

# Review of: "Social-Cultural Anthropology in the Oldest Department of Anthropology in India: Writing History or the Suppression of Records?"

Nompumelelo Zodwa Radebe<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of South Africa

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The article is a response to the claim made by Partha Chatterjee that the Department of Anthropology at the University of Calcutta (CU) only practiced Physical Anthropology and Archaeology and not Social-Cultural Anthropology. The author argues that the claim misrepresented and suppressed historical records. The argument in the paper is based on the summary of the lecture and abstract it is therefore an assumption as the author posits, "we can safely assume that whatever Partha Chatterjee had stated in the abstract was elaborated and explained further in his lecture." (p 3).

The main contribution the article makes is in proving that the Department of Anthropology at (UC) did provide training in Social/Cultural anthropology the author argues that from its conception the Department of Anthropology "emphasised and practiced the discipline from a holistic perspective, and teaching and research were being done in all the three major sub-disciplines of the subject, viz. (i) physical anthropology, (ii) social-cultural anthropology and (iii) prehistoric archaeology" (p. 3). The article further shows the anthropological scholars who went on to represent the discipline in different portfolios. More importantly, the author provides evidence of the role that social/cultural anthropology played in advancing nationalist anthropology. "Indian anthropologists paid more importance to the collection of data from the field rather than on building theories." (p 6). This is of utmost importance because anthropology has faced its demise many times because of the foundation that created the "Other". It is therefore important to always show that indigenous anthropologists did challenge the discourse of "Sameness" and brought forth the knowledge of the indigenous people without distilling it within Western concepts. In a way, this article is important in dismantling colonial entanglement.

However, the justification for the article is not convincing as it responds to an abstract. The author does not provide a context of the lecture which could have led to the approach taken by Partha Chatterjee. This is critical in social-cultural anthropology because the context can change the meaning and interpretation. The title of the lecture: Science or Cultural Interpretation: Anthropology at the University of Calcutta, 1920-1970' suggests that the lecture could take two approaches, either cultural or scientific. So, the focus on physical anthropology and archaeology could be the result of the "scientific" focus. What the author could raise is the question of "science". This is an important question in anthropology because indigenous knowledges were inferiorise as they were understood as cultural to suggest that they were not legitimate knowledge but superstition. The separation between science and culture is therefore loaded in the discipline of anthropology and cannot be taken lightly. It is in this context that the presentation of the whole lecture becomes critical in understanding the argument made. While addressing the suppression of records is important, the argument of science

versus culture is more important. Especially since the argument of science versus culture touches on the racist history of anthropology which still haunts the discipline.

I commend the author for defending the social/cultural anthropology discipline at UC because of its contribution to knowledge production.