

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANGLE OF ANTOA – A NEW THEORY OF ART

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Abstract/Summary of Anthro of ANTOA

Aim of this article is to shed light on anthropological background of my New Theory of Art – ANTOA. Started as sociological investigation into the function of Art,, a visit to the Kalahari desert, and 24 Arts talks jelled the project.

But in human sciences back in the late 1980ies, no real research into the social side of artistic expression took place. I drew up a catalogue of questions and interviewed prominent Arts and Culture vultures in dying days of Apartheid. How did respondents see Art`s function, as firm commitment to building unity and trust, or as solitary glasshouse act, oblivious of social conditions?

While concepts like culture, society, civilisation and “tribe” are discussed, the analytical background extends to history of Art in Africa and early inquiries into myth and ritual by B Malinowski and AR Radcliffe-Brown.

Malinowski, enchanted by Polynesian creative finesse in limestone pot and canoe carving, fiercely supported the homebound view whereby anthropologists had to see the world thru eyes of the “native”.

Malinowski practiced participant observation, a new research technique.

Radcliffe-Brown described certain rituals with relation to matrilineal descent rules in a patrimonial society where the child inherits name of the father. While Art serves the function of staving off misfortune and disease. And establishes links to the past as well as to lineage of mother`s brother and sister`s son. The research is focused on South Africa and draws parallels to Fidji and the Friendly Islands in the Pacific.

I end the overview with reference to the shared sentiment of universal character of true Art, that functions like social glue and cements strong links to a mythological past. As well as links among men and material objects, and inside certain social networks. Where the value of tradition is elevated to moral law. And inspires and passes on meaning. Art has indeed gained analytical exposure since and compares favourably to myth and associated ritual activity.

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This article, entitled <Anthro Angle of ANTOA>
is a chapter from my NEW THEORY OF ART,
a follow-up study to my interview series
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When, in 1984, I visited a remote San/Bushman village in Botswana`s northern Kalahari, I unwittingly laid ground-work for social analysis of creative action. As remote as I lived from any “civilised plains” then, the Arts had always interested me. No matter if practiced in out-of-way regions under conditions yet to be revealed or in a familiar local environment.

Even before my initial steps into literary journalism in mid-1970ies, as editor of my high-school magazine, creativity had flowed and flourished, with the family group gladly supporting creative action, be that painting, handicrafts, music or writing. Add here multiple visits to museums, galleries, festivals, Art events.

Years later I suddenly found myself in deep bog, not of a theatrical quality, rather sauntering along thick sandtracks, negotiating inaccessible swamp ways, stormy coastline, when social uncertainty, fed by corruption and political upheaval, made an inroad. When an enquiry into creativity of stone-age hunter-gathers was seen as strange, baffling.

Scope of my fascinating research became clearer, broader, graspable as I studied conditions in South Africa in more detail. Extended focus from desert fields to the Arts, a somewhat lesser understood branch of social relations.

Yet, the ongoing racial conflict in region obscured and at same time enhanced the investigation. It became clearer, more concise what role the Arts can play in a situation of drastic change. Riveted on racial, social and economic inequalities.

**As happened in the sub-continent at the time.
Oddly though, Art was a no-go for most social analysis.**

Art rather suffered the paradox of raw symbolism and wild speculation, endless mystification, and provoked a good dose of unexpected distaste and scorn in the human sciences.

The house remained divided into social and cultural schools, yet Art`s blunted, almost wistful and rather unknown message, half forgotten, interestingly affected both.

Allegedly great minds were confused. Did the Art world indeed contribute to the overthrow of staid and worn conventions, racist laws, and that more taciturnly than the plot of a Le Carre spy thriller?

From a historical view, Social Anthropologists were interested in the human relations that signify social activity. And how they touched on each other in an interdependent network, where aspects like economy, moral, religion, leisure, craftworks stood in certain relations to each other. Similar to a basket woven out of countless strands where the various threads grew into one whole stand. Yielded an image of the work more clinical and accomplished than any “primitive and crude” method of endowing objects and constituent parts with creative value could invoke. And these bracelets and amulets from the East Coast were indeed woven from a cow`s tail? From a sacred animal that linked up with ancestors and gods?

