

Existential dilemmas of a North Atlantic anthropologist in the production of relevant Africanist knowledge:

On the occasion of the University of Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, granting a honorary doctorate to Professor René Devisch of the Catholic University Louvain, Belgium

Wim van Binsbergen

Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam / Programme on Connections in African knowledge, African Studies Centre, Leiden

Note. This is the full version of this paper, to complement the shortened version (which for reasons of space lacked the extensive references and bibliography, and the extensive quotes from Professor Devisch's original allocution) as printed in the CODESRIA Bulletin, 2008

Introduction

When, nearly half a century after the end of colonial rule, an African university grants an honorary degree to a prominent researcher from the former colonising country, this is a significant step in the global liberation of African difference (to paraphrase Mudimbe's 1997 expression). The African specialist knowledge institution declares itself to be no longer on the receiving and subaltern side, but takes the initiative to assert its independent scholarly authority, and thus redefines the flow of North-South intellectual dependence into one of intercontinental equality. Even more is at stake in the present case. Having studied and researched at the predecessor of the University of Kinshasa in the beginning of his academic career, and having returned there numerous times for research and teaching, the honorary doctor could be classified among the conferring institution's own students and research associates, and his work has ranked prominently in Congo studies during the last several decades. At the same time the conferment honours a discipline that ever since the decolonisation of Africa has (because of allegations of its colonial connotation) formed contested ground in that continent: *anthropology*; and in this case even an anthropology away from the popular topics of power, social organisation and globalising development – but rather, one of symbols, corporality, and insistence on the continuity, vitality and viability of historic, local cultural forms. Aware of the peculiarities of his case, René Devisch has devoted his extensive and celebrative word of thanks to the topic 'What is an anthropologist', and it is the highly original and widely-ranging nature of this text that has prompted CODESRIA to invite a number of African and Africanist scholars to comment on it.

This puts me in an awkward position. Ever since 1979 my intellectual and institutional collaboration with René Devisch has been so intensive, and so saturated with admiration and friendship, that I find it difficult to summon the distancing, objectifying tone, or the concise formulations, habitually associated with such comments. The honour done to him by the principal university in the country to which he has pledged his work and his heart (and which is also the birth country of my wife, the country of origin of my adoptive royal ancestors, and the focus of some of my recent research), is in the first place a source of great joy to me, and scarcely invites the critical cleverness expected from me here. However, the personal di-

lemma thus posed is typically Devischean in that it is analogous to the central dilemma dominating his ethnographic writing and teaching as founder and driving force of the Louvain School of Anthropology (cf. van Binsbergen 1992): *how to create a position from where to speak, and a mode of speaking (and of silence), that does not betray the existential closeness and continuity between speaker and those about whom is spoken*. In other words, how to avoid the modernist pitfall of assuming a privileged point of view as speaker; how to adopt a stance that does not impose firm boundaries and alien categories but seeks to understand and employ the categories that have informed the earlier closeness; how to turn text into a dialogic encounter between equals, instead of an appropriative and subordinating monologue? This is to be the spirit of the following remarks, even though my piece is still too short, and my personal tendency to hypercriticism too strong, to entirely live up to this ideal. As has always been my strategy of personal mental survival, I will bluntly articulate – from my own perspective, which is inevitably one-sided and prejudiced – what I consider to be home-truths, but none other (I hope) than those that René Devisch and I have already considered, and sought to thresh out, in a productive, outspoken and trustful friendship that has spanned half our lives.

A vision of anthropology as intercultural representational loyalty

For reasons that will gradually become clear in the course of my argument, I prefer to go over the four parts of Devisch's piece in the reversed order, from end to beginning. In his final, most inspiring and least controversial, section he sketches a vision of 'Tomorrow's anthropologist' as one who renders audible the many different voices of remembrance, particularly on behalf of the least privileged classes and groups in the world system today:

'L'anthropologue n'est-il pas quelqu'un qui au niveau académique, ou dans l'enseignement, ou dans son travail de co-implication avec les réseaux sociaux ou en collaboration avec la gestion publique –de façon critique, efficace et sans cesse disposé à se corriger-- articule les multiples voix de mémoire? N'est-il pas de la tâche de l'anthropologue de rappeler dans son contexte professionnel, elle ou lui aussi, les blessures et les aspirations des "gens d'en bas" tant des villes que des villages? C'est l'anthropologie qui depuis voici 25 ans lutte pour décoloniser les sciences humaines ayant opposé, comme l'a fait le colonisateur, ville et village, modernité et tradition. L'anthropologie est la science proche du vécu des gens. (...) Pareil anthropologue est donc un diplomate interculturel et intergénérationnel, et devrait par conséquent questionner aussi les modes par trop eurocentrés de sa discipline et de son regard. Au travail dans son groupe d'origine ou dans un milieu d'adoption, ou collaborant avec des réseaux sociaux ou avec des institutions publiques, l'anthropologue devrait y être surtout sensible au génie social et culturel. (Devisch 2007)

Yet such a position, however gratifying to the Africanist anthropologist, and however much in line with the positions of other anthropologists, historians and philosophers,¹ brings up questions which, of course, Devisch could not discuss in his short and festive presentation, but which need to be answered before his vision can be more than a source of self-congratulation for anthropologists and for Africans.

