

Narrating History and Anthropology: JDY Peel's 'The Past in the Present'

John Peel was my 'oga'. In Nigerian popular slang 'oga' connotes boss and patron, and as my PhD supervisor at SOAS in the 1990s, a colleague in the anthropology department there during the early 2000s, and as my editor, mentor and friend in subsequent years, he was many things besides. I will always consider myself uniquely fortunate to have received such generous and rigorous support from him over the years, though I am reminded, from similar sentiments in the tributes paid to him since his death in November 2015, that he was, in fact, an 'oga' to so very many of us.

In terms of his scholarship there can be no doubt that the trilogy of books on religion will be his most significant legacy. His landmark studies were on conversion, on syncretism, on encounters and comparisons. *Aladura* (Peel 1968), *Religious Encounters* (Peel 2000) and *Christianity, Islam and Orisa-religion* (Peel 2015), are marked, in part, by a methodology concerned above all by an enquiry into the nature of the 'thing in itself' as he used to say - a concern to understand religious practices and processes as that, individual and collective quests for spiritual security. And in part these works stand out because they are studies of social adaptation and of profound historical transformation. As such, therefore, they test the ways in which we account for continuity and change.

Indeed, John's broader contribution to historical anthropology was also remarkable. He insisted on the need for anthropology to reconcile itself with history. He argued that human beings produce sociocultural form through an arch of memories, actions and intentions (Peel 1995: 582-3). Narrative is the way in which that arch may be expressed, rehearsed, shared and communicated. It is this which gives human action its inherent historicity or lived-in-timeness and which requires an anthropology that, to be adequate to its subject matter, should be essentially historical. He set a benchmark of how to write this form of anthropology in his social history of a Yoruba town in *Ijeshas and Nigerians* (Peel 1983). And in the process of this work and other writing he engaged with and shaped one of the most enduring theoretical problems in anthropology - the problem of continuity and change, or the past in the present. Accounting for the underlying structural continuities in otherwise dynamic and shifting social processes has remained a key tension in our theorising 'since the '60s' (Ortner 1984), and John's contribution was to draw our attention to the role of narrative, and how accounts of the past could shape how present and future practice.

In this short note I wish only to acknowledge and draw our attention to the unique features of John's views on 'the past in the present'. The paper of his which is most closely associated with this analysis is 'Making History, The Past in the Ijesha Present'. 'Making History' was published in *Man*, now the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* in 1984. It came out just after *Ijeshas and Nigerians* was published to such acclaim. It was a reflection on that ethnography, and was one of those insightful

articles where he reviewed, synthesised and theorised.¹ It is written with John's characteristic density of argument and comparison, and its aim was to show:

... how a society's sense of its past is integral to its self-production through time. In other words, how is it that making history, on the plane of social action directed at realising a future, is so closely involved with making history, in the sense of giving accounts of the past?

John positioned his focus on narratives of the past in the present within the debates on 'conjectural history' from Malinowski, Cunnison to Bohannan, and arrived at a problematic concerning the 'presentism' anthropology feared of history. Beyond the distorting effects of present interests on representations of the past - what John called a necessary methodological warning - he argued that the real problems were twofold - *how* 'mythical charters' of the past were believed, and, more broadly, *why* present interests are necessarily justified in terms of the past.

The first question will be familiar to John's readers since it appeared elsewhere in his work in different guises - in relation to religious belief itself (Peel 2000), and to ethnicity (Peel 1989), for example, as well as to history. John consistently argued that narratives of conversion, belonging, and the past should be explained in their own terms, and not reduced to the effects of external pressures. By accepting that beliefs were 'at least' what they purported, he asked how these ideational constructs gain traction, and become credible, believable and part of lived experience. How 'mytho-historical charters' are legitimated, he argued, has to depend on them 'being believed, i.e., on its plausibility to its intended audience, and not simply on the *force majeure* of powerful agents which wish to promote them.'

