

# Existential Dilemmas of a North Atlantic Anthropologist in the Production of Relevant Africanist Knowledge<sup>1</sup>

## 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 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

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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 dilemma thus posed is typically Devischian 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: *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 RD and I have already considered, and sought to thrash 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 reverse 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.

Yet such a position, however gratifying to the Africanist anthropologist, and however much in line with the positions of other anthropologists, historians and philosophers, brings up questions that, of course, RD 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 – RD 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 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, while 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 RD'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 RD'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 RD's now rather too dismissive pronouncements on 'postmodernist deconstructivist relativism' (essentially addressed against the *métissage* of cultural and social forms that many students of African cultural, identity and social forms have stressed in the context of globalisation). My point is not so much that, like RD himself, globalisation studies have almost invariably criticised the *McDonald's-and-Coca Cola* model of African globalisation as too facile and too superficial. RD 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...

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) that RD rightly identifies as growth-points for anthropological encounter and understanding. 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, 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 insistence on 'une complicité transsubjective entraînant l'un et l'autre à creuser ensemble des interrogations ultimes dans les replis de l'existence'.

### 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 RD's preference is on the side of what has been anciently local – something we can understand and must respect.

Having identified with Congolese, more specifically Kinshasa, society for decades, RD is not a distant observer when the clash becomes, from psychological and symbolic, dramatically *physical*, notably in the destructive events of September 1991 and January–February 1993, about which he has written incisively. 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. Nonetheless,

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, and by the end of my argument we will come back to this. Surprisingly, however, RD 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.

As my book *Intercultural Encounters* (2003) brings out, I am rather in agreement with RD's observation on this point, but the devastating implication is once again methodological. 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 being 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 and Marcus in their influential postmodern statement *Writing Culture*. It is as if anthropology, despite being paraded in RD'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 unmethodological 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. For whatever our methodological *desiderata*, RD'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 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 while ignoring the political economy of globalisation, North Atlantic and specifically USA global hegemony, and the aftermath of the colonial experience. RD is only too well aware of the need for decolonisation, but his self-admitted, mild tendency to aestheticising 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 postcolony 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 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 RD made a special study) 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 generalisation 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 *Jacqueries* 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, RD 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' worldview, 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 postcolony 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 *aestheticising apparatus of acquiescence*? Or is the problem merely that of applying village research strategies in an urban mass society?

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 RD'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 previous boundaries have faded with the reduction of the costs of movement through geographical space). 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 meaning 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 as in More's famous book *Utopia*, and contrary to a critical orientation of modern thought that sees utopia primarily as an ideological perversion of reality. RD's vision of future anthropology inspires because it promises to create, to constitute in itself even, such a utopian space.

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 (as I argued elsewhere to be the case for Mudimbe), but because she pretends to *fully* adopt a new home in fieldwork. This is not just RD's personal delusion but the collective (though far from universal) delusion of our generation of anthropologists – whose fieldwork rhetoric (including my very own) 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 that RD with his recent writing on *border-linking* understands, at the theoretical level, much better than I do myself. But despite pioneering this theoretical solution, the utopia of RD's future anthropology, while playing with the promise of postmodern 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* that she is subsequently compelled to instrumentally take distance from, in her professional and social life outside the field.

### The Thrice-born Anthropologist

Following the lead of anthropologists such as Lloyd Warner, Margaret Mead and Vic Turner, RD 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 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 RD's image of the African fieldwork encounter, gives way to alienating alterisation 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.