The first question is that of *method*. By what specific methods is the future anthropologist going to realise this vision? Reiterating a basic tenet of the Louvain School – that it is the anthropologist's task, and prerogative, to speak as a local – Devisch implies that here the local meanings and modes of enunciation should take precedence over whatever established models and concepts of the global anthropological discipline; and his argument soon develops

¹ From a vast literature I cite: Ricoeur 2004; Foucault 1977; Nuttall 1998; de Boeck 1995; Kapferer 2000; Greene 2002; Irwin-Zarecka 1994; van Binsbergen 1988 / 2003; Chrétien & Triaud 1999; Jewsiewiecki 1991; Fischer 1986; cf. Koepping 1984.

into a diatribe on universalism, postmodern relativism, and globalisation. However, the matter is more complicated than such a binary opposition suggests. The scientific representation of the cultural other remains highly problematic even if the problem of access has been solved. All science is predicated on the possibility of generalisation – of raising the local to a level of narration, conceptualisation, abstraction – in short *representation* – where it turns out to reveal themes that, whilst continuing to be local, are also – by virtue of an intersubjective methodology managed by the global disciplinary community of anthropologists – indicative, in space and time, of more universal conditions. Such management need not be an entrenched clinging to obsolescent paradigms – on the contrary, it may be dynamic, transitory, and innovative, as Devisch’s argument and his entire oeuvre clearly show. Yet necessarily, every anthropologist will find herself in a field of tension between local inspirations and commitments, on the one hand, and globalising expectations of method and professional discipline, on the other. The methodological hence universalising implications of science are among the uninvited guests of Devisch’s inspiring and festive banquet (we will meet a few others below), and one wonders what would happen to his vision if they were yet given pride of place. I fear that, if they continue to be kept out of doors, they will turn (like high-ranking uninvited guests in myths and fairy tales) into vindictive forces spoiling the party and bringing its protagonists to misfortune.

The next question concerns the qualified mix of universalism and localism that we find in today’s context of globalisation, also in Africa. Here again, recognition of an *inevitable and highly productive, situationally shifting field of tension* (instead of the hope of opting, once for all, for either pole of the opposition informing such tension) would have quickened Devisch’s now rather too dismissive pronouncements on ‘postmodernist deconstructivist relativism’ (essentially addressed against the *métissage* of cultural and social forms which many students of African cultural, identity and social forms have stressed in the context of globalisation).² My point is not so much that, like Devisch himself, globalisation studies³ have almost invariably criticised the *MacDonald’s-and-Coca Cola* model of African globalisation as too facile and too superficial. Devisch points at a genuine danger when he warns against a

‘...relativisme extrême [qui] risque de ré-instaurer un universalisme impuissant à penser l’Autre dans ses couches plurielles et son originalité telles qu’elles surgissent dans la rencontre.. dans la rencontre. C’est un universalisme au rabais, prétendant que les processus de mondialisation ou de métissage même finiront par effacer le syntaxe originel des langues et des cultures locales tout comme ils effaceront la réinvention ou l’émancipation endogènes de certaines traditions épistémologiques, éthiques, architecturales, thérapeutiques locales.’

All the same we should not overlook the fact that these multiple layers and this originality are far from constant. Globalising Africa displays the creative proliferation of new practices and new identities, and the resourceful adaptation of new objects and new technologies to time-honoured practices which then inevitably change in the process – rather than the unadulterated preservation of historic practices as such. So on the African scene of today and tomorrow, we may expect much that is old, but even more that is excitingly new and full of bricolage, in the very contexts (humour, merry-making, mutual aid, hospitality, healing and mourning) which Devisch rightly identifies as growth-points for anthropological encounter and understanding:

‘...les espaces-de-bord constitués par l’humour et la gaieté (si abondantes à Kin), ou par l’entraide en réseaux et l’hospitalité véritable, que bien dans la séance de guérison ou de deuil, que la rencontre entre

² Our author is sparing with specific bibliographic references, but one detects here the emphasis on the recent and constructed nature of ethnic identities (Amselle & Mbokolo 1985; Amselle 1990; Kandé 1999), which has become the standard paradigm in ethnic studies (van Binsbergen 1997), and in the course of the 1990s has become very influential also in the study of cultural globalisation in other domains than ethnicity.