The second problem of the 'past in the present' is why present interests should need historical justification at all. Why do societies like the Yoruba, for instance, 'seem to require consciously to reconstitute their past as part of their self-production'? His analysis of the dialectic of present interests in terms of the past took John's work in many directions and he revisited concepts of time, agency, rhetoric, and the philosophy of history in the course of this enquiry. But his particular challenge was to examine the ways in which historical narrative, the stories we tell ourselves about our pasts, are projected into the present and future to legitimate current actions in the name of cultural continuity and historical precedent. He was especially intrigued with how present action was informed by accounts of historical precedent, and hence how 'making' history (oral, ritual or written) could not only appear to reproduce the social order - a form of stereotypical reproduction - but was also integral to its actual transformation.

John's work at that time inflected many theoretical interests and influences. But he spoke of his time in Chicago very fondly, (he was a Visiting Professor jointly in the Departments of Anthropology and Sociology, 1982-83) and, while there, was inspired and challenged by Marshall Sahlins' ideas. Sahlins had published his landmark study, *Historical metaphors and mythical realities* just a few years earlier in 1981. It was a moment - what Bernard Cohn (1981) called a 'rapprochement' - between the social

¹ The title of the last chapter of *Ijeshas and Nigerians* was also 'The Past in the Present'.

historians and the anthropologists, and John was at its forefront. In the wake of that study, anthropologists were probing the classic question of continuity and change – how are societies able to endure in the face of radical change, absorb new dynamics and reproduce themselves in familiar, conservative, stereotypic ways. Sahlins' take on the ways in which world views could do the 'cultural work' of making sense of change 'according to meaningful schemes of things', was powerful. And John acknowledged that in tracing the ideational links between the past and the present, it was necessary, in part, to trace how ongoing practical activity is continuously 'organized by structures of significance' (Sahlins 1981: 8) which were not merely derived *from* the past but regarded as essentially *of* the past. Sahlins, indeed, argued that history is sedimented in the institutions and practices of culture, and culture, he famously wrote, was 'the organisation of the present in terms of the past' (Sahlins 1985: 155).

Yet, for John, this version of the past in the present, the replication of past practice, or 'habitus', as Bourdieu called it, was premised on too static a notion of culture, and failed to include a conscious, constructed account of the past; it was 'history turned into nature' (Bourdieu 1977: 72). Sahlins' model suggested that change was confronted with an unproblematic cultural endowment, and elided a crucial area of reflexivity (Peel 1993: 172). John argued that plural narratives lead us to see culture as fugitive, contested, reinvented and vulnerable to historical contingency (Peel 1993: 175). For John then the past was not merely received, it needed to be represented, and that process, 'making history', had to be studied in and of itself - it could not be reduced to cultural categories nor to the pattern of present interests it reflected. It is this sense of 'making history' as representation rather than cultural habitus, that John developed:

... if the traditional order is seen more in terms of human projects than of a system of cultural categories, then how people represent those projects to themselves, that is histories as told, becomes fundamental to cultural description. Sahlins', despite his declared objective of bringing history and anthropology together on equal terms, inclines to privilege culture over history, to try to show how far history can be enclosed within culture (Peel 1993: 173).

John's ethnographic cases illustrated this examination of the 'deeply constitutive place of history-making in the lives of individuals and societies' (Peel 1993: 175). Rather than presenting a model of transitions between given cultural orders or ages of history, John emphasised a dynamic process, premised on a critical dialectic between the present and representations of the past. In the Ijesha case, for instance, narratives of the past are integral to contemporary forms of political practice. Despite the circulation and consumption of written histories, Ijesha *Itan*, the oral histories or charters of social institutions such as title holders, lineages, and communities remained important at the time of John's study. A central feature of chieftaincy *itan* was their paradigmatic quality in dealing with the relationship between chiefs and their subjects. A familiar scenario is rehearsed in chieftaincy *itans* (chieftaincy histories), as well as an annual ritual ceremony (*Iwude*) in which violent opposition is recalled towards abusive and self-aggrandising chiefs. These traditional accounts, of the Ijesha rising up to check the tendency of the *Owa* to exploit them, and which were revisited in violence in Ijesha in 1941 and 1966, showed how the 'doctrine' of stereotypic reproduction of *itan* narratives were adapted to present and future circumstances to serve as a kind of control on the modern political class (Peel 1984: 127).

