Editorial

This issue of the *CODESRIA Bulletin* revisits a postcolonial turn in anthropology and Africa. Anthropology is a dynamic and plural discipline, in constant dialogue with itself, related disciplines, and the continuity and innovation, vitality and negotiation of evolving local and imported forms of social and cultural reality in Africa. It is in recognition of this that CODESRIA invited ten scholars of Africa – in the majority *from* Africa – to comment on the position of the postcolonial anthropologist. These scholars in the main take as a point of departure the work of Professor René Devisch. A European anthropologist who applied his understanding of local Congolese lifeworlds to investigate much-overlooked aspects of his native Belgium and the *habitus* of North Atlantic social scientists, Devisch has displayed an impressive ability to look at local practices through a bifocal lens. This in turn has led to a re-evaluation in academia of local knowledge practices and systems, and their complementarity with regard to universal sciences.

On the occasion of the award of an honorary doctorate granted him by the University of Kinshasa in April 2007 (only the tenth such award in the history of that university), Professor Devisch reflected in his academic address on the very topic 'What is an anthropologist?' He looked back at his studies of philosophy and anthropology in Kinshasa – deeply marked by the sociopolitical and intercivilisational contestations of Négritude and African philosophy that were prevalent at the time. From these he drew inspiration for his anthropological endeavours after the 1970s, with the aim of contributing to the decolonisation of anthropology and the anthropologist in order to understand the particular sociocultural contexts from within the rationale and dynamics of the communities involved. Over the years, his primary research interests focused on the Yaka in rural southwestern Democratic Republic of Congo and suburban Kinshasa. Additionally, he benefited from the hospitality of diverse subaltern communities, both rural and suburban, for research stays in his home country Belgium, in southern Ethiopia and Tunisia, and from supervision of African and European doctoral students during their anthropological fieldwork in eight African countries. More recently, Devisch and his colleague Filip De Boeck acted as promoters of the honorary doctorates that their alma mater, the Catholic University of Leuven, granted two African scholars, Jean-Marc Ela in 1999 and Valentin Mudimbe in 2006.

One can gauge some of the significance of the recognition by the University of Kinshasa from the remarks of the Dutch anthropologist, Wim van Binsbergen:

> 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.

In his reply to the critical reflections expressed in the commentaries on his academic lecture, Devisch situates his anthropological endeavour in the 'shared borderspace' that may develop between a transcontinental plurality of lifeworlds, traditions of thought and scientific disciplines. Very much aware of the trauma of the colonial presence and intrusion also in its present disguises, and the gnawing sense of moral debt contracted by his generation of social scientists who came to Africa in the early days of independence, he is yet able to feel revalidated by the reciprocal interpersonal loyalty that his many African hosts, co-students or colleagues have extended to him over the years. He invites us to reflect on contemporary anthropology's intercultural commitment to a bifocal gaze and to multisided intercultural discourse, to the cross-pollination in African academia between universal sciences and local knowledge systems (as was suggested in the Special Issue on 'All knowledge is first of all local knowledge', *Africa Development/Afrique et développement* 30.3, 2005, ed. Theophilus Okere, Chukwudi Anthony Njoku and René Devisch), and finally to the blind spots in Western-derived social science.

The Bifocality and Intercultural Dialogue at the Core of the Anthropological Endeavour

A profound respect for diverse ways of life, for plural gender-specific procedures of signification, as well as a capacity for empathy and unprejudiced dialogue, together constitute, we believe, the golden thread in extended fieldwork along which the anthropologist can investigate groups or networks and the lifeworld from within. Such genuine intersubjectivity involves seeing local realities primarily from the perspective and in terms of the communities concerned. And yet there remains a paradox, since researchers subsequently represent their insights largely in the academic traditions of persuasion derived from Eurocentric modernity. As the late Archie Mafeje observed, a core question for the anthropologist is how much does his or her report remain a form of bordercrossing. There is the constant risk of exoticising, if not othering, the locals – a risk derived at least in part from the Western scholarly tradition of the book and of epistemological distancing that, as Mafeje suggests, exclude a multi-value logic in favour of subject–object dualities.