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 RD tries to let pass for Flemish culture fits the bill: that complex social composition includes 'Belgo-Sicilians', as well as Turkish immigrants; but that is not the point. The point is that RD 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 and 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 RD), 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, RD 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); has seen how the absence of a culturally supported notion of natural death plunges entire African families and communities into paroxysms of witchcraft suspicion that totally destroy 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; 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 be 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 continuity 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 years Before Present, and trickling out to other continents from 80,000 BP), but mainly is due to the much more recent 'Back-into-Africa' migration, 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 RD makes between African cultures on the one hand, and on the other 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. 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. 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 RD 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 RD's mode of being an anthropologist is (and there is no doubt about that), it is in all 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 RD's attempt at placelessness) its postmodern aftermath. Not as an intellectual producer, nor as a citizen, would RD (despite all his well-taken criticism of modernity) be prepared to give up these achievements – in fact, he tells us that Mobutu's forcefully incorporating RD'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 mathematical games and divination systems to therapy, music, dance and conflict regulation – all to be found in RD's text) without at the same time cutting one's own flesh, in what seems almost a compulsive sacrifice to undomesticated and destructive alteration.

### 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. 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, 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 once coined

the phrase 'the anthropologist as hero' to focus on the transformation of the image of the anthropologist under postmodernism. As a psychoanalysing anthropologist, RD 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, RD 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 subheading 'What did I come to do in Congo between 1965 and 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' (underneath 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 member of the Jesuit congregation studying from the priesthood, with all its subtle implications of obedience and harmless rebellion, 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 RD 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 and 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 Lahiya who since his first fieldwork in Tunisia forty years ago has kept up the home cult of the local saint Sidi Mhammad and has never renounced his steps in the Qadrî ecstacy 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.

#### Note

1. Considerations of space have forced us to suppress most of the extensive references and bibliography to this contribution, as well as extensive quotes from Professor Devisch's original allocution; the full version preserving these details may be consulted at: <http://www.shikanda.net/devisch.htm>

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## A Tribute to René Devisch

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It was by pure curiosity that I accepted CODESRIA's request for comments on the address by Professor René Devisch on the occasion of his acceptance of an honorary doctorate from the University of Kinshasa. As a Congolese intellectual, I am ashamed to admit that I did not know who RD was until I read this speech, which greatly impressed me by its brilliance and the lessons that this Belgian scholar of Flemish extraction has learned from his anthropological practice among the Yaka of the DRC.

My ignorance of the work of RD is symptomatic of my general ignorance of the work of anthropologists, even though some of the people whose work I have greatly admired happen to be anthropologists or have engaged in anthropological research. In addition to having read Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Balandier and Melville Herskovits, I was a student of Jan Vansina at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a close friend of the late Elliott Skinner, the Franz Boas Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University. Skinner's immersion in Mossi culture and values is quite similar to the

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admiration and sense of kinship that RD displays with respect to the Yaka.

With Devisch, as with much of anthropological production in the era of post-imperial and postcolonial studies, anthropology has been transformed from its origin as the colonial science *par excellence* into an extremely innovative and illuminating body of knowledge on the struggles of the multitude to make sense of the contemporary world and to find security and make ends meet in the face of the challenges of globalisation. It is therefore not surprising that in the last three years, during which I served as a member of the Herskovits Award Committee of the African Studies Association (ASA) of the United States, the most interesting books among the 150 or so books submitted for the best book award have come from anthropologists and historians.

The educational itinerary of RD in the Congo was enriched first by the mental decolonisation promoted by progressive intellectuals like Auguste Mabika Kalanda, but also and more importantly by his full immersion into the life and culture of a local village community. Going to the school of the people, as Frantz Fanon advised revolutionary intellectuals to do in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, allows one to see the world from a totally new perspective, and one that differs radically with the dominant Eurocentric vision of reality.

A very interesting example in this regard is Devisch's characterisation of the popular participation in the military-initiated violence of September 1991 and January–February 1993 in Kinshasa as 'Jacqueries' or popular uprisings. From the standpoint of the authorities and the press, these events are simply described as 'pillages' or acts of looting. So what started as officially engineered acts of indiscipline by the military in a strategy of what Amnesty International then called 'violence against democracy' was taken over by ordinary people as political protest against an unjust and repressive social order.