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Review Article

The Frontier of Interculturality. A Review of Wim van Binsbergen's *Intercultural Encounters: African and Anthropological Lessons towards a Philosophy of Interculturality* (2003), Münster: Lit Verlag, 610 pages 40.90 Euros.

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Wim van Binsbergen's huge book, *Intercultural Encounters: African and Anthropological Lessons towards a Philosophy of Interculturality* (2003) is bold, honest and to some extent quite disturbing.

An immediately striking feature is his relentless critique of his positionality as a North Atlantic subject which is quite admirable. Most academics concerned with Africa tend to exclude this important angle. In this way, postmodernism can be employed in two devastating ways. An uncritical version of postmodernism may not pay sufficient attention to the author's antecedents (and van Binsbergen's self-critique is sometimes embarrassingly frank). Also a playful version of postmodernism may exempt the author from social responsibility.

A forceful text, one that may alienate the positivist mind (or structures of thought that tend towards positivism/scientism) but it (the text) already anticipates this rejection (or in fact denial) with a formidable intellectual arsenal.

Let's concentrate for a moment on the unambiguous condition of van Binsbergen's positionality. Indeed many parts of his massive work address and capture its complexities in a compelling manner; there are continual themes that demonstrate the power of the events, turns and upheavals that have influenced his life and work as an academic such as the absence and even denial of ancestral antecedents; the unilateral identification with the women in his life; and hard struggles against the pain of personal rejection. His merciless self-critique is in fact an extension of an equally unremitting critique of the project of anthropology in general and Africanist anthropology in particular.

So far his wide-ranging anthropological explorations have led him through five different African contexts; rural Tunisia, urban Zambia,

rural Zambia, rural Guinea-Bissau and urban Botswana. During his first major anthropological project in Tunisia a crucial methodological dilemma which he didn't problematize at the time came up; 'problems of power, social change, the interplay between heterogeneous semantic, social and economic systems within one field of interaction, corporeality, self-reflection and interculturality' (p. 64). Indeed van Binsbergen's relationship with anthropology tends to be unusually problematic, a love-hate relationship that has been mutually beneficial. Consider the view that 'anthropology is more than just a sublimated form of sleuthing or espionage' (p. 73). The evocative association of anthropology with espionage is quite intriguing. He makes many other similarly evocative and intriguing associations in relation to the project[s] of anthropology.

Anthropology, he consistently points out, is first and foremost implicated by the project and discourses of imperialism. In order to redress its often disturbing historical antecedents 'anthropology, almost by definition, sides with the peripheral, the subaltern, the non-vocal, that which is excluded from sharing in the political and economic power in the modern world' (p. 30). In other words, what has been termed an 'anthropology of advocacy' is required to right some of the wrongs of the discipline's complicities with imperial projects and colonization. But the complicity of anthropology with colonization does not end with the moment of decolonization. The discipline is also implicated by the important category of class. In this regard, van Binsbergen points out that 'anthropology could only rise, as a critical and comparative reflection, in a complex industrial society whose ideological tissue had been torn by secularisation, capitalism, and the rise of new classes and political structures, in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries CE' (p. 31). In the critique of anthropology's complicity with forms of sociopolitical oppression (imperialism and colonization), van Binsbergen maintains a remarkable consistency; 'North Atlantic anthropologists implicitly share in the privileges and the power of the Northern part of the world, as against the South' (Ibid). Furthermore, it (anthropology) represents 'a form of intellectual appropriation and humiliation against which Africans in the nationalist era rightly protested'. As a way of redressing colonial imbalance, van Binsbergen advocates a radical deconstruction of the various biases and epistemologies of Africanist projects of anthropology. This is not a project to be conducted by North Atlantic Africanist anthropologists alone. Mafeje, Magubane and Okot p'Bitek have all done important work in this regard. A crucial strategy to reconstitute Africanist anthropology, van Binsbergen argues, is to

constantly acknowledge the significance and centrality of the process of interculturality as its *logos*. In other words, interculturality transforms and thus diminishes its inherent violence as representation.