Whereas the cultural branch often quoted a romanticised myth, a forgotten concept of man`s survival in nature as its messiah, the social side of Anthro assessed relations between people in a more multi-stranded and kinship-based network.

Yet one of the leading ideas of culture was its supremacy over nature, implicating a somewhat stifling colonial arrogance.

So that this obscure concept of society remained as seedy and controversial a beehive of political agitation as its “cultural” parent, wading thru thwarted aspirations and broken contracts.

Meanwhile that distant and promised land of “higher” cultured and civilised behaviour light years off.

Yet, a broken order that worked, condemned and analyzed on a corrupted scale of social inequalities was the result...Lacking allusions or sensible references to creative expression that could establish, compose universal meaning and applicable insights.

It rather set the landowner class against the workers` masses. Stirring that historical conflict that spelt trouble and iron curtains, and East opposing West, while nuclear capacity overshadowed stone-age harvesting and tilling. Coarse tools, carving objects with sensible application of the natural Arts appeared. A surprisingly skilful embroidering of ornaments, decorations, pottery, sculptures, ritual objects, etc. followed.

At same time, cohesive social relations inside the group sprang up. Revealing hidden creativity not exclusive to Southern Africa but found in the Polynesian islands around Papua New Guinea as well.

Yet other social scientists maintained that the world had become a haven of and for civilisation. This after diligent research in strange, inhospitable environments, leaving us clueless, confounded by inexplicable abstraction. Rather than sincerely interested. The centre occupied by urban projects and their bewildering context of senseless progress. Of people without architecture. Even here the embroidering by rituals, illustrating and filling empty worlds, makes cultural sense and provides a strong social glue. It shows how historical Nihilism in Eastern Europe predated the Bolshevik revolution.

Then applies creativity as yardstick for social progress. For innovation. Allegedly crude Art works become tools of revolution.

Would the resulting focus, a rather new angle of investigating cultural phenomena inadvertently lead to separate cultures, developing, rather languishing in separate areas?

The Apartheid regime constituted a twisted example of this view, while merely scientifically oriented researchers did establish more insights on cultured or civilised behaviour.

Independent of the artificially created differences, entrenching intolerant rulers and segregationists, many culturally focused researchers reinforced the intellectual fences erected by the Apartheid system.

This while a highly charged socio-political context thrived on discontent, upheaval and Marxism. It wasn't for nothing that UCT, whose human sciences section had been started by famed Social Anthropologist AR Radcliffe-Brown, was called “Moscow on the Hill”.

Those were the days of the Soviet Moscow, but coming to think of it, we are here talking historical days not much different from our current surge in Russian war-mongering.

Yet, after I published my Botswana Bushman adventures in two publications – Africa Insight magazine in Tshwane/Pretoria and ROOTZ cultural mag, I realized that the “Hill” suffered a sure lack of creative investigations. Along anthropological and sociological lines, considerate

of political, economical and historical references. And delving into the vibrant, meaningful universe of creative action, inspired by social unrest in turbulent times.

Extending the visit of remote areas, inhabited by nomadic hunter-gatherers who ground out mysterious ways of living, to analyzing Arts in social environments was a milestone indeed.

It took a while to reveal the real implications to me, though.

The signifiers and data troves from my research pad soon converted to a series of explanatory footnotes. Pointing to geographical and political links as well. The interview project grew on fertile analytical ground, establishing a rare connexion to unique history as well.

However, a seemingly chaotic upheaval, littered with racial coffins, eventually won the day and led to the watershed 1994 elections. The latter hammering the final nail into the system of separate development, assigning so-called group areas for separate cultures to a muddy graveyard, drained, swamped. And buried under distant utterings of an unintelligible past, yet eerily void of Arts and Culture as cornerstones of successful struggle.

Also not to forget a historically charged craft overload, at times called stylish, where refined works of raw proportions, fiercesome symbolism and remote origins, stretched their feelers far out into overseas museums and ethnographic collections.

And this without any inkling that cultural theft had occurred on a large scale. Instead, these skilfully carved objects, albeit declared primitive, barbaric, found new homes overseas, in European, American and Asian collections, on their own or their holders' sincere accounts. Europe and other northern zones had to know about Africa and its amazing Arts and Crafts universe!