³ E.g. Meyer & Geschiere 1998; Fardon *et al.* 1999; van Binsbergen & van Dijk 2003.

anthropologue et hôte ou entre anthropologues du Nord et du Sud devient une sorte de complicité.’

To which we can add: *much that will disappear forever, to be supplanted by commoditised global trash*, also in Africa, given the unexpected ways in which the – apparently so much less defenceless – North Atlantic region has, within two or three decades, been overtaken by ever increasing commoditisation (van Binsbergen & Geschiere 2005), electronic media, the aggressive market model, and a reduction of much of popular culture to commoditised emulations of routinised clichés.

The question is perhaps at which level, and with what degree of specificity, we are looking for universals in the anthropological encounter. For that they are there also transpires in Devisch’s own words which conclude this passage: insistence on

‘Ça peut même devenir ...une complicité transsubjective entraînant l’un et l’autre à creuser ensemble des interrogations ultimes dans les replis de l’existence. Et dans pareille partage mutuellement enrichissant de la dignité et de l’espoir humains, à leur niveau, ils se corroborent l’un l’autre dans une intersubjectivité, de plus en plus co-constitutive de mondes entrelacés ou “glocaux”.’

Witnessing ‘the clash of civilisations’?

We proceed to our author’s third section, where in beautiful passages the juxtaposition between globalism and localism, exogenous and endogenous cultural forces, is articulated in a way that avoids the above pitfalls, explicitly admitting that both are working simultaneously, even though Devisch’s preference is on the side of what has been anciently local – something we can understand and must respect:

‘Mentionnons d’abord la parodie ainsi que la violence plus ou moins ritualisée ou sorcellaire au travers desquelles nombre de communautés tournent la violence, voire la terreur, contre elle-même de façon auto-destructive. D’autre part, c’est à travers son esprit d’humour, de farce et de créolisation, tout comme à travers son inventivité écologique dans l’élevage, sa ténacité au travail de la terre, son inventivité à réparer les voitures “cadavérées”, ses florissants marchés interrégionaux (comme à Kumasi ou à Onitsha), que l’Afrique plurielle de la parenté, des masses de jeunes désabusés, des communautés (charismatiques) de foi, ou encore des réseaux locaux et des associations d’entraide et d’entrepreneurs cherche, de mille-et-une façons, à parer aux aléas de la vie en ville ou dans les régions désertiques ou minières.’

Having identified with Congolese, more specifically Kinshasa, society for decades, Devisch is not a distant observer when the clash becomes, from psychological and symbolic, dramatically *physical*, notably in the destructive evens of September 1991 and January-February 1993, about which he has written incisively (Devisch 1995). And, identifying as more or less a local, he realises that, even regardless of the constraints of his professional disciplinary forum, his hands are tied by local commitments – he cannot just write as he pleases:

‘Je me sens très redevable du bon accueil qui m’a sans cesse été généreusement offert au Congo. Cet accueil et la dignité qui en est la marque n’ont fini de me contraindre à une écriture pudique et digne, évitant en tout cas l’exotisation, une écriture sans doute qui est quelque fois par trop esthétisante. Bien que mes écrits n’examinent la dite “Afrique mal partie” qu’au niveau des antécédents dans l’ère coloniale ou bien à travers les façons dont nombre de jeunes Kininois métabolisent le choc et l’hybridation entre horizons civilisationnels par la voie de la parodie ou de l’errance, ...je n’ignore pourtant pas la violence à la fois subie et agie dans l’espace public kinois et surtout ailleurs dans le pays. (...) Toutefois, plus l’affinité et les sentiments de complicité affectueuse grandissent entre l’anthropologue et les réseaux-hôtes, *plus la rencontre anthropologique est transférentielle.*’ (italics added)

An anthropologist like Devisch, whose theoretical baggage and reference have been

psychoanalytical as much as social-organisational, can hardly be expected to use the word *transferential* without acknowledging its usual specialist implications. The obvious reading of the italicised phrase would be that the anthropologist's text gets charged with subconscious conflict from the personal (especially early) life history of the anthropologist himself,⁴ and by the end of my argument we will come back to this. Surprisingly, however, Devisch takes *transferential* in the literal sense of *transfer*, notably the transfer of cultural content from the ethnographic hosts to the ethnographer – admitting that (like in any interpersonal encounter)

‘...la signifiante et les forces qui sont nées et continuent à naître dans la rencontre de sujet à sujet dépassent ce que l'on peut dire ou maîtriser; elle excèdent la verbalisation ou la traduction. Cette rencontre, interpersonnelle et interculturelle, peut devenir une authentique entreprise humaine de co-implication à plusieurs voix, demeurant mutuellement enrichissante.’

