

## « Discourse on method » - the *apatam* and the gender cleavage

The following “Discourse on Method” aims at offering a brief insight into the so-called *apatam*<sup>1</sup> method which has been at the heart of the approach that has guided field research underlying the second part of T. Bearth (ed.) *Dynamiques du genre – le cas toura*. Its purpose is to show the advantages of the *apatam* method, its necessity and prerequisites, but also its limitations, and the need to supplement it with a “positive discrimination” slant, in order to make it relevant to gender issues in the given context of inquiry.

As far as development is concerned, what really counts, that which determines action in the field and thus, at least in part, the quality and the sustainability of outcomes, is local “theories”, those supported and espoused by the actors themselves. Such local theories, the vibrant and subtle well-springs that support and dynamize any action worthy of the name, are not ordinarily accessible except via the medium of the local language, the language used by actors themselves to negotiate who they are and how they act, and to organize their individual or communal day to day dealings.

The *apatam* is the place for pooling such speech, the communicative space which symbolizes the inclusiveness that is nowadays so often said to be a condition for any coherent action in the area of development. The *apatam* -- without prejudice to other decision taking places such as the “palaver tree”<sup>2</sup> -- becomes, from the point of view of participatory research, the privileged site of an epistemology which focuses on the local point of view, which in turn is apprehended through the medium of the local language.

Taking the local language into account in a research context obviously presupposes fluency in that language on the part of the researchers, or some of them, at least. Knowledge of the African mother tongue, something that is not highly esteemed in university contexts and rarely if ever appears on applicants’ curricula vitae suddenly gets a high priority for those who are engaged in the kind of research which confronts them, in their new role as researchers, with the socio-cultural context they originated from. It should be pointed out that skill in the relevant African language necessarily includes competence in writing it and therefore a prior readiness to acquire such competence; for what is said in the language

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<sup>1</sup> Apatam = meeting-place for informal chatting and deliberation, mostly by men.

<sup>2</sup> Palaver tree = place for formal meetings, e.g. judiciary cases.

needs to be transcribed in accordance with its specific sonority, tones and grammatical structure in order for it to be turned into data that can be scientifically exploited.

But for the problematic of gender, this « discourse on method » could have stopped there, satisfied with the prioritization of the local point of view whose epistemological corollary is insistence on use of the local language. However, as soon as we take gender into account we are bound to understand the limitations of a method centred on the *apatam* as the unique or main local reference point. “Getting in tune” with the *apatam* is emblematic of local inclusion -- as opposed to a discourse which claims to be global and general -- and specifically inclusion of the poor and the marginalized (as we are wont to say). But at the same time the *apatam*, from the point of view of gender, is also and above all a place of exclusion. This exclusion operates and perpetuates itself by dint of taboos and restrictive prohibitions, which tend to exclude, in the case of the Tura *apatam*, the participation of the female sex.

The deliberate choice of the cover photo for this book, showing the extraction of palm leaves for making brooms (the Tura ladies’ costly strategy for surviving the breakdown of the local economy as a consequence the war), might seem to draw our attention away from the *apatam* rather than bringing us closer to it. But it can also be seen as a result of applying the *apatam* method to the *apatam* itself by extending its scope beyond the male-dominated *apatam* to other places, thus including those who tend to be excluded from the *apatam*, in the case at hand the female actors. It thus brings into conjunction firstly positive discrimination as a discovery procedure and secondly the local epistemological principle that favours excluded voices as the source of pertinent knowledge.

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