In framing his anthropological project, van Binsbergen gained a great deal from his studies of the production of another anthropologist, Pierre-Philippe Rey. Rey's work 'encompasses, among many other things, inter-continental migrant labour to modern France, the history of capitalism in the North Atlantic region, Nambikwara kinship structures from South America, oriental despotism, and the history of historical materialist thought from pre-Marxism right through to Althusser' (p.76). In specific relation to Africa, 'Rey sees his work as the production of an anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois ideology, developing a theory of the class struggle of African peasants and proletarians, and thus providing the insights by which their struggle may be strengthened, may learn from earlier struggles, and may ultimately be successful' (p. 76-79). Van Binsbergen finds Rey's work lacking in a number of ways in spite of its strenuous efforts to identify with sections of the agrarian underclass. He argues that the very class location of North Atlantic anthropologists undermines the authenticity, force and validity of their productions unless a relentless operation of auto-critique is instituted. Without this vital operation of auto-critique, what they produce would be products of false consciousness.

The presence and critique of marginality are also a constant in van Binsbergen's life and work. The figure of the leopard – sacred outsider – as a cosmological motif is quite instructive in a number of ways. Even van Binsbergen's choice of an academic discipline speaks volumes about a certain *marginal constant*: 'an important factor in the relative intellectual isolation of the anthropological discipline has been the fact that that discipline has also attracted a remarkable number of outsiders: Jews, women, homosexuals, working-class children [...] migrants, and moreover the spiritual heirs of the explorers, big-game hunters and missionaries of the nineteenth century – so many people who were less welcome in the more established academic disciplines, or who could not take root there' (p. 501). The discipline always provides space for individuals who need to work through various pressures and manifestations of wanderlust.

Van Binsbergen's academic experiments are essentially avenues for understanding human cultures, gender relations and the social and political systems of other peoples and also his own cultural context. The Nkoya of Zambia are very significant in this regard. However, van Binsbergen often reminds us that the formal academic structure of textual production does not always capture all the various emotions, images and psychologi-

cal dimensions that emanate from his ethnographic excavations. In order to address this shortcoming, he often turns to his talents as a poet and novelist.

His analysis of the sexual economy and gender relations among the Nkoya demonstrates the resilience and enduring qualities of some profound aspects of traditional cultures. On the Nkoya husband/wife partnerships, van Binsbergen writes that after sexual intercourse, a Nkoya woman 'kneels down before her partner and claps his hands respectfully, genuinely pleased that, of all women, this man has chosen her to manifest his manhood and donate his seed' (p. 108). She is also expected to 'prepare and serve his food, then kneel before him and by hand-clapping invite him to come and eat it' (Ibid). The patriarchal mode of sociopolitical organization couldn't be more reinforced. Yet, van Binsbergen affirms that women in Nkoya culture enjoy considerable agency and autonomy in their abilities to seek and find redress for forms of male oppression they find unacceptable or unbearable. In the realm of sexuality, Nkoya sexual culture differed markedly from North Atlantic organizations of sexuality. Among the Nkoya, 'the recognition of male needs makes it normal that a woman, in cases of long periods of absence, looks for a temporary substitute for both her domestic domains and her sexual tasks: a 'sister' or a friend, that will not represent a threat to her relationship with her husband' (p. 112). Passages such as these jar the sensibilities considerably but van Binsbergen's self-lacerating quest for ethnographic truth at many turns absolves him from charges of self-indulgence that ought to follow logically in contexts of this kind.

A major event that has profound implications for his personal and professional lives is becoming a *sangoma* (traditional healer). In becoming a *sangoma*, he writes, "from an ancestor-less piece of flotsam of human history, I became a priest in an ancestral cult, in a decisive step not only of professional independence and Africanist exploration, but also of self-construction' (p. 193). He tells us that '*sangomas* are people who consider themselves, and who are considered by their extended environment, effective healers: as mediators between living people, on the one hand, and the ancestors, spirits and God (Mwali) on the other – in a general context where most bodily afflictions and other misfortunes of a psychological, social and economic nature, are interpreted in religious terms' (p. 202).

The transformation of van Binsbergen into a *sangoma* was a long and elaborate process of trials and tribulations. In his demanding attempts to become a *sangoma*, van Binsbergen 'was seeking existential transforma-

tion, fulfilment and redress, much more than anthropological data, across cultural and geographical boundaries' (p. 171). He also ascribes his absorbing quest to a deep and unfolding Lacanian conflict within him in which he strives to fill the void left by the loss and/or severance of the mother. In this way, *sangomahood* becomes the balm of the unification of a splintered self, a therapeutic re-articulation of painful and strife-ridden subjectivity within the confines of a deeply felt spirituality.