As my book *Intercultural encounters* (2003) brings out, I am rather in agreement with Devisch's observation on this point, but the devastating implication is once again methodological (cf. van Binsbergen 2003: 19f and *passim*). If in an interpersonal encounter the ethnographer opens up to host's cultural experience, absorbing and emulating the latter, then ethnography may become a form of *deferred introspection* on the part of the ethnographer. However, if in the process the ethnographer's own personal transference towards the reception, appreciation and explanation of that cultural experience remains out of sight; and if part of what the ethnographer has learned admittedly cannot (as being 'beyond words') be communicated to, especially, a scientific forum; then the process of ethnography becomes largely uncontrollable and risks to be relegated to a genre not of scientific writing but of *belles lettres*. Claims to this effect were already made, but on different grounds, by Clifford & Marcus in their influential post-modern statement *Writing culture* (1986; cf. James *et al.* 1997). It is as if anthropology, despite being paraded in Devisch's text as the key to intercultural loyal representation, is facing a devastating dilemma: the choice between *irrelevant but methodologically grounded superficiality, and profoundly existential but un-methodological relevance*. It is this sort of dilemma that, a decade ago, made me give up ethnography and instead concentrate on theorising about the philosophical bases for interculturality. But probably one need not go so far.⁵ For whatever our methodological *desiderata*, Devisch's qualitative insight in Congolese and especially Kinshasa cultural dynamics retains compelling qualities – apparently, our hearts, and our minds, even as scientists, are moved by other forces than method alone.

But there is something else that makes me uneasy. I cannot dissociate the phrase 'clash of civilisations' from Huntington's (1996) unfortunately influential analysis of today's world conflicts in terms of religion-driven essentialisation, which seeks to derive total explanation from a reified domain of ideology whilst ignoring the political economy of globalisation, North Atlantic and specifically USA global hegemony, and the aftermath of the colonial experience. Devisch is only too well aware of the need for decolonisation, but his self-admitted, mild tendency to estheticising and idealising cultural processes, in combination with an awareness that for reasons of sociability his hands are tied, make him, I fear, stress symbolism over political economy, and underplay the complexity of the Congolese post-colony in the early 1990s. Were the *Jacqueries* primarily a response, as he suggests, to the failure in the *oeuvre civilisatrice eurocentrée* ('the Eurocentric civilising mission') in the eyes of the urban proletariat, a radical casting off of an alien cultural model that could only seduce but not deliver, and that specifically did not provide wholesale, new existential *meaning* in a situation where old meanings had been reduced to *anomie* and ineffectiveness? There is much in the

⁴ Cf. Crapanzano 1981; Ewing 1992; Devisch 2006.

⁵ Cf. Roth 1989 for a philosophical defence of fieldwork in the face of the 'Writing culture' school; Jackson 1989 for a form of existentialist ethnography that avowedly owes a lot to Devisch's feedback.

religious and ideological history of the Democratic Republic of Congo in the course of the twentieth century (also, for instance, in the healing churches of which Devisch made a special study; also cf. Ndaya 2008 and Mudimbe 1997) to suggest that – before, during, and after Mobutu’s *authenticité* movement – European cultural contents were eagerly and massively adopted to the extent, and in those social classes, that the political economy allowed at least minimum chances of survival, dignity, and participation. It has proved to be a widely applicable empirical generalisation⁶ that people resort to collective violence and mass protest, not so much when they totally reject the apparent focus of their aggression, but when they are subject to *relative deprivation* – when, Tantalus-fashion, the desired prize, ever so near, yet remains out of reach. Why not read these Jacques as barely disguised class conflict, as uprisings not against European culture as such, but against a thoroughly corrupt state and its elite, that have reduced the citizens of one of the richest countries in Africa to inconceivable poverty and powerlessness, in the very face of great (largely European-shaped) riches and uncontrolled power?