As they also littered English, French, Dutch etc. embankments with original statues of bygone Pharaonic times.

Or with artistically carved bronzeheads or domestic entrance doors of West African fame. These awesome works rarely appreciated as outcomes of free-spinning creation.

Hosting deeper meanings and touched by universal truth, insights. Provoking wholesome appreciation. Urging our own creative sense to grow, come forth and step into the fray.

Into glaring headlights at the Modern He-ART Gallery in Soho, just round the corner from Cape Town's famed Greenmarket Square.

This was the situation after the Soviet Union had folded in 1991 and so-called millionaire welfare capitalism had taken over. Yet history then, with the welcome help of keen creative commitment, prepared the earthen, burgeoning fields of South African democracy.

Where Art had struggled for recognition yet had shone as handy tool of resistance against elitism and racism! Yes, that was accepted in academic circles, but Art as object of social study by oldest Anthropology department in the country? Not really.

As I expressed it in an interview from 2011. Given at the start of my exhibition in Cape Town, celebrating the official launch of the interview book.

Now a vivid ethnographic document and basis for a New Theory of Art.

The Anthro department at the University of Cape Town would not engage here, in a sort of controversial research disaster, as seen by the leading intellectual minds at the time. Analyzing lofty and emotional angles of creativity, at same time grounding it in social unrest and the urgency of regime change? Investigating inspiration, as it occurred in free-flowing and brave minds, opposed to racial supremacy and economic exploitation?

Definitely not, that wasn't on in leftist academic circles. Such research did not seem helpful or in demand. There was little to almost no research on social function in this field,

Rather, it was culture concepts over Art schools and artefacts over inspiring household objects and totems. The more abstract and unintelligible the ethnography, the better...

Meanwhile a new theorem could be built on and lifted off various cornerstones. The latter counted, marked, laid out, assessed in the pro and con method of scientific inquest. Where those aforementioned craftworks easily converted to religious objects, allowing for complex spiritual worship and secret initiation rites in secluded areas of remote villages. And giving meaning to social action and relations where none had been detected previously. Surrounding yet unkempt fields with the wealth and individual appeal of creative ingenuity.

However, missionaries and ethnographic researchers preferred the primitive side of local ethnicities – no matter in Africa, Asia or Latin America. Clergy and colonial state brazenly, wholeheartedly deriding the locals as 3rd world rarity, and called their “cultures” barbaric, crude and below acceptable standards.

The same “insiders” had already classified the home folks in swamps and along stormy coastlines as incapable of expressing creativity. Yet saw them ready to fall into the missionary trap, dangling an exciting carrot before their eyes. Namely that seemingly mindful carrot of education, prompting mass conversion to Christianity and installing printing presses next to mission schools. Learning how to read and write and be a god-fearing Christian wasn't so bad after all and justified the meagre spending of colonial admins.

These were also times in which academic researchers rarely penetrated or dug out the well hidden creativity in mythology. Lasted for 150 years or so this shameful period, and accompanied empire building in various parts of the world.

Luckily fertile fields eventually prospered, and the harvest of brazen cornerstones of socially significant artistry began, delivering Greek columns, Egyptian vases, Renaissance paintings, Malawian carvings, Mali's djembe drums.

Culture and mythology studies had dominated for decades, yet that a strong link could be drawn from creating historical meaning to social presence, immediacy, lastly ethnic belonging thru Art, thus delivering a glue as sticky as social context, was not on the rather hollow agenda. In none of the local Social or Cultural Anthro departments. And missing from overseas analytical radars as well!

Meanwhile if Mythology was substituted for Art, a new sense of creative action could be found. Ritual and ceremony become welcome and sophisticated pedestals for application of artful skills. Value, meaning, passion are attached. Nonetheless exercised by allegedly simple creatures, their carving of intricate patterns into wood and clay accomplished with blunt tools and stone-age wedges.

Was a black person in South Africa capable of meaningful creativity, lest of all of diligent and considerate and repetitive craftwork?

Art historians would answer in the affirmative but the leading political, missionary and magistrates` views would negate artistic ability in regional Black culture. And elsewhere in the so-called primitive, stone-age world, yet alive and kicking from the Kalahari desert to the Andaman and Fiji islands.