One mainstream discourse in social science continues blithely to privilege Enlightenment rationality, the autonomous self and Human Rights – this last understood in the individualistic terms of contemporary Western ideology – promoting itself as the universal project and the bearer of progress to all nations. It is also this perspective that, in the transatlantic mass media and much of Western-derived academic discourse, deploys in ethnocentric fashion its projected phantasms with regard to the populations south of the Sahara, or to non-literates and impoverished rural and displaced people. This is the case even

when the latter processes are engineered in full or in part by the destructive agency of the very Enlightenment rationality that is celebrated. However, the open-ended, many-tongued networking and digital narrativity in today's media world stimulate us more than ever to seek new modes of border transcendence. Moreover, the variety of modernities and the many transnational, diasporic crossings increasingly bear witness to the transcontinental multi-centredness of cultural history. Ever sensitive to what is obfuscated in the encounters of civilisations, many an anthropologist has wondered if the North is not seeking, in some insidious way, to invent a shadowy zone or an 'un-thought', which it contrasts with its technocratic, rationalist and secularised societies, in response to its individual and collective *angst* in the face of death, finitude, the unforeseen and the hybrid.

Living in the shattered worlds of shanty towns may force anthropologists to expose themselves to a ruthless interrogation of their partly defensive intercultural constructs. There is, for instance, as Devisch points out, the anthropologist's exposure to the local epistemologies that characterise rule-governed commonsensical thinking, or the more intuitive practical thinking, as well as the reflexive and rule-governed systematic, but culture-specific, understandings of things and the human condition. The anthropologist thereby must open up to lifeworlds that unfold themselves through the interplay of everyday practices and the manifold interventions, motions and messages of humans, ancestors and non-human agents, visible and invisible worlds. All this may unfold in interactive and culture-specific – very likely not Enlightenment and Christian – sites of emerging meaning production and innovative world-making, among others, through such forms as parody and mimicry.

The anthropologist will feel interrogated by the clash between the postcolonial state institutions on the basis of intrusive civilisational models conveyed by transcontinental media or school syllabi, of public display, religiosity, consumerism and sexuality on the one hand, and the subaltern people's clinging to home-born beliefs, modes of living, habitual techniques and skills, on the other. Hence, the anthropologist, to Devisch, is witness, in the youth cultures and new religions, to so many subaltern urbanites' transcultural bricolage of both a forceful identity display and its constant refashioning or reframing in the multiple selves of the members of the community studied.

These experiences may force many a social scientist beyond the neutral stance of science. He or she may become more and more reluctant to leave out of the picture both the shocking effects of estrangement, uncertainty and disarray and the countertransferential dimension in the experience of them. Here, some social scientists find a way out, either in emancipatory involvement with their host group (see Jacques Depelchin below), or in subversive artistic productions or aestheticising writing on their own society. By doing so, they may be able to show how much the latter has imbibed or overcome the imaginary colonial and postcolonial identity or knowledge constructs – a reality unmasked in diverse manners in their commentaries by Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, Lansana Keita, André Yoka Lye, and in the thoroughgoing scholarly analysis by Valentin Mudimbe, in *The Invention of Africa*, 1988. As Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, Déogratias Mbonyinkebe Sebahire, Noël Obotela Rashidi and Wim van Binsbergen also argue in their commentaries, depicting or differentiating so-called 'traditional' and 'modern' people or societies as incarnations of 'local' versus 'globalising' lifestyles is largely a fiction of the media and social sciences. But it is a myth that in many ways shapes perception and action in a world where reality is often hostage to ideology.

