amount of documents, books, and research containing many concepts and theories about the human race, human civilization, daily life, and its problems, which continue to concern contemporary anthropologists. Furthermore, this heritage can offer us a foundation, ideas, and new information within the framework of combining the traditional thought of these societies with contemporary anthropology (Faheem, 1986, p. 201). The responsibility now lies in the collaboration of anthropologists and historians in sorting and reinterpreting real anthropology, free from ideology, that can be used in the development of these peoples, and in overturning all the characteristics and accusations that colonial anthropologists assigned to them.

In addition to preserving some of the cultural and historical heritage of these peoples, a group of Western anthropologists emerged during the liberation period after the end of World War II, defending the colonized societies. One of the most prominent examples of this is Frantz Fanon, who called for a focus on the national culture that had been despised by French anthropologists and emphasized the necessity of linking it to armed struggle. National culture is the driving force behind the liberation struggle that eliminates colonialism.

Although anthropology took a liberating and independent direction in the second half of the 20th century, this did not prevent the possibility of anthropological research results being misused in ways that harm the peoples under study (Orragi, 2013, p. 267). Some imperialist countries still use it in their wars, and like any science or source of knowledge, it is a double-edged sword, with its use depending on various factors and circumstances, over which anthropologists themselves may have little control (Faheem, 1986, p. 204).

There is no doubt that the project of "militarizing anthropology," adopted by the U.S. military, for example, in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan under the so-called program "Embedding Anthropologists in Military Operations" (HTS), represents one of the clearest examples of using applied anthropology in wars and conflicts.

Colonel Stephen Fondacaro explains the goals of this project by stating: "The scientists' task is to provide a clear understanding of the issues the military faces with local populations, where officers receive this information and, based on it, decide on the nature of the military actions they should take" (Al-Atabi, 2015).

Conclusion:

Anthropology is a relatively modern science, with its early roots emerging alongside the early stages of colonial movements that began in Europe and spread to the "other world": the New World, Africa, and Asia, which were considered unknown by Europeans. As a result, anthropological studies of these peoples were influenced by the old Orientalist perspective, characterized by a view of inferiority and superiority. The origins of anthropology, and its historical beginnings, were closely tied to colonialism, as studies were conducted on "uncivilized" societies to understand their structural and cultural characteristics, making it easier to colonize them. Thus, anthropology became a colonial tool par excellence, aimed at facilitating the colonization process and the subjugation of peoples. These studies passed through three major phases: the exploratory studies led by explorers and spies, the military studies conducted by officers and military leaders, and finally, the specialized academic studies, in which anthropology developed into a methodical science based on analysis.

The researcher who carefully examines anthropological studies during the colonial period will undoubtedly notice the repulsive racist outlook that relied on the superiority of the European race over other races. In this context, these studies worked to cement this theory by accusing the societies of the "other world" of primitiveness and backwardness, attributing this to religion in particular. These studies also justified colonialism through the theory of civilization and the claim of spreading culture. For this purpose, these studies aimed to negate the identity of the colonized peoples and dismantle their societies.

However, despite this, colonial anthropological studies provided these societies with significant benefits by preserving some of their cultural and historical heritage. Without them, these peoples would not have been able to learn much about their past, which can be relied upon to build their future. In this regard, anthropologists, historians, and other scholars could collaborate and benefit from these studies in an attempt to free them from

the remnants of Orientalism and to craft a new anthropology that serves development and the aspiration for a better future.

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