To this rhetorical question, Devisch may answer ‘because the people of the Kinshasa suburbs where I did my fieldwork then, did not consciously conceptualise their violent actions in terms of such class conflict’. Which only reminds us that, however close the ethnographer chooses to remain to the participants’ world-view, there must remain room for explanations in more abstract, theoretical, structural terms. Such terms necessarily elude the participants’ consciousness because the primary function of local collective representations is to make people unaware and uncritical of the violence, exploitation and powerlessness to which they are subjected in their society. Before a festive audience of university prominents whose middle-class commitment to the post-colony is no secret, in other words with tied hands, how does the anthropologist begin to reveal home-truths that reach beyond the local society’s *estheticising apparatus of acquiescence*?⁷ Or is the problem merely that of applying village research strategies in an urban mass society?⁸

One major condition to allow the anthropologist to adopt greater freedom in the face of the mystifying local collective representations is the following: the *utopian* illusion inherent in Devisch’s text must be critically recognised. Globalisation has created a context in which *locality* could acquire a different meaning (from a self-evident *sui-generis* dimension of social phenomena – imposed by ancient technologies of locomotion –, to active *construction* of locality as something that can no longer be taken for granted in a globalised world where usual boundaries have faded with the reduction of the costs of movement through geographical space; cf. Appadurai 1995). Here the emergence of interstitial spaces that are at the same time nowhere and everywhere (e.g. the Internet, English as global *lingua franca*, the world of global electronic media) is lending a new meaning⁹ to the word *utopia* (‘The Land of Nowhere’). For, with their promise of boundary effacing interculturality these spaces take on connotations of an ideal future society – somewhat like in More’s famous book *Utopia* (1516), and contrary to a critical orientation of modern thought¹⁰ which sees utopia primarily as an ideological perversion of reality. Devisch’s vision of future anthropology inspires because it promises to create, to constitute in itself even, such an utopian space:

‘L’anthropologue de demain s’offre comme un *espace-de-bord* interculturel et un *espace* d’inter-mémoire entre sociétés d’hier et d’aujourd’hui, d’ici et de là-bas, du nord et du sud.’ (Devisch 2007; my italics).

⁶ Aberle 1972; Runciman 1972.

⁷ Cf. Schoffeleers 1991; van Binsbergen 1993.

⁸ Cf. van Binsbergen 1997: 41-47, ‘The virtual village in town (b): “Villagisation” and ethical renewal in Kinshasa and Lusaka’.

⁹ Cf. Rodowick 1999; Magnat 2005; Ainsa 2006.

¹⁰ Cf. Mannheim 1929/1936; Popper 1945/1966; Dahrendorf 1965; Rorty 1997.

Yet such a vision is predicated on the tacit assumption that the anthropologist is fully available for the unadulterated absorption and subsequent representation of local cultural content, because she has no compelling cultural belonging of her own to begin with – she is nowhere, not in the sense of being homeless by an excessive dedication to the meta-local universalism of global scholarship (like I argued elsewhere to be the case for Mudimbe; van Binsbergen 2005), but because she pretends to *fully* adopt a new home in fieldwork. This is not just Devisch's personal delusion but the collective (though far from universal) delusion of our generation of anthropologists – whose fieldwork rhetoric (including my very own, cf. van Binsbergen 2003 and even the present paper) is replete with *adoption*. Yet the *raison-d'être* of fieldwork, and of the subsequent professional textual representation of other people's social and cultural life, can only be the emphatic admission of two *prior* cultural homes: (1) in all cases that of the anthropological discipline, to which continued and all-overriding allegiance is pledged and renewed with every interview and every publication; and (2) in most cases also the anthropologist's society of origin, if different from the host society of fieldwork. The point boils down to a simple home-truth which anthropologists of our generation have been slow to learn: in order to have a genuine encounter, it is imperative that both parties insist on who they are and tolerate the other without giving up their own identity – in a way which Devisch with his recent writing on *border-linking* (2006) understands, at the theoretical level, much better than I do myself. But despite pioneering this theoretical solution, the utopia of Devisch's future anthropology, while playing with the promise of post-modern utopias' boundary-effacing, yet resides in self-inflicted violence: in the dissimulation, perhaps even the flagrant denial, of the fact that the anthropologist is inextricably localised *outside* the host society, because that anthropologist cultivates an ulterior home in global universalising science (and also has been indelibly programmed to continued allegiance to her society of birth). We are back at the tragedy of fieldwork: that in the field the ethnographer lives a committed *communitas* which she is subsequently compelled to instrumentally take distance from, in her professional and social life outside the field (van Binsbergen 2003).

The thrice-born anthropologist

Following the lead of anthropologists such as Lloyd Warner, Margaret Mead and Vic Turner,¹¹ René Devisch has sought to apply whatever he has learned in the field in Congo among the rural Yaka people and in the slums of Kinshasa, to his native Flemish society – thus becoming a *thrice-born anthropologist*, in Turner's (1978) apt phrase inspired by the South Asian belief in reincarnation. The idea that the North Atlantic region can fundamentally and radically learn from other cultures has been at the very heart of anthropology since its inception, and has always sought to counterbalance such instrumental, colonial and hegemonic overtones as anthropology has also inevitably had as an exponent of its times and region of origin. The project of the anthropologist who, by virtue of an African apprenticeship, sees his society of origin with new eyes, is sympathetic and, from an African perspective, inspiring and gratifying. Yet again a number of questions remain.