This reinforces the need to take a new and bifocal look from 'there' to 'here' – as if it were 'there'. Applying the anthropological insights gained in the corporeal symbolism in Yaka socioculture to his research in Belgium with family physicians and psychiatrists, Devisch was led to trace in a phenomenologically inspired perspective the impact that the culture-specific moulding of the body and senses has had on many a patient, both autochthonous and allochthonous.

Cross-Pollination in African Academe Between Universal Sciences and Local Knowledge Practices and Systems

Academe in contemporary Africa can promote its social and cultural relevance by selectively integrating with its epistemology of scientific rationality and objectivity the innovating force of African traditions of knowledge systems and practices. Devisch believes that in their quest to neutralise as much as possible ethnocentric bias, the anthropologists' first attempt (see also Lapika Dimomfu below) is to understand subaltern individuals and groups and the rich potential of their knowledge and spirituality endogenously, that is, in their own terms. The use of the term 'endogenous' or local here, with regard to the particular society or network, professional or interregional, that is the focus of the anthropological study, is, he points out, certainly not intended to suggest a unity, homogeneity or clearly distinguished culture or bounded group. Rather, he has in mind a capacity of interrelated subjects and of cultural matrices to exercise self-orientation and critical insight from an earlier or more primary and endogenous wellspring of inspiration or reference, largely carried by the mother-tongue and home culture. By local knowledge or mode of knowing, Devisch refers to any given professional network's or groups unique genius and distinctive creativity, which put a characteristic stamp on what its members develop as local and possibly long-range patterns of knowledge and epistemology, metaphysics, worldview and local technologies.

A popular etymological interpretation of the French notion of *connaissance*, understood as *co-naissance* (literally co-birth; but colloquially referring to experiential knowing and insight), Devisch argues, offers an insightful linguistic rendition of the sensuous intercorporeal and dialogical encounter in which the anthropologist is engaged. By virtue of the emotional, hence intercorporeal, co-implication of the subjects in a communal action – such as an apprenticeship, a palaver, a marriage or a therapy – the sharing of knowledge becomes *co-naissance* or an intersubjective knowing and knowledge sharing.

Blind Spots in Western-derived Social Science

Anthropological fieldwork and the subsequent scholarly reports may for the author and reader entail major dislocations from the interactional, the verbal or the observable to the spheres of the transactional, multisensory co-implication, the auspicious event and the invisible realm. An ethically committed anthropologist, however, cannot go on excluding from the intercultural encounter

whatever appears to be at odds with the Eurocentric academic's secularised worldview, or with a hegemonic mode of sensory and objectivist data acquisition canonised by Enlightenment rationality.

Arising from these arguments, Devisch identifies the issue of whether the empathetic anthropologist can or should espouse, in terms of their own canons, the distress or the beauty of the encounter, hence the dignity and numinous inspiration, the sanctification of sorrow and spiritualisation of suffering in line with the cultural milieu of the host group. How is this problem to be expressed or theorised? Interaction in the unstable border zone between the here and the there, the living and the deceased, the visible and the invisible, the auspicious and the uncanny – whether in dream-sharing, ritual, sacrifice, divination, witchcraft, healing, pilgrimage, poetry, dance or song, Islamic or Christian liturgy – makes the anthropologist also attentive to what is not rule-governed, representable, sayable or verbal.

This, Devisch maintains, makes the engaged and liberated anthropologist – very much like the artist – listen to all sorts of language play and surprising narrative themes, and open up to the non-habitual or co-attracting modes of becoming. Such receptivity may be demanded in the dramatic arts, including the resonance between musical tone, transactional mood and ritual existential motivation; a transindividual sensitivity and synaesthetic playing on suggestibility in entrancement; or dreaming and possession induced by guiding ancestors; and masquerade and the plastic arts. The anthropologist is moreover led to concentrate on particular tracks of world-making and thinking through things, whether in aesthetics or initiatory knowledge productions and artefacts, or in legal claim-making, resistance, emancipation, community building. He or she is enticed to look in particular at processes of world-making by local networks from the focus of vulnerability and pain, healing and the sublime, and their ferment in the interstitial. Such culture-specific hermeneutic and identity dynamics question much of the Eurocentric, gender- or race-biased master narratives of nature, fact, property, mastery, regulation, individual choice and scientific rationality.

