Reactions to René Devisch

1. Towards an Ethic of the Intercultural Polygogue

The Path of an Anthropologist

Opening up to another person is always something of a mystery. An exploration, regardless of its orientation, is a generous source of findings and questions.

Nocky Djedanoum 2000 *Nyamirambo! Poésies*, Bamako, Editions Le Figuier/Fest'Africa, p. 11.

Déogratias Mbonyinkebe Sebahire
National University of Rwanda
Rwanda

What is an anthropologist? This somewhat banal question is the subject of deep reflection and meditation by René Devisch, Emeritus Professor at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, and recipient of an honorary doctorate from the University of Kinshasa, at the end of a mutual adoption and *sui generis* investiture.

The happy award winner from our alma mater seized the golden opportunity to deliver a brilliant and pithy speech that revealed to us the intricate pathways of his 'cultural experience' (as defined by James Spradley and David McCurdy).[1] In other words, he gives us some lessons on his anthropological quest as an encounter with otherness in fields that have become familiar, thanks to frequent visits and keen observation underpinned by relevant methodology.

The researcher thus creates opportunities whose outcome is no longer fortuitous, but is the result of an attitude learnt and mastered by patient listening, clinical observation, a keen sense in terms of intuition, perceptiveness and anticipation, in the manner of the seer. This ultimately enables him to establish effective and efficient communication with the host environment, even if it means inventing appropriate categories of thought for translating this rich experience that sometimes borders on the unspeakable. The shrewd researcher taps into registers of internal conceptualisation in the sociocultural environment he is researching. In this regard, we recall the crucial remark by Claude Lévi-Strauss that 'The ethnological problem is, … in the final analysis, a communication problem'.[2]

At the end of this rather complex process, the anthropologist arrives at a more authoritative definition of his own boundaries, including his credo or that of the group to which he belongs – in brief, his own individual and social identity.

Let us now retrace the path taken by René Devisch (RD). He starts by establishing the link between his vocation as an anthropologist and his family life story marked, *inter alia*, by a benevolent atmosphere that apparently brought good luck. There is undoubtedly a place in our lives where we bloom and blossom, and catalytic events that shape our destiny. Such events are sometimes inspired or borne by a name, such as that of René, which we see later being reborn among the *Yaka* of Kwango, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. A relationship is thus established between the realm of childhood and the journey of the adult. Autobiographical accounts tend to substantiate this relationship in an after-the-fact interpretation of the events. The family environment is set against a background of cross-border transactions (a recurrent theme) where at least childhood fantasies, dreams and souvenirs, and illicit activities likened to hunting are played out. Such transactions remind us of the black market economy in our sprawling urban areas in which people, in particular women from destitute backgrounds, struggle to survive on a daily basis by inventing strategies full not only of cunning, ingenuity and cultural creativity, but also of mistrust of the law in the postcolony. That is precisely where a window opens and allows the anthropologist to look at the other, where and how the other is different – a look that could eventually become cynical, condescending or empathic, as the case may be.

The social reality, as it is viewed and understood, has all the connotations of ambivalence cross-bred during the childhood period from a culture imposed through language and ways of life. RD opted very early for empathy, a choice that was partly inspired by his teachers and favourite thinkers, including philosophers, writers, sociologists and anthropologists. He is resolutely in favour of immersion in the problems of the Congolese elite of his student generation. Here, immersion is neither fusion nor confusion, as these blur the vision. The generation referred to is driven by a manifest determination – for which they must pay a high price – to liberate and build a less inegalitarian and less dependent society. Such a society, with a few exceptions, will ultimately be swallowed up. We can imagine the student RD leaving, in spite of himself, the turbulent Congolese scene only to return later with a burning desire to better understand from the standpoint of a few privileged observation posts, in particular the *kwangolese* homeland and the maddening capital, Kinshasa.

Should we join him, in the 1970s decade, in talking about the clash of cultures that may have been speeded up by the economic 'zairianisation'? It is said that the intention of the then Zairian government, pressured by the unfavourable economic situation, may have been inspired by its 'American master'. The idea was to stimulate and to politically monitor the growth of a middle class capable of learning the rudiments of business and pulling itself up by its own bootstraps in order to bridge the growing and threatening gap between a minority of wealthy people and the destitute masses. However, the results

have been more disappointing than ever – a total disaster in which the general public is the greatest loser, not to talk of the ruin of a whole segment of this artificial bourgeoisie created from scratch and sustained by clientelist gestures. Alas, the same is true of the authenticity ideology, which was nevertheless so promising, on account of its excessive political exploitation.[3] Each person can form their opinion of that turbulent period in the economic and political history of the former Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo.

RD has the feeling that, beyond all the excesses and contradictions, there is a key factor that seems to have marked his approach as author: the imperative to urgently explore what he calls 'a deeply rooted layer of cultural and identity authenticity'.[4] He points out that 'beyond the colonialist writer's prejudiced view of the *Kwangolese* people […], are models and prejudices of the colonial master which the people have introjected'. We are aware of the havoc wrought by others, particularly in neighbouring Burundi and Rwanda, which sent shock waves into the DRC. These prejudices, stereotypes, myths and stigmas have led to the unspeakable, opening up wounds that will take ages to heal. This is the side of anthropology that can produce unexpected and undesirable effects, in terms of fabrication of memories and identities, a risk that calls for ethical vigilance.

