



DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
Arca Code (213) 885-3331

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Dear Mr. Couffer,

There are two objections I have to the term "witch doctor." The first is that it implies a particular person is a kind of doctor, but not really one at all, or one in which he resembles a witch in appearance or behavior. The comparison is clear --- our doctors are "real" while those in Africa are not. The second point is that it does no justice to the full range of capabilities and differences of roles which these individuals have in many different kinds of societies. There are those who use many different techniques --- i.e. psychiatry, non-western pharmacologies, etc. --- in their own context to achieve ends valid for their own social purposes. We would certainly object if an African lumped all of our doctors (philosophers, dentists, chiropractors, surgeons, chemists, priests, etc) under the same label. So it may be that a more neutral term such as "medical specialist" or "curer" would be better. The term witch doctor rings of Hollywood and, I think, the less stereotyping of others the better.

As to a term like "tribe," anthropologists use it in a specific sense to refer to a particular kind of social organization. The units of a tribe may consist of unilineal descent groups or other social units, but the writer of the article made no mention of these. Again it is like saying that hunters and gatherers such as the Bushmen, pastoral nomads of E. Africa, and certain Nigerian peoples live in tribes or tribal groupings. Such a characterization is inaccurate regarding their own social groupings, and it serves to make everyone seem to be alike, South American Indians to Africans who are not industrialized or live in urban areas.

The point is that the article in question was ethnocentric, but, more than that, it was inaccurate. Part of the matter is semantics, something anthropologists have grappled for years. How do we accurately translate one form of behavior into another language? The answers are not clear, but at least we can begin by attempting to make value-free terms more useable. That is why it irks most anthropologists to see terms like those and other offensive terms such as primitive, savage, stone-age

man, tribal chief, tribal sacrifice (are goats really sacrificed? or do they have other conceptions?), etc., used with regularity among the lay public who, probably don't read academic-type books, but get a false idea of simplistic primitiveness, and child-like qualities of other peoples's, of the world. While some anthropologists also use these terms, the meanings differ considerably.

I hope this has been of help to you, and wish you success with your writings.

Sincerely,
David Hayano, Ph.D.
Assoc. Pro