

Interview with Professor Steve Tonah, University of Ghana

Steve Tonah is a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Ghana in Legon, Accra. His main academic interest is in conflict and migration studies. The interview was conducted by Gabriele Rosenthal on 1st May 2019.

G.R.: I am pleased to have this chance to talk to you today about the situation of sociology in Ghana. For you there is obviously a close biographical link between sociology in Ghana and in Germany, and you have gained academic degrees in both countries.

S.T.: Yes, I got my BA in Economics and Sociology in Ghana in 1982. Then I studied in Bielefeld from 1985 to 1989 and gained a Diplom (equivalent of MA) in sociology, and in 1993 I was awarded a PhD, also in Bielefeld.

G.R.: What was the subject of your dissertation?

S.T.: It was on the development of agropastoral households in northern Ghana. My supervisor was Günther Schlee.

G.R.: Can you tell me more about it, especially about your empirical research?

S.T.: I wrote about the role of the Fulbe nomad cattle herders in agricultural development in the north of the country, and the transformation of subsistence economies in rural areas. In the 1970s and 1980s the government tried to improve the life of farmers in the north of Ghana with big irrigation projects. But the result was that the smallholders were displaced by large-scale farmers. In other words, the government failed to achieve its goal which was to improve the life of the smallholders.

G.R.: What was your impression of sociology in Germany, after you had studied it in Ghana?

S.T.: We students had the great advantage that sociology is very standardized, so that we studied the classics in sociology, such as Comte, Spencer, Karl Marx and Weber. There was hardly any difference between Ghana and Germany, including the methods taught; we learned quantitative and qualitative methods, the same as in Bielefeld. But in Bielefeld everything was in German, there were no courses in English. So the problem was the language. And in Germany I had to read more! There were so many more books and we even met the authors; for instance I saw Norbert Elias¹. We had read about him in Ghana, he was even here in the 1960s. We were happy to meet such people.

G.R.: Elias was a professor and head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Ghana from 1962 to 1964 (after already spending a year there as a visiting lecturer in 1957).

S.T.: Yes, for three years.

G.R.: Does his work have any influence today on sociology in Ghana, is it read?

S.T.: Of course, or rather it is being read again. His main works, meaning of course *The Civilizing Process*, but also *The Established and the Outsiders*. These are his two best known works in Ghana, which are currently very popular.

G.R.: In what areas of sociology would you say that the analysis of established-outsider relations plays a role? I ask because my colleagues and I at the Center of Methods in Göttingen strongly believe in using methods from figurational sociology in biographical research.

S.T.: Elias' theory of established-outsider relations plays an important role both in the sociology of rural development and in the sociology of migration. In Ghana, as in many other African countries, access to land for example is determined by the principle of "firstcomer versus latecomer". The firstcomers are usually the established farmers, while the latecomers are people who have come recently, or the outsiders.

¹ Elias was a visiting researcher at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) in Bielefeld from 1978 bis 1984, and after that he repeatedly gave lectures in Bielefeld, including a lecture on 8th May 1985 to mark the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

G.R.: Let me go back to your situation as a student in Germany. I expect you found sociology in Germany very Eurocentric?

S.T.: Yes, of course. We mainly read European authors. That was the time when the French authors were beginning to be known. And in Bielefeld we were strongly influenced by Luhmann. That was very Eurocentric. When I returned to Ghana, I noticed this because my colleagues had been in North America, and they had learned much more there about American sociology, while we in Germany heard relatively little about it.

G.R.: And sociology from the Global South was never mentioned?

S.T.: Hardly at all, but I must say that there were very few texts from there. Today there are a lot more, including some classical texts. Well, in the past there was no sociology, only scholars such as Ibn Batutta, Islamic scholars who were very influential in Mali, in Timbuktu. But they wrote in Arabic or Persian, and their works have only recently been translated. But now we have integrated them in our sociology, including the philosophers.

G.R.: What would you say is the most important contribution of these Islamic scholars to sociology?

S.T.: The works of the Islamic scholars occupy an important place in the history of sociological analysis. With their studies of African societies and accounts of their travels in West Africa, these scholars have made considerable contributions to our understanding of local societies and their social structures.

G.R.: Let us talk about the work of Ghanaian scholars. It is a known fact that in Ghana there is a close connection between sociology and the political elite. For instance, Kofi Abrefa Busia was Prime Minister of the Second Republic in Ghana (from 1969 bis 1972) and during a period of exile from 1959 to 1961 he was Professor of Sociology and Culture at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands². Has he left any traces?

S.T.: Yes, of course he's still very influential in respect of democracy and what is here called "local government". His doctoral thesis, it was in

² Previously (from 1951 to 1954) Busia had been a lecturer in African Studies at the University of Ghana (then University College of the Gold Coast); after the overthrow of his government (which lasted from 1969 to 1972), he lived in exile in the Netherlands and Great Britain.

anthropology, was on the subject of “chieftaincy”. It’s still the classic text today, he wrote it in Oxford, it was later published, on the Ashanti³, and then he did a lot on democracy and rural development. His inaugural lecture in Leiden (in 1960), by the way, was entitled “The Sociology and Culture of Africa”.

G.R.: Chieftaincy was also one of your main subjects and now you are working more on migration.

S.T.: Yes, but with regard to migration studies, I’ve been engaged in that field for a long time, my research on the Fulbe nomads is also about migration. I have been working on pastoralism for thirty years, but today my research is more focused on what is often referred to as irregular or international migration.

G.R.: Could you say something about your work on the Fulbe? I personally think this research is very important in the context of discussions on migration, border policies and the significance of nation states.