The trances and beauty of *sangomahood* are for van Binsbergen therapies of freedom in which catharsis and emotional healing are equally prominent. Not even the discouragement of gore could weaken his resolve; 'I had to join the other *sangomas* in drinking from the cut throat of my dying sacrificial goat; its gall was smeared onto my feet and its inflated gall bladder tied to a string for me to wear as a pendant' (p. 173). Apart from beauty of the trance and also the beauty of the dance, van Binsbergen claims that *sangomahood*, offers 'a researcher a vast range of information, both of esoteric knowledge, and of social arrangements and bodily practices that may not be as accessible to the researcher who remains a relative outsider' (p. 185).

The quest for *sangomahood* had entailed extremes of beauty and sacrifice. In relation to van Binsbergen, it began as a struggle to assuage and overcome what appeared to be an existential lack. Away from his biological home, he sought to escape the traumas of incest, violence and despair. Thus becoming a *sangoma* opened up for him 'the possibility of a non-egoistic, not primarily libido-driven, servitude to the suffering of others' (p. 230-1) which in many ways soothes and redeems the loss and violence of his own past. Indeed he had to find or *create* another home which he sought first of all among the Nkoya of rural Zambia. Eventually, he became an adopted member of the royal family. Also, he succeeded in attaching himself to one of the lodges devoted to therapeutic religion in Francistown, Botswana.

In various ways, van Binsbergen makes the suggestion that *sangomahood* heals both psychic and existential schizophrenia and that it does not compound it as it may seem to many Western eyes. In other words, it is meant to release victims from the traumatism of schizophrenic situations: 'The aim of *sangoma* divination is primarily therapeutic: to reinsert the client to what may be argued to be her or his place in the universe, so that the life force in principle available for that person but temporarily blocked by their drifting away from the proper place, can flow once more' (p. 256). *Sangoma* divination reconstructed and healed van Binsbergen's emotional and psychological landscape even before he

fully became a *sangoma*: 'I had only joined the *sangomas* in search of therapy after my mental breakdown at the rejection I was experiencing from the local population at large, because the latter perceived me as another specimen of the local hereditary enemy, the Boers' (p. 213). As such, *sangomahood* and its divinatory practices aim for the unity of diverse and often contradictory subjective and psychological resources. Being a Dutch professor, husband and father, an adoptive member of the Nkoya royal family with strong affective relationships with people in North and West Africa extract a number of demands and sacrifices. It pushes van Binsbergen to the frontiers of interculturality, to the extremes of multicultural forms of knowledge resources, different cultures and modes of social organization and the multiple contradictory impulses which they attract.

Thus, becoming a *sangoma* is a crucial way of dealing with a multiplicity of intercultural contexts, forms of communication and orders of knowledge. Perhaps in having so many orders of knowledge at his disposal van Binsbergen is likely to be a better *sangoma* than many of his African co-practitioners. He is knowledgeable about other divinatory systems such as Arabic geomantic divination, the New Age intellectual movement, *I Ching*, runic divination, tarot, the Zulu bones oracle, Native American varieties, *Ifa* divination and astrology. Undoubtedly, easy familiarity with this variety of divinatory systems is likely to enrich his practice of *sangomahood*. Even more important is his employment of the internet and the new information technologies to disseminate knowledge about his practice and the general nature of the divinatory system which by his adoption he promotes. His exact words; 'thus gradually a global practice emerged, where I would no longer meet my patients in person, but they – invariably total strangers to me – would contact me via an electronic intake form on my website, and they would subsequently receive via e-mail the outcome of the session I would conduct in their absence' (p. 236). Thus by his cultivation and assiduous application of postmodern information technologies *sangomahood* has assumed a truly global format.

The mix of the biographical and the strictly academic produces quite an interesting architecture of the text. This, I think, pushes the text to the borders of a manageable transgressivity (definitely not the kind you find with compulsive/aggressive postmodernism) which after all is said and done is almost a requirement in contemporary textuality. The interrogation of the boundaries of autobiographical reflection and academic writing is another very interesting feature of van Binsbergen's text. He claims

to be an Afrocentrist (p. 432) and on the level of the sheer volume of his productions, this claim ought to be taken seriously.