Even local insiders like Walter Batiss who had written books on the subject, stated that all East Coast groups in Southern Africa, like the Nguni, had lost their arty side due to migration. Due to their migrating down from the Highveld and then many groups chased off by Charka in a reverse north-easterly direction? Had once been creators of meaning in modified objects but now had degenerated to insensitive tribespeople?

Too much migration had apparently blunted their creative capacity...Oddly, this opinion stated by a well revered artist of the abstract age who had published his thoughts in written form. But who ignored the many arty crafts objects in Zulu social life, as much as attributing the wrong meaning to them.

Eventually A NEW THEORY OF ART, based on social action as much as on individual preferences and the skill and craft revolution, would rise up from the leaky, often prejudiced, twisted, also condemned and rejected data bed. Return to sender. From the base rock of my notebooks and audio-recordings, transcribed to book form. Where socio-political and individual links to the artists I had interviewed against the odds thrived.

Where fundamental elements of our social universe (networking, crafts overhaul) would constitute a solid foundation. And build trust in ancestral forefathers and mothers. Namely in benevolent rather than malicious welfare spirits, say guardians against colonial decay and European or "white" moral swamps. Bogs.

So, at most Anthro and Sociology departments, it was all about culture between 1960 and the early 1980ies, with culture a rather abstract idea, open to manipulation but surrounded by racial barriers. Rather than offering a home to humanity`s manifold associations, relations, social activities, driven by ethnic or language or economical, profitable rather than creative, arty desires. Expressions.

And, with this abstract and meaningless concept of culture often went together an alarming misinterpretation of man`s interaction with nature, the latter placed antagonistically to defeat vain efforts of/at civilisation. Culture was seen as man`s victory over the base forces and vagaries and oddly repetitive uncertainties, dominating the outside physical world, provoking skewered and one-sided, leaky and porous social responses.

Lacking creative claims and a universal context of shared sentiments. Such as masterly works of Art could induce, spell out in the wonderful and stimulating dialect of metaphor, simile and symbol. And many more signs of creative intervention could follow. Enhance the insight.

That creative action would come in handy here and underline our spiritual longing, our grounding in spirituality, in metaphorical messages, was welcome. Wisdom indeed rewards the soul, boosts sincere comprehension and adjusts cultural or ethnic belonging. However controversial the concept of culture and rarely aligned social activity comes across.

It all looked welcome, even self-evident now. Soon reason and intuition would follow, like clinical precision and free-flowing inspiration in creative action, symbolizing much more than chucking wastepaper into the bin.

The ominous gap jumping forth here became a stepping stone into my series of Arts and Culture interviews.

Published as Role of the Artist in Society between 1988 and 2011. Surely constituting a refreshing exception to the staid rule!

Meanwhile in real terms of personal safety and freedom of movement, no-go zones had maliciously spread all over South Africa at the end of the 1980ies. They existed indeed and would also become breeding ground for a new wave of discontent. Of dubious and murky vigilante origin. Sidelining the Arts for sure, pushing it into the empty realm of moral negligence and decay – the long awaited as much as dreaded breaking down of dinosaur Christian values, as prominent moral markers in an antiquated, tainted colonial society. Now at the mercy of revolutionary Africa. The latter itself wearing religious cloaks and kaftans to gain self-conscious political edges. And then taken over and enhanced by, the moral decline and creative abandonment, rather say:

self-adjusted to the new airs of freedom and free movement. End of racial oppression. This achieved with the irresistible zest for new-found impetus, reaching for the carrot of creative freedom. Of good allround education. Of social independence. Expressed in political reform and bridging the gap to a tragic lack of learning. The new system of governance, though applying dated judicial rules, held these aims in safe custody and for the common good of the nation.

And that Art rather related to a historical- philosophical school of scientific enlightenment and progress, the clarity of expression, thought and style, marking common values of a certain people, feeding a universal theme with strong local vernacular, romantic rather than empiricist in nature, never struck intellectuals or scientific researchers as relevant or interesting at the time.

Art and creative action as worthy of structured anthropological evaluation or deeper social research?