To begin with, the apparently place-less anthropologist of the fieldwork encounter in Africa turns out to have a native culture after all – so why could this native culture not have been considered as the inevitable and filtering, even distorting, backdrop to whatever meaning, whatever *rapport*, the anthropologists could have achieved in the field in the first place?

Secondly, the fusion between subjects, one of them being the anthropologist, which dominates Devisch's image of the African fieldwork encounter, gives way to alienating alteri-

¹¹ Cf. Warner 1953, 1961; Warner & Lunt 1946; Mead 1942; and Turner & Turner 1978.

sation when it comes to Western Europe, as if the anthropologist, back from the field, finds himself ('benevolent Yaka notable' that he aspired to be, in his own words) reborn as a lower life-form in a murky North Atlantic underworld that can no longer be home and apparently never was:

'Rentrant du Congo en Flandre, je suis à chaque fois amèrement troublé d'être confronté avec le discours public moderne par trop masculin et technocratique. Celui-ci ne cesse de privilégier allègrement la rationalité des Lumières et des sciences exactes, le moi autonome et les 'droits de l'homme' – comprenez de l'individu de l'Occident moderne-- comme le projet universel et porteur du progrès des nations. (...) Sensible à ce qui est obnubilé dans l'espace-de-bord intercivilisationnel, j'en viens de plus en plus à me demander si le Nord n'y cherche pas de façon inavouée à métaboliser une zone d'ombre ou un in-pensé de notre civilisation technocratique, rationaliste et sécularisée, notamment notre angoisse individuelle et collective de la mort, de la finitude, de l'imprévisible et de l'hybride.' (Devisch 2007).

It is a familiar experience among fieldworkers from the North Atlantic region: having adopted an African culture, we feel we are no longer at home in our own culture of origin – our *sense of the self-evident* (whose production is the principal function of culture) is destroyed as a result of what could be considered a professional hazard. On closer scrutiny, not all of what Devisch tries to let pass for Flemish culture fits the bill: that complex social composition includes 'belgo-siciliens', as well as Turkish immigrants (Devisch 1985); but that is not the point. The point is that Devisch once more falls into the trap of thinking in absolute, non-overlapping binary oppositions (where he seeks to side with the preferred pole), rather than in broadly positioned, and situationally and perspectively shifting, fields of tension of situationally varying intensity (where meaning, relevance and life are generated not despite, but by virtue of, that tension; and where only the introduction of a scientific stance, and scientific textuality, make the tension rise sky-high, and the poles worlds apart).

Of course, North Atlantic cultural forms of today seek to come to terms with individual and collective fears of death, of finitude, of the unforeseen and of the confusion of categories, – with all these perennial but inevitable nightmares of the human condition. It is true that in this endeavour 'the West' has often conjured up phantasms of alterity, filling its nightmarish imaginary space (for instance, in the construction of a commoditised popular media culture) with somatic and cultural features referring to other continents, especially Africa. But, as an inspection of the work of principal Western thinkers on these existential threats in the last two centuries could bring out (Kierkegaard, Dilthey, Heidegger, Sartre, Plessner, Horkheimer & Adorno, Buber, Levinas, to mention but a few), the recourse to exotic images was never the *main* vehicle for such existential reflection in North Atlantic thought. Nor would existential familiarity with African life (such as anthropological fieldwork has certainly afforded Devisch), or a mere look at clinical figures concerning individual and collective violence, murder and mental illness in Africa, suggest that south of the Sahara people and cultures have been, in every respect, so very much more successful in allaying these nightmares. They are nightmares, indeed, not so much of the modern or postmodern North Atlantic, but of the human condition *tout court* – they are the price to be paid for the language-based self-reflexivity that makes us all, humans living today, into Anatomically Modern Humans. Like myself, Devisch has in the context of his fieldwork been peripherally enmeshed in the web of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations (he has written some of the most incisive treatises on witchcraft ever: Devisch 2001, 2003); has seen how the absence of a culturally supported notion of natural death plunges entire African families and communities in paroxysms of witchcraft suspicion totally destroying the ever-so-thin fabric of solidarity; has seen how in recent decades the AIDS pandemic in Africa has reduced people's sensitivity for suffering others to levels previously only recorded for aberrant ethnographic cases like the Ik people under exceptional ecological pressure (Turnbull 1972); and his decades of frequenting Congo at the heights of

corruption, terror and civil war cannot have left him with too many illusions as to any narrower range or shallower depth of the human predicament in that part of the world, as compared to Western Europe.