The focus at a point on the issue of integrity raises a lot of personal issues. He defines integrity as 'a person's successful endeavour to create and maintain consistency between his behaviour, on the one hand, and the norms and values to which he is publicly committed, on the other' (p. 200). Again, one is compelled to return to the question of honesty and its role in structuring intellectual/biographical trajectory. Most academics clothe their formulations with a veneer of objectivity which we the readers and they often take for granted. This easily breeds mediocrity and kills originality.

His philosophico-anthropological project/(intercultural encounter[s]) rediscovers the human subject explodes the myth of unhistoricized, unproblematized objectivity but also succeeds in producing a highly satisfying order of knowledge. A liminal transgressive order of knowledge that is full/matronly/non-fascist Wagerianism/high-point modernism on the brink of a self-reflexive poststructuralist deconstruction.

The wide-ranging and ambitious scope of van Binsbergen's work is likely to invite varying degrees of conflict that academics such as Kimmerle and Ineke van Wetering (whose works fall within the European context) had with his earlier work.

A central theoretical quest in the text is the Foucauldian thesis/*problematique* of epistemic regimes, orders of knowledge and their modes of constitution etc. I sympathise with van Binsbergen's constant reframing of the status of the other and her place in *etic* anthropological frameworks. The typical North Atlantic academic enterprise or industrial orientation tends to appropriate all forms of knowledge for instant and constant commodification. As a North Atlantic subject and author, van Binsbergen can hardly avoid the implications of this reality. But again being an African by choice, a diviner-priest to the bargain, he is more aware.

Thus van Binsbergen has emerged from a complex of elemental conflicts – positionality/subjectivity, academic and textual (the tensions between modernism and postmodernism) – a subject as conflictual as ever but one who has not chosen the path of superficial or uncritical reconciliation. Instead he has established a hard-won region of resolution. Reconciliation, which is an important theme for him, can be interpreted in a number of ways. Reconciliation, within the psychological field, definitely has a lot of upheavals. Reconciliation in a more explicit sense by which I refer to the more mundane manifestations of subjectivity, in van

Binsbergen's terms, that is, as a North Atlantic academic on the one hand and a *sangoma* on the other. He has graphically depicted the fields of conflict to which both vacations give rise and the frustrations through which they mark him. In this way, he enables us to remember not only how we choose our themes but how our themes choose us.

Van Binsbergen argues that reconciliation is a social technology of conflict management and good private and public relations. He explains: 'reconciliation is an essential aspect of all human relationships, both in primary human relations based on face-to-face interaction, and on group relationships of a political, religious, ethnic nature that encompass a large number of people' (p. 350). Because of the severe limitations of paradigm of structural functionalism in dealing with some of the more fundamental problems of conflict resolution, van Binsbergen calls for a new 'anthropology of reconciliation' (p. 351). There is a paralyzing disconnection between social scientific discourses and approaches to reconciliation and established theological paradigms.

A reproblematicization of this conceptual space, van Binsbergen argues, is now necessary. Reconciliation, we are informed, 'is a creative social act of rearrangement and reinterpretation' (p. 352) in addition, it is 'the transformation of conflict' (Ibid). This realization is often ignored by paradigm of structural functionalism. One of the excesses of the paradigm is that it does not recognize that 'social systems do not work in the same way as the axiomatic systems of symbolic logic and mathematics: it is common for social systems (as it is for biological systems) to arrive at more or less the same point from different starting points, along different routes, and to invest that point with the conflicting tendencies specific to the various points of departure' (p. 357). As events in postapartheid South Africa demonstrate both within and outside the deliberations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the collective task to discover a consensual archive that addresses in a fair way the horrors of apartheid has proved to be exceedingly problematic. As such, reconciliation has become a fervid site for competing ideologies and meaning. Indeed, the current paradigm of reconciliation does take into full cognizance the diverse complexities of social life. An important conceptual linkage is made when van Binsbergen re-reads the South African concept of *ubuntu* as a consciousness of reconciliation.