I kept on against the odds and it indeed took some time but eventually I had established a framework of questions that appeared in 22 of the 24 talks. A relevant scaffolding had been erected around these interviews, propping up the new-found tool of socially motivated creativity. Soon harvested by the functional method and overcoming political challenges and deepseated economic inequities.

Releasing craft styles and images, at times motivated by religious, mythical and ancient symbols, so I could attach them to universal sentiment. To a common feeling of enlightenment. Of insight and truth, passed on and enriched by masterful creativity.

Passed on from generation to generation even though an abyss between young and old in rural and outlying societies had opened up.

And seen from the creator`s or art worker`s angle, building an open-ended experience, rather than propagating the fixed truth of a lifeless object.

The chasm had narrowed again.

Meanwhile social function had traditionally been studied among so-called “primitive tribes” in eastern Papua New Guinea by the Polish-British researcher Bronislaw Malinowski. He made for that famous contemporary and hard-rubbed rival of Radcliffe- Brown.

Malinowski was seen as the first truly “scientific explorer” in native, savage lands of remote outlays, inhabited by wild perpetrators of and actors in seemingly incomprehensible, barbaric, actually romanticized and heavily idealized rituals. Contributors to a strong social fabric that allowed for the stale dichotomies of us and them, friend and foe, high gods and low evil spirits, exorcised and banished by magicians and sorcerers, by past and present guardians of spirituality and common liability. Ritual’s function was to squeeze a loose fabric of conventions in one frame. Reinforcing, supporting, invoking, legitimizing Myth and Art as the oldest of social threads. Their value as imaginative pointers to a future mind underestimated.

The system of social function was at times motivated by the study of cannibalistic groups, just think of Malinowski’s ground-breaking research in East Papua. Serving up for the folks at home, in far distant Europe the perfect pretext for looking down on intolerable and stubborn, flesh eating aborigines.

Yet Malinowski tried to avoid that trap and pointed out that besides applying a certain method of gathering data, here supported by participant observation, the ethnographic researcher needed to slip into the native mind as well!

He/she had to see the world thru “wild”, “primitive” eyes and realize that most prejudices held in the western, preferably Anglo-French academic world back then were useless. Proved counter-productive and did not serve as tool of ethical analysis of distant social realms. Or of remotely situated groups living out rather different modes of religion, of sea-faring and canoe-building and economic exchanges (See the Kula exchange in the Trobriand islands).

Whereby Malinowski goes as far as saying that besides a system of sharing material goods, the specific method of barter called Kula also helped the spread of Art, morals and ritual practices. He elaborates that not the creative product was of importance, eg the distinctly carved canoe, but the people or artists (sculptors) who had produced it, had endowed it with their own feelings. Which subsequently gained a larger meaning as universal pointers to shared sentiments. Now buried deeply and proudly passed on in exceptionally stylish and impressive works of Art and Craft. Called crude carvings, empty of deeper meaning yet achieved with “native joy”. Made by sophistication instead, radiating talent. This as inner truth of the modelled object after misleading European terms, notions had been stripped off, done away with.

So how exactly would Anthropology unearth the secrets and mechanisms behind a new and strange world of associations?

Apply social function to the branches of East Papuan “tribal” society and how interaction of various threads or social strata worked? Like leadership, laws, conventions, canoe-building, trade, etc.?

Myth and Art now dependent on each other, though operating on different social levels, working in reverse, too, in a new way round. And serving certain functions, upholding and cementing the social net, legitimising traditions and facilitating communication...

Stated in a more academic fashion by Malinowski's rival, AR Radcliffe-Brown.

Who had looked at the kinship base of ethnic society in eastern Australia and South Africa, and uncovered matrilineal lineage in male dominated, patrilineal village life.

This odd reverence to the mother's brother and sister's son present not only in the Friendly Islands and among Polynesian groups of the Pacific but also amongst Bathonga, Shona, Xhosa and Nama speakers in Southern Africa.