Without a doubt, African societies have made great and lasting contributions to the range of human strategies of coping with the tragic human condition. It is the anthropologist's privilege to describe these strategies in a globally accessible format, and thus to facilitate their wider global circulation (even though all such representation is inevitably distortive to a greater or lesser degree). But the discharge of this privilege need not go at the expense of cultural *Selbsthass* – 'self hatred'. Especially not since state-of-the-art comparative genetic, linguistic, mythological and ethnographic research has brought out the fact of very considerable cultural continuity¹² between sub-Saharan Africa and Eurasia, which in part goes back to the common African cultural background of all Anatomically Modern Humans (originating in sub-Saharan Africa 200,000 Before Present, and trickling out to other continents from 80,000 BP),¹³ but mainly is due to the much more recent 'Back-into-Africa' migration,¹⁴ which started from Central Asia c. 15,000 BP and in the process also had a considerable impact upon Europe. Although geopolitical factors of the last few centuries have led to extreme ideological alteration, in fact North Atlantic and sub-Saharan cultures are to a very considerable extent continuous, which makes for considerable implicit understanding in the field despite the mask of alteration.

But even if such continuity were not the case, the stark contrast Devisch makes between African cultures on the one hand, and Enlightenment rationality, the exact sciences, the autonomous Ego and (between parentheses, as if we should know better?) human rights, is amazing. Less than three centuries old, these achievements of modernity have admittedly constituted a North Atlantic departure from the historical cultural continuity that in many other respects unites the North Atlantic region with the rest of the world.¹⁵ Yet it is a departure that is not in the least *owned* by the inhabitants of the North Atlantic region but, on the contrary, like all cultural achievements of humankind (and I am not suggesting that modernity should rank among the *greatest* achievements) it constitutes *an inalienable part of the inheritance of all of humankind*; it has rapidly though patchily been appropriated, in creative and innovative ways, as well as contested, all over the globe.¹⁶ Africans or Indonesians or Native Americans applying these achievements are, in doing so, operating in a culturally alien space, but not any more so than are inhabitants of the North Atlantic – they all may effectively learn these themes of modernity as an innovative, globalising departure from the culture of their childhood, they all will experience strong tensions between these cultural modes in their adult lives, and they all will also discover the severe limitations of modernity in the process. Yet it is these pillars of modernity that have allowed Devisch to become an anthropologist and to take a critical view of his own native society. It is here that the truly amazing practice is situated of seeking to understand the other through the medium of written specialist text, in such a way that the well-formedness, consistency and persuasiveness of that text (as a result of the writer's solitary and monologic struggle through the distancing and virtualising medium of the written word, and these days usually through a high-tech artefact, the computer) has become the principal indication of the degree of intercultural understanding and truth that has been attained in the process. However sympathetic, convincing and striving towards integrity Devisch's mode of being an anthropologist is (and there is no doubt about that), it is in all

¹² Cf. van Binsbergen 2006, 2008.

¹³ Underhill *et al.* 2001; Oppenheimer 2004; Manica *et al.* 2007.

¹⁴ Cf. Hammer *et al.* 1998; Cruciani 2002; Coia 2005.

¹⁵ This is the old thesis of the 'General Human Model', advanced by the great Dutch historian Romein (1954).

¹⁶ For an analogous argument specifically on Information and Communication Technology including the computer, see van Binsbergen 2004.

respects a product, not of any historic African inspiration (where such a reliance on monologue, text and machine would be unthinkable), but of globalised modernity and (in Devisch's attempt at placelessness) its post-modern aftermath. Not as an intellectual producer, nor as a citizen, would Devisch (despite all his well-taken criticism of modernity) be prepared to give up these achievements – in fact, he tell us that Mobutu's forcefully incorporating Devisch's fellow-students into the army made him decide that he would not stay in Congo for the rest of his life. So much for '[so-called] human rights' – one must not make light of significant human achievements in the very place where they have been so much trampled upon.

It should be possible to champion the global circulation of the many genuine contributions Africa has made to the global heritage of humankind (ranging from mathematical¹⁷ games and divination systems to therapy, music, dance, and conflict regulation – all to be found in Devisch's text) without at the same time cutting in one's own flesh, in what seems almost a compulsive sacrifice to undomesticated and destructive alterisation.

The anthropologist as hero

One of the popularised and obsolescent notions of psychoanalysis is that of the *Primal Scene*: a key childhood episode (e.g. the infant's witnessing the parents' sexual intercourse) creates a subconscious conflict that destructively breaks through in adult life in various symbolic disguises (Freud 1918). In the global mythico-symbolic repertoire, the hero figure looms large, not only because it provides a plausible idiom to recast the relation between the infant son and his mother (Jung 1991), but also because it is an apt expression of the process of individual maturation and fulfilment every human being is likely to go through. Bruce Kapferer (1988) once coined the phrase 'the anthropologist as hero' to focus on the transformation of the image of the anthropologist under post-modernism. As a psychoanalysing anthropologist, René Devisch is far more familiar with these themes than I am, and I therefore take it that the mythologising format of the first section of his piece is deliberate.