A second concern highlighted by Devisch can be formulated in line with what was suggested earlier about the anthropologist's tuning in with the given sociocultural orientation and the local forms of 'co-naissance' or co-implicating knowing. Anthropology is summoned to seek critical insight into the dynamics of multiple and shifting identities, and into the genuine and paradoxical ways in which particular lifeworlds disenfranchise the subaltern, or veil and unveil the unsayable. Participant observation leads the anthropologist to scrutinise the culture-specific ways of feeling, seeing and trans-subjective, hence intercorporeal, modes of figuration, interlocution, recollection, empowerment and comprehension. He or she is thereby led to focus on the knowledge, values or imaginaries that are endogenous to particular cultural sites, as well as on their explanatory tropes, their interpretation and generalisations. This focus may inspire some unprecedented transcultural approach that can trace possible homologies between age-old crafts or rituals, contemporary aesthetics or techno-scientific developments, and futurist techno-human virtual reality. Is it not the role of anthropology or intercultural philosophy to also unravel the unthought – both the most original or the deeply suppressed – in the host society, just as in mainstream Western consciousness? What readily comes to mind here are the genuine, original modes of knowing and their authoritative use in society, of the arts of language play, of dealing with the human body in resonance with the social and cosmological body, or of palaver and reconciliation, in many African societies.

A third concern of the anthropological endeavour radically opposes some of the deconstructionist stances taken in postmodern thinking. The fundamental authority for the anthropologist is precisely the culture-sensitive and culturally embedded (thus unavoidably culture-bound) intellectual and existential interdependence of field and text, of life-bearing thinking and speaking through the voice of things and artefacts, intersubjective engagement and self-critical reflection. Such an approach to the culture-sensitive, specialist and intersubjective encounter from within a shared basis of valuation bears witness to the ever-emerging possibilities of a mutually enriching human co-implication. It would involve the artfulness, the dignity and the domestication or, literally, the home-coming of more and more lucidly interweaving 'glocal' worlds – worlds that mark our challenging era with hope.

Professor Valentin Mudimbe offers an apt concluding assessment. Drawing on an exceptionally wide-ranging intercivilisational expertise and an expert scholarly scrutiny of the great philosophical studies in relation to self and other, and knowledge acquisition, Mudimbe's magnanimous letter to Devisch invites the latter to enter the intercultural hospitality of a meditative walk along the Benedictine tradition. He invites Devisch in particular to critically reflect on the philosophical underpinnings and major phenomenological understandings of the most fundamental and therefore interculturally comparative process of cultural shaping: how to make the body a site of *the Rule*. Translated into the thematic of the Kinshasa Academic Lecture: how to subdue the culture-specific biasing blind spots, passions and errors characterising ethnocentric misunderstanding and misrepresentation, to an empirically sound and transculturally valid scientific anthropological practice.

Having, two decades ago, forcefully resisted the missionary and evolutionist *Invention of Africa*, Mudimbe now scrutinises, with incisive awareness, the phenomenological and discourse-based modes of keeping intact the intersubjectively most engaging intercultural knowing and insight or 'co-naissance'. If it is not the salvationist mission or the humanitarian impulse in the name of something bigger than us that validly urges a genuine intercultural *epoche*, nor the embarrassment or the moral guilt for respectively his or her ancestors' or predecessors' so-called pre-modern ways of life or colonial intrusion, is it then perhaps the Other's precariousness and ethical appeal, or rather mere fascination, that urges the anthropologist's commitment? Drawing on his background in philology and in line with the Foucaultian approach of structured discourses, as well as cutting across major philosophical and empirical anthropology, Mudimbe examines the gravitational field in which the intercultural anthropologist is moving. He defends the classical plea for keeping the ethical commitment distinct from the proper neutral scientific endeavour and agenda in line with its rules for empirical and historical-contextual enquiry that aims at interculturally valid scientific knowledge.