Not only were *itan* relevant to everyday social reproduction, therefore, but they were also relevant to new and changing configurations of power and conflict. And as such *itan* shaped the nature of change which, in turn, was made to accord with the precedent of past practice the *itan* narrated: 'An *itan* is an active force because through it, history is *made* to repeat itself' (Peel 1984: 118). By conflating subjective and objective attitudes to the past John argued that structuralist histories had failed to capture the *dialectical* relations between past and present that shaped stereotypical reproduction.² The conclusion John drew from his analysis regarding this dialectical relationship merits full quotation:

These societies thus give themselves deliberately to a task of 'stereotypic reproduction': they strive to *make* history repeat itself. ... The important point is the mutual conditioning of past and present which is thus achieved: where possible, present practice is governed by the model of past practice and, where change *does* occur, there is a tendency to rework the past so as to make it appear that past practice has governed present practice. This stereotypic reproduction serves both to slow down social change and to deny that such change occurs: it must be understood both as an achievement in the face of history and as a constituent of it. This is the dual character of stereotypic reproduction, where practice and representation constantly limit each other to impart some sense of control over the vicissitudes of history (Peel 1984: 113).

Narratives, John argued, evoked the past for a range of reasons and not just for the stereotypical reproduction of social orders, but for radical social transformation too. Further dimensions of the 'past in the present' emerged in his work on religion encounter, which he developed in 'For who hath despised the day of small things?' Missionary narratives and historical anthropology' published in 1995 (in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*). Drawing on the journals of Church Missionary Society African agents John explored their various forms of narrative structure and rhetoric. These missionary narratives projected Biblical precedents into prophecy, and grafted prayers and parables into indigenous historical chronicles so as to anticipate individual and collective redemption. For individuals such as Samuel Crowther, the Bible offered paradigmatic histories that shaped personal narrative - he relaunched his religious career with the baptism of his mother (from whom he had been separated for 30 years) as Hannah. And on a more general level, the missionary strategy, John argued, was to take up indigenous historical assessments of the Yoruba wars and associated enslavement and rewrite them into a new narrative in which Christianity would resolve the problems of the age (Peel 1995: 605). In this context 'history doubles as prophecy' (Peel 1995: 601), and 'The religious encounter was less a matter of the clash of world views, considered as timeless sets of moral and theological alternatives, than it was a contest between rival narratives or schemes for how individuals and communities should project themselves over time' (Peel 1995: 600).

² Elsewhere he wrote: 'the past (qua representations) must be made through an engagement with its traces: the past (qua antecedents) is not just the source of the categories which shape action, but exists in a dialectical relationship with categorising agents, who make their past as they act to realize their future' (Peel 1993: 175).

In the context of nineteenth century religious conversion, and twentieth century Ilesha history, then, John identified not only the relevance of historical narration to future-oriented social formation but a key point about the relationship between past and present: 'Making history is really a single process with two strands: the practice of fashioning a future social order entails a constant reevaluation of the past' (Peel 1984: 129). As such we must recall that a key part of his scholarly legacy will be an orientation of historical anthropology that focuses on narrative – the 'making of history': 'narratives-as-lived are the proper subject matter of an historical anthropology and any anthropology that takes seriously the idea of human agency will be concerned with how narratives-as-lived are shaped by narratives-as-told (Peel 1995: 606).

While sympathetic to practice theory as an approach, John argued that narratives were an 'integral' but overlooked part of the definition as outlined by Ortner (1984). Narrative, he argued, was a universal human trait and whether it involved the mundane and personal, or the epic and collective, it had universal import in our understanding of human agency:

... While narrative as a universal human capacity underlies all forms of historical consciousness, it is always realised in forms that are affected by particular material, social, and cultural conditions. In all its forms, from the simple stories that enable individuals to schedule their activities over time to the complex histories that maintain social hierarchies and national identities, narrative empowers through enhancing the capacity for action.' (Peel 1995: 585)

The anthropology of the past in the present has been dominated by structural histories, notions of cyclical time, and stereotypical reproduction, but John's work on 'the past in the present', and his insistence on the dynamic interaction between the two, drew him to a model which sought to embrace the contingencies and vicissitudes of historical transformation. For, as he quite beautifully argued: 'The wilderness of history will always tend to overgrow the gardens of culture' (Peel 1993: 178).

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