The critique of globalization has also been one of van Binsbergen's preoccupations. He argues that the concept remains problematic and inadequately theorized and also that 'the silly clichés of globalization, such as jeans, Coca Cola and the McDonald hamburger [...] have gained an

absolutely metalocal distribution' (p. 405). Part of the weakness of its conceptualization may derive from the fact that philosophers until very recently paid scant attention to it. Even Richard Rorty's categorization appears both lame and problematic.

Van Binsbergen poses several important questions about the new information order: 'Does ICT in Africa lead to creative and liberating cultural appropriation by Africans? Does it lead to the annihilation of the African cultural heritage? Or do both propositions apply somehow? Is the computer in Africa to be taken for granted or does it remain an alien element?' (p. 398). Ultimately, van Binsbergen argues that the new information technologies may prove to be beneficial for projects of liberation in Africa. He makes an intriguing claim that the text, that is, the *book* due to its rigid formalism is antithetical to social life in Africa, which on the contrary, is marked by a considerable degree of informalization of various levels of social, political and cultural life and also by a seemingly unstructured inventiveness.

The age of computer technology, on the other hand, is characterized by the emergence of the *network* which in its rapidities and virtualities undermines the slower formalisms of the age of the book; 'for as long as the book remained the norm, and for as long as the forms of communication associated with the book predominated, Africa with its un-booklike response self-evidently lagged behind in ways that it would never be able to make up for. It is not the computer in itself which constitutes an assault on the formal and the linear in information, and puts an end to the book as the gold standard. Rather, such a revolution is being prompted by the ramifying, rhizomatic forms in which information is being presented and may be managed on the Internet and in the hypertextual structures within microcomputers' (p. 424). This is undoubtedly a very useful insight indeed.

On a different level, I would claim that van Binsbergen has lived through his vulnerabilities, insecurities and disappointments with astounding honesty – for me a key quality of the text. His lot as an outsider – construed in a variety of contexts, class, professional, racial – has been transformed into something of immense value, a struggle worthy of emulation.

The discussion of the leopard as a cosmological and existential motif/reality I find very convincing and well-researched. In a way, the leopard has become doubly endearing in representing the Sacred Outsider and all the personas associated with it; diviner-priests, traditional leaders, and all kinds of solitary spiritual travellers. The Nkoya ethnic group of Zam-

bia knows the leopard as Mwendanjangula; 'a hunter on his solitary journey through the deep and dense savannah forest may meet him, and if he is the first to greet, may receive great material and healing powers, but if Mwendanjangula greets the hunter first, then the latter may be stricken with madness' (p. 197). The figure of the leopard is eternally transgressive and controversial. In van Binsbergen's handling divination, mystery and the underworld become inexplicably attractive. Even unadventurous academics cannot fail to be impressed the scholastic atmosphere that surrounds van Binsbergen's discussion of these esoteric themes; references to Asia, Europe and ancient Egypt all in one prolonged breath. At this point, the text reassembles itself on another discursive register, one that broadens its already impressive history and one that marks the rest of the complexion of the text with other possibilities. Those possibilities need to be discussed seriously but this is not the place to do so.

Relatedly, in structural terms, there are several levels of tension in the text. For instance, the entire textual architecture has a certain Kantian solemnity, a well-deserved authority that would tend to undermine postmodern notions of play, difference, *jouissance* etc. However, it incorporates other fields of tension – the continuous problematization of the status of the knowing/observing subject, the unabashed unmasking of the author-function and its hidden motives and the analyses of seemingly contradictory orders of knowledge or canons of rationality – e.g. esoteric against conventional academic discourse – within the same conceptual environs thereby creating a multiplicity of discursive registers. Indeed, the architecture of the text and the industry of discourse to which it might give rise is an issue one has to examine at much greater depth and with more detail.

Let us turn to more concrete if more mundane issues. I think van Binsbergen's treatment of reconciliation is important for centres of conflict resolution in Africa and approaches to conflict management on the continent. To be precise, his general treatment of reconciliation has a broad visceral appeal absent in positivist social science approaches. For instance, I am aware of the work being done by some conflict resolution centres in Nigeria and it mostly seems to be unrealistically technicist, a dry impractical assortment of jargon meant only for the developmentalist industry which van Binsbergen very rightly criticizes in a somewhat dissimilar if not totally unconnected context. In this instance, I refer to his discussion of the Kazanga Association (in rural Zambia) which illustrates how the global developmentalist industry contributes to the milking of

the rural poor through a combination of the activities of bureaucrats of the industry itself and local elites.