The mythologising element is unmistakable, and profoundly puzzling. Instead of presenting himself as just a particular kind of anthropologist situated in a collective professional genealogy and a collective mode of intellectual production, Devisch reverses the burden of proof and under the overall heading 'What is an anthropologist' presents the narrative of his own professional life; and under the sub-heading 'What did I come to do in Congo from 1965-1974' presents a personal myth. Like all heroes, his birth is miraculous: he is congenitally 'a person of the boundary', born on a farm between France and Flanders and close to where the land gives way to the sea, hence apparently destined to placelessness and to dexterity in the handling of boundaries. One is reminded of the fairy-tale 'The clever farmer's daughter' (Aarne & Thompson (1973) no. 0875 – underneath of which lurks a trickster figure also known from many South Asian sacred narratives) who – superhumanly skilful in the handling of irreconcilable opposites – is told to come to the king's court

'not on the road and not beside the road, not mounted and not afoot, not dressed and not naked'.

The myth continues when our young Fleming is reported to go to Africa, of all places (the year is 1965), for what is suggested to be primarily an academic study of philosophy, and there, from what yet, but only vaguely, materialises as the context of clerical life as a young

¹⁷ Highly developed in Africa is the *mankala* family of games, where players move their tokens along two or more parallel series of holes, while complex rules allow them to capture certain tokens (cf. Culin 1896). Devisch, while acknowledging the mathematical significance of these games, calls them 'probabilistic', but in fact they are the very opposite, notably an application of *finite* mathematics.

member of the Jesuit congregation studying from the priesthood, with all its subtle implications of obedience and harmless rebellion,¹⁸ we see the miraculous birth of an anthropologist, fully equipped (not unlike the Greek goddess Athena springing forth from her father's head) with today's discourse of interculturality, alterity and professional anthropology, – but without any professional teachers, supervisors, or teaching institutions being named (again, Devisch's locatedness in North Atlantic institutional and professional frames is dissimulated); and without any manifest institutional or existential struggle concerning his celibate clerical vocation – only to be miraculously provided with a spouse at the end of his first fieldwork, when their marriage is blessed by the local chief, whose mystical predecessor by spiritual adoption our fieldworker has turned out to be. Is it just that Devisch is speaking for people who have known him all his adult life, so that he can afford, tongue in cheek, to let an edifying personal myth adorn the facts already known to the audience? One simply cannot understand why a juvenile clerical calling, in time traded for a brilliantly productive and innovating secular career as one of Europe's most prominent and most profound anthropologists who has moreover excelled in loyally facilitating Africanist knowledge production by Africans, should be so utterly embarrassing as to be turned into an unspeakable Primal Scene – especially at the moment when that career receives the highest official recognition from the African side. Other anthropologists of recent generations, like Schoffeleers, Fabian, van der Geest, went very much the same road (but without the accolade in the end), as did Congo's highest ranking intellectual son, Mudimbe, and numerous others. The anthropologist is his own greatest enigma; but he should not be, for the very reasons of self-reflexivity I have stressed in the present argument.

But do not forget who is talking here: the adoptive Nkoya prince Tatashikanda Kahare, the illegitimate child from an Amsterdam slum turned into the Botswana spirit-medium Johannes Sibanda, Bu Laḥiya who since his first fieldwork in Tunisia forty years ago has kept up the home cult of the local saint Sidi Mḥammad and has never renounced his steps in the Qadīrī ecstatic cult, but now officiating as if for him the self-renewing adoption of African cultures has been smooth and sunny sailing throughout.

Or as if he had been able to articulate any of the home-truths contained in the present argument, but for the life-long example, the constant and profound intellectual feedback, and the unconditional friendship of Taanda N-leengi / René Devisch, intercultural hero who has managed to go where angels fear to tread. The Primal Scene masked in René's festive and deliberately vulnerable self-account is the pain of self-annihilation without which however no intercultural rebirth could ever be achieved. His honorary doctorate marks, and rightly celebrates, his spiritual arrival in the land of the ancestors – many years, hopefully, before his body is taken there, too.

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¹⁸ Cf: 'En [19]67, [Père] Johan [Allary] et moi, nous montons audacieusement à Canisius une petite bibliothèque dite d'africanistique, et cela très visiblement dans le voisinage de la chambre du Recteur.'

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