S.T.: I began my research on the Fulbe nomads on the border between Ghana and Burkina Faso in 1989. Immediately afterwards I published an ethnographic study of the Fulbe in Ghana. It was mainly concerned with their migration history and their relations with sedentary – or established – farmers and with the Ghanaian government. Since the 1970s several governments have tried to drive the Fulbe out of Ghana. But they haven’t succeeded because the economic livelihood of the Fulbe is closely intertwined with that of the indigenous farmers. In the 1990s my research was focused on the government’s border policies. I also compared the situation of the Fulbe in Ghana with their situation in Ivory Coast, in Burkina Faso and in Nigeria.

G.R.: Is migration studies an area in which sociologists in Ghana are interested, or are you alone in this respect?

S.T.: In sociology I’m alone, but we have several institutes here, migration centres. We have a cross-discipline centre. It works on an interdisciplinary basis: geographers, sociologists and historians. But in sociology I’m the only one.

³ The title of Busia’s PhD thesis was “The Position of the Chief in the Modern Political System of Ashanti”.

G.R.: How do you explain that? And what are you currently working on in the area of migration studies?

S.T.: Here in Ghana, research on migration is dominated by geographers. In my case, it was my research on Fulbe nomads that slowly aroused my interest in migration studies. I'm currently working on migration from West Africa to Europe via Libya.

G.R.: If not migration, what are the main research topics in Ghanaian sociology?

S.T.: The main topics include urban and rural sociology, sociology of health, sociology of industry, sociology of law, African social thought, environmental sociology. Especially development sociology is still a major topic, and of course the sociology of gender, which is an interdisciplinary field, but in sociology it's a required course. Everyone has to do it, it's impossible to imagine a sociologist in Ghana without a knowledge of the sociology of gender.

G.R.: To what extent does gender play a role in your work, or to put it more concretely, what role does it play in your current research?

S.T.: In Ghana, students of sociology are taught the importance of gender very early on. For this reason I have always attached importance to it in my work. For example, women play a very important role in the life of nomadic Fulbe herders. That can't be overlooked. In my research, I have therefore always tried to take the female perspective into account.

G.R.: You said earlier that when you returned to Ghana in 1993 American sociology was the dominant influence. Is this still the case?

S.T.: Yes, it is, but European sociology, like Beck and the risk society, or the Frankfurt School, or Niklas Luhmann, now has a place in North American sociology. In other words, these European authors have become known in Ghana via America. We now read the works of Habermas, Luhmann, Elias, Horkheimer, and of course more recent authors. It's not as one-sided as it was twenty years ago.

G.R.: At that time, were you the only Ghanaian sociologist doing a PhD in Germany?

S.T.: I can't really say. I knew which universities offered degrees in sociology, like Berlin, Göttingen, Marburg, Frankfurt, Munich, and so on, but I didn't know if there were any Ghanaians there.

G.R.: What would you say is the main effect of having studied in Germany on your work?

S.T.: In Germany, we were encouraged to think more critically than was normal in Ghana. And I learned a lot about the theories of newer (more modern and currently influential) sociologists – like Elias, Luhmann, Habermas, Bourdieu, Foucault, Castells, Giddens, etc. – and was even able to meet some of them. I was also proud of being able to read many classical authors in the original (Marx, Weber, Simmel, Sombart, Tönnies, etc.).

G.R. Let's come back to the situation of sociology in Ghana today. How many professors of sociology are there in Ghana?

S. T. ... not more than fifteen, including associate professors.

G.R. And how many departments?

S.T. Six, including one or two private universities.

G.R. A year or two ago you became a member of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences. What are the the main topics and activities there at the moment?

S.T. Mainly organizing lecture programmes and receiving visiting scholars for periods of two to six months. For instance, at the moment there's a programme on Kwame Nkrumah and his life, he was Ghana's first president (from 1957 to 1966). The Academy also has annual lectures, for instance on the life and works of J. B. Danquah or Ephraim Amu.

G.R. Nkrumah was not a sociologist, but his works are closely related to sociology, especially his writings on Pan-Africanism, on topics such as "consciencism" (1964) or neocolonialism (1965).

S.T. Certainly, he wrote a lot about development, and about socialism, which was very popular at the time. He was not dogmatic concerning the economic system or social system, his works have a lot to do with African development.

G.R. I'd like to go back to the influence of Elias on the Department of Sociology in the 1960s – I believe there were some conflicts.

S.T. I only know that at that time the Department was dominated by teachers from Great Britain. At least half of the lecturers were from England, and were influenced by Parsons' structural functionalism. Elias wanted something different, he wanted to go further in sociological theory. But his work was not recognized. He was a loner, people here thought he was strange. He wanted to change the teaching here, but that was difficult and he had little influence.

G.R. Finally, I have one last question: how do you think we could improve cooperation between our professional organizations?

S.T.: Strangely enough, I have often attended conferences on Africa, but hardly ever on sociology, only on Africa, so I'm not very familiar with sociology in Germany – it's very strange. Or you could put it this way: the Africanists have shown much more interest in the work of sociologists from Ghana or Africa than German sociologists have. Now we should see if we can remedy this situation. At least we sociologists from Ghana should take part in the annual congress of the German Sociological Association. I have only attended it once, and that is not enough. Even I know too little about what is happening in sociology in Germany. And I think we should try to change that.

G.R. I think that is an excellent idea. The next annual congress will be in September 2020 and it would be great if you could attend it. Steve, I would like to say thank you for taking part in this interview. We have been in touch for several years now and I am looking forward to continuing our cooperation.