On another level, I find van Binsbergen's approach to ethnicity particularly interesting in relation to the contributions many other Africanist scholars and their rather obsolete (by his own unmasking) views on culture. But more importantly, political scientists have a rather mutilated and sterile notion of ethnicity. Van Binsbergen's approach with its avoidance of disconnected jargon – which in many ways parallels and complements his analyses of ideologies of reconciliation – has immense potential for fertilizing the field.

Also, I find his analyses of power structures, the political elites and political institutions in postcolonial Africa quite plausible. They are very responsive to the historical transformations governing the trajectories of power. In addition, van Binsbergen explanation of informalization and its influence on social life in Africa makes so much sense.

On the text is an apt and comprehensive survey of van Binsbergen's intellectual itinerary to date. I had thought the chapter on fieldwork in Tunisia to be rather distant from the rest of the text which focuses largely on sub-Saharan Africa but within the context of wider epistemological aim, the experience can be conceived as part of the central quest in intercultural communication and by extension philosophy. So within the realm of interculturality, it makes considerable sense.

Thus, van Binsbergen's intellectual itinerary on the whole has been one that involved the discovery of the intercultural path without his knowing so until he had become established in his career. An admirable case is made for intercultural philosophy using a mode of discourse that involves anthropology, ethnography, philosophy and history. Unquestionably, this is the beginning of an uneasy but extremely challenging (sub)discipline.

What more can one say? This is an awesome work of research and reflection. The critique of Africa (and African ethnicities), anthropological canons and philosophical methods is conducted in such breadth and with such detail that it is bound to have a multiplicity of reverberations in those areas and many more.

This is not a work informed by flashes of youthful insight. It is the kind of work that can only be produced by many years of immersion in various fields of intellection and this is demonstrated at several levels. Its robust multidisciplinaryity is also at all times evident. Through it one locates Michael Jackson's (not the singer!) postmodernist anthropology *ala* the Comaroffs, anthropology generally and its slow interpenetration by

other cutting-edge discourses, the genius of Mudimbe, the lapses of African political theory (specifically, the inadequacies theoretical paradigms of conflict resolution and theories of ethnicity) the isolation and possible demise of each discipline and the rebirth of the disciplines (anthropology, philosophy and sociology) at the combustive crossroads of globalization to which we are ineluctably drawn and by which either we pursue our destruction or our own redemption. Both most times would seem the case.

Just as van Binsbergen's intellectual itinerary is for the most part an excruciating quest for diverse truths, place and belonging, it is also a relentless critique and undermining of the assumed subjectivities of being and the received unities of identity. Most times, the work reads like an alternative project of deconstruction that begins and circulates at the very conceptual compound from which Derridean deconstructionists flee. The traumatism of inadequacy, incompleteness, alienation and insecurity are overcome by the sheer force of identification, and by the power of sacrifice which gain cultural syncretisms as a means to sociocultural healing.

The act of approaching and conquering the intercultural frontier has entailed a tremendous amount of personal and professional sacrifice and various kinds of effort. Ironically, the establishment of a rigorous practice of intercultural hermeneutics in contemporary times was largely accomplished through the efforts of a German Indian-born philosopher, Mall, who eventually abandoned the rich Indian philosophical heritage in order to learn and reinforce the German tradition. In other words, he spurned the very spirit of interculturality for a reversed ethnocentrism which by a Fanonian mode of psychoanalysis would make quite interesting reading. Van Binsbergen, on the other hand, discovers that a philosophy of interculturality is only possible through both sacrificial acts of continual cultural transgression and also a ceaseless respect for the divisions within and amongst cultures. Interculturality is perhaps better served by an immersion in diverse cultures, various disciplines and modes of activity as van Binsbergen's professional affiliations demonstrate; poet, positivist anthropological researcher, Marxist, *sangoma*, professor of anthropology and finally theorist of interculturality. Let us hope that the intercultural frontier for both van Binsbergen and those who are fortunate to stumble upon it becomes the basis for even greater intercultural conversation.