CHAPTER 2

Developing the ‘Other’: Perceptions of Africans and change

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Introduction¹

Developing the ‘other’ – in this case Africans – should here be understood in two distinct ways that partly overlap and depend upon each other. On the one hand, the rationale for development aid is that there is someone somewhere – countries or people – who can develop. On the other hand, for this kind of development to happen there needs to be another group of ‘others’ – the donors, in this case the broadly defined ‘West’ – who will take part in facilitating the development. Thus, at the outset, there are two categories of ‘others’ – the Africans and the Westerners. Both parties are dependent upon each other and have to be ‘developed’ as concepts prior to the actual ‘development’.

But this relationship is largely an asymmetrical power dependency. Moreover, this dichotomy of the ‘other’ African seen in relation to the ‘West’ is a product of history that has developed over time. The perceptions of the African ‘otherness’ also constitute frames for understanding development practices. Although today the dark and murky colonial perceptions largely belong in the past, Africa and the African ‘other’ are still, to varying degrees, perceived as different. Various perceptions of the ‘other’ also have implications for understanding processes of change and the premises on which they occur, and this is also reflected in today’s development discourse.

The overall aim of this chapter is to address the concept of the ‘other’ and ‘otherness’, as well as the development and the developing of the ‘other’ and how this relates to changes on the African continent – past and present. This will be analysed through four perspectives: first, a theoretical and anthropological discussion of how to approach the ‘other’; second, a historical examination of the concept of the African ‘other’ from colonialism onwards; third, a look at whether Africans have contributed to these perceptions by developing a Pan-African ideology and philosophy; and finally, a presentation of images of ‘others’ in the

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development discourse, mainly as portrayed in the media, with examples drawn particularly from Norway. Taken together, this will form the basis for a comparative discussion of developing the ‘other’ as part of the development discourse.

Captain Cook and the Clash between Giants

Before entering the development discourse, it may be useful to approach the problem from a theoretical and anthropological standpoint. One of the last major clashes in anthropology between prominent and dominant anthropologists of our time took place in the early 1990s. One of the leading authorities on the history of the Pacific, Marshall Sahlins, had written extensively on the topic, including *Islands of History* (1985). In 1992, another distinguished anthropologist, Gananath Obeyesekere, published *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European mythmaking in the Pacific*, which featured a harsh critique of Sahlins.

Sahlins’ first response was not to comment on Obeyesekere, preferring to leave that to other scholars and reviewers. But most of the thirty or so reviews of Obeyesekere’s book were quite positive, and he was even awarded two prizes for it. So if anybody wanted to defend Sahlins, it had to be himself. His response was another book: *How ‘Natives’ Think: About Captain Cook, for example* (Sahlins 1995). This book has been labelled remorseless revenge (Borofsky 1997: 256).


Obeyesekere’s work is variously described (to give but a small alphabetical sample) as: absurd, anti-anthropological, blundering, blustering, careless, contradictory, defective, dubious, evasive, epistemic murk, falsely accusative, fictitious, highly righteous, helter-skelter, implausible, misrepresentational, pidgin-anthropology, quixotic, scattershot, slanderous, scholier-than-you, solipsistically fallacious, stratified palimpsest of confusion and contradiction, symbolically violent, ventriloquism, willy-nilly, wrong, unaware, unhistorical [and more].

On the other hand, Obeyesekere himself admitted that he had written, wit-tingly and unwittingly, in a ‘satiric mode of shaming’ (Obeyesekere 1997: 270). The language he used, and his wordplay, reflected this: in the second edition of his book, for instance, he added a 63-page reply to Sahlins entitled ‘On de-Sahlinization’. He also admitted that the reason he wrote his book in such a