While the birth of a child was awarded with the father's name, implying strict adherence to patrilineal sanctions, a more caring, mother-to-child element prevailed in the matrilineal family section. And Art serving as saviour, although unwittingly, producing ritual ornaments like amulets or necklaces against evil spirits, sorcery, misfortunes, disease or dangerous animals. Affecting the mother and her children, attached to her own family lineage through "Ubulunga (Xhosa), Ditsoa (Sotho) or Lobola (Nguni)" cattle, given at marriage. The latter cementing structured marital rites, invoking creative skills and vivid motives in weaving or carving of protective Art and craft products. Their materials taken from that same sanctimonious cattle that constituted the living link to benevolent ancestral spirits, staving off real physical or moral danger. This a plausible connexion to the power of shared sentiments, imbued by artistic skills into objects of underrated moral notions, albeit yielding strong protection against misfortune and diseases.

And here we uncover a certain but rather neglected, swiped over conclusion, drawn from early 20th century ethnographic accounts. Rarely seen as basis for analysis of creativity's function, its role as moral and aesthetic building material to tie social strands into a solid and unbreakable construct, a brilliant intellectual edifice, often overlooked. And rarely assessed for or thought or considered of deeper value.

Anyhow, research funds were hard to come by and doggedly controlled by investigators of cultural barriers and artificial entities who spoke Dutch and French-related Afrikaans dialects as first language. These local variations of Dutch vernaculars had surprisingly grown into ethnic fruition, integration in the Southern African sub-continent.

Despite the fact that undaunted Arts workers and creative practitioners, not to mention outstanding historians lived in their ranks, the culture of ethnic separation had stalled most innovative research thinking. Social science development lagged behind drastically in the early 1920ies as well. At a time when both, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, came to South Africa.

Projects that delved into the functional end of social togetherness in a certain geographical region soon took the lead in scientific circles.

But again, many such studies remained outside of real relevance, excluded by outdated racist laws such as the Group Areas Act or Bantu Education, an absurd supremacist construct that contributed to a disturbing lack of sensible education for African learners. And served as pretext for a century-old rivalry between Dutch and English academic malpractices.

Meanwhile, Art's contributions to the social and political victory of 1994 were non-negotiable, and in fact aided the successful upheaval against Group Areas and Detention without Trial. Doing so with a unification drive, applying resistance-prone symbols and poetic dialect, sharpened by the fierce necessities of socio-economical upheaval. Tearing at and eventually

bringing down this weird and artificial Apart-heid misnomer, spewing social toxicity, in fact falling apart like aged and brittle rubble. With no to very little Art value attached.

As the writer Richard Rive pointed out in our talk:

what is that, a country called non-Europe? A people that is non-white? A load of rubbish for sure, but definitely not a valid cultural edifice, although teeming with social and ethnic barriers. With prejudices hardened into unequal laws. Propagating and in defence of “white, western, European, capitalist” control, lastly supremacy, and building on well hidden structural violence.

Oddly, to signify an unexpected marker, Radcliffe-Brown supported the integrating element in social studies. He acknowledged South Africa’s ethnic diversity as melting pot of great potential, namely for a social net in opposition to racial exclusion.

Mr Malinowski, despite the far-reaching implications of his hands-on investigation of Pacific islanders, sided with a somewhat conservative, rather romanticized separation of different ethnic groups. Yet he could not be held accountable for that unscientific rabble in shape of the ugly laws, realized, set into motion by the Apartheid system from 1948 to 1994.

His was a more noble and global idea of differing cultural aspirations, coming to fruition in separate regions, and still drew on the late 19th century concept of heroic culture as opposed to and in control of antagonistic nature.

Astonishingly, Art has indeed gained socio-academic exposure in meantime and compares favorably to Myth and associated ritual activity. Stepping up to a fine challenge for my theory. Where Art and Craft and Culture manage to grasp a strong leadership position of the spiritual realm, legitimized by vivid and often misunderstood symbols, culminating in sensible messages and sincere communication. Creative symbols not only eliminate the dangers of disease and misfortune in so-called primitive society, but also tie individual aspirations to shared universal sentiment in the modern age.

Whereas ancient rituals and inspiring ceremonies fanned the fires, lighted by yet tenacious creative expressions. All too often overlooked in relevant queries of social function in Art.

Similarly, inspiring craft techniques shape and release new messages, constitute a pliable, flexible putty, joining the various tiles of a large mosaic. That is spread over structured and complex floorboards, trodden over by hunter-gatherer as well as pastoralist groups, let alone forming a poorly visible, yet sensibly appreciated base for modern Arts and Crafts, Art and Culture movements.

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