It is in the light of these epistemological and ethical concerns that CODESRIA welcomes the opportunity offered by René Devisch's address at the award of an honorary doctorate to him by the University of Kinshasa, followed by the commentaries and a letter by most distinguished African and/or Africanist scholars. Such recognition of a Western anthropologist by the intellectual community of a country whose populations have been victim of some of the worst excesses in African encounters with Western scholarship and traditions meant an opportunity for CODESRIA to revisit the debate on anthropology, the anthropological approach and their relevance in Africa.

Exactly a decade ago, the late Professor Archie Mafeje in a 43-page monograph strongly critiqued African anthropology as a handmaiden of colonialism, and called for social history to replace it as a discipline. His critique of anthropology was published in the *African Sociological Review* (2.1, 1998), along with responses by Rosabelle Laville, Sally Falk Moore, Paul Nchoji Nkwi, John Sharp and Herbert Vilakazi. On the rejection of anthropology at independence by African politicians and intellectuals, Archie Mafeje wrote:

> After independence they did not want to hear of it. The newly independent African governments put a permanent ban on it [anthropology] in favour of sociology and African studies. In the new African universities anthropologists got ostracised as unworthy relics from the past. From the point of view of the African nationalists, Anthropology was designed to perpetuate that which they sought to transcend as nation-builders. From the point of view of development theorists and practitioners Anthropology was not a modernising science and, therefore, was a poor investment. The few African anthropologists on the ground felt defenceless and 'went underground' for more than two decades, as some of them confessed in a special meeting organised by CODESRIA in 1991. The attack on Anthropology was heart-felt and justified in the immediate anti-colonial revulsion. But it was ultimately subjective because the so-called modernising social sciences were not any less imperialistic and actually became rationalisations for neo-colonialism in Africa, as we now know. However, the important lesson to be drawn from the experience of the African anthropologists is that Anthropology is premised on an immediate subject/object relation. If for social and political reasons this relation gets transformed, anthropologists might not be able to realise themselves, without redefining themselves and their discipline (Mafeje 1998: 20).

This observation by Archie Mafeje was pertinent, and at a minimum, served as a wake-up call to those wishing to practise anthropological research in Africa not to take for granted the parameters set by colonial anthropology and, instead, to redefine themselves and their trade precisely along the lines he suggested. Most recently, a CODESRIA volume – *African Anthropologies: History, Critique and Practices* – documents in a critical manner how far anthropology has come on the continent and how it strives to be relevant despite initial hurdles and current critique. Deconstruction and reconstruction are a fact of life in the discipline. Common though the tendency is for anthropologists to be compromised, co-opted and neutralised by dominant discourses and dominant forces, it is refreshing that a growing number of critical voices are beginning to be heard more loudly. Anthropologists have contributed and could contribute even more to positive forms of transformative thought and practice, both by working to facilitate social and cultural change and also by providing critical accounts of it. African anthropology has established a major milestone in terms of self-criticism and reflexivity in the manner suggested by Mafeje.

CODESRIA believes in debates that recognise and provide a level playing field for African contributions and perspectives. This is the way forward in the collective quest to minimise the catalogue of misrepresentations of which Africa and African scholarship are often victim. Such dialogue, mutual recognition and respect should help to convince African and non-African social scientists alike about their integrity and science vis-à-vis Africa and its predicaments. Indeed, CODESRIA believes the twenty-first century marked by globalisation and the contestation and renegotiation of disciplinary boundaries and social identities to be particularly opportune for paying greater attention to changing what is produced as knowledge on Africa. Even more importantly, it is time to interrogate the institutional cultures within which that knowledge is produced, with a view to encouraging greater and more genuine collaboration that draws from different disciplinary boundaries.

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