How do anthropologists go about their work, in concrete terms? He asserts:

> Anthropologists lend an ear to the plurality of voices and common or dissident perspectives. They listen to collective memories, memories that are wounded or heavy-laden, etched on the bodies of patients.

As you can guess, here we are in the realm of medical and/or psychoanalytic anthropology. Let us stop at the concept of 'plurality of voices and common or dissident perspectives', which appears to have a broad application. I cannot help referring here to the words of a young Italian anthropologist, Francesca Polidori, who came to Rwanda in 2003–2004, to do fieldwork as part of research for a doctoral thesis in anthropology on Rwandan refugees of the 1959–1963 period. She seized the opportunity to study the *Gacaca* courts[5] instituted to clear the backlog of genocide cases and to foster the so-called process of unity and national reconciliation. Francesca Polidori, invited to express her views as a field practitioner in my social and cultural anthropology class at the National University of Rwanda, made this pertinent remark:

> I find that the greatest potential of the *Gacaca* lies in its ability to spur on people to confront the different truths about the genocide. It is not simply a legal tool, but a form of public reflection and commemoration of genocide.

The lesson to retain in the context of this article is the attention that should be paid to the plurality of statements on the social reality made by various social speakers or actors in an approach that is somewhat multi-vocal, taking into consideration RD's famous 'common or dissident perspectives'.

What about collateral effects themselves? RD takes a startling shortcut about these and talks about other anthropologists navigating in the same waters. He says that anthropologists are torn between fascination and anxiety, particularly, I would add, when one visits the mediators of the invisible. And RD gives a poetic description, again inspired by his childhood memories:

> Before this huge mass of water and powerful high tide, I experienced, as a child, the fear of annihilation almost similar to the fear of being engulfed by an indefinable and massive otherness upon my arrival in Yitaanda. However, you are ardently lured to the encounter by some fascination, such as the high tide that will gradually engulf you if you yield to it by sitting on the seashore.

Another beautiful description worth retaining is that of the anthropologist assigned a status that he/she has to accept and the feeling of mutual adoption as well as the launching of projective mechanisms. RD devotes significant and interesting sequences that cannot be summed up without reference to the 'grey area in us' illuminated by flashes of theories that ultimately calibrate possibilities of listening, receptiveness and writing potentials.

How then can we assess the fallout from such an encounter that apparently has a bit to do with magic and metamorphosis? To revisit his metaphors: 'looking from out "there" towards "here" and vice versa', through the lessons learnt from reading in the margins, between the lines, the transitional spaces, in particular, on the potentialities of the individual body as well as the social body. The anthropologist thus becomes, in the present and the future, 'an inter-cultural and inter-generational diplomat', to echo RD's words. Or, again, 'At work in his group of origin or in the environment of adoption, where the anthropologist, while collaborating with social networks or with public institutions, ought to be especially sensitive to the social and cultural spirit.'

In a perspective of applied anthropology, in our contexts of national and regional reconstruction after the immense damage caused by bloody conflicts, the anthropologist becomes some kind of cultural broker,[6] who builds a bridge between voluntarist public policies and the problems and aspirations of the rich base of his/her cultural heritage that has long been lost and which is found in times of emergency, but also thanks to a clear vision of culture as an inexhaustible source of wealth (culture as wealth). Such wealth needs to be pondered, rejuvenated and readjusted (especially innovations in various forms of transitional justice, networks of associations, creative crafts, etc.).

RD rightly recalls that there are some persistent taboo areas proscribed by established intellectual traditions, in particular with regard to forays into life, the sacred, the present absence, what is innate (is this privacy?) in relation to secular Eurocentric trends in several domains. Unfortunately, this is a persistent situation – a situation whereby the North (Europe and North America) is placing the South under its material, intellectual and even spiritual dominion. In the best of scenarios, we find ourselves in contexts of subcontracting or co-opting, and in the worst- case scenario, one is confronted with extraversion and marginalisation, as the Benin philosopher, Paulin Hountondji,[7] the US-based French historian, Florence Bernault,[8] both lucidly point out. Regarding the second warning or appeal for epistemological vigilance in the face of the excesses of a certain breed of sceptical and relativist postmodernism, we should seriously ask ourselves where contemporary Africa stands in its historicity to speak in an informed manner.

In such an Africa, have we, indeed, sufficiently assimilated the lessons, constraints and opportunities of

'imposed' and somewhat 'booby-trapped' modernity, its so-called package of democratisation of institutions, individual growth and prosperity, secular thought and practices and entrepreneurial efficiency? Can we do without it, or have we already formulated our own interpretations? What kind of modernity do we need, taking into account our heritages, questions and profound needs today at both individual and collective levels? How are we currently fighting to achieve by sheer force a modicum of autonomy and initiative in a context that is persistently changing its name and language?

Can we count on some collaboration from our big partners from the North or elsewhere? These are some of the key questions that need to be highlighted.[9]

At the end of his stimulating reflections and proposals and before making acknowledgements and closing his long period of mourning, RD outlines for anthropologists areas of trans-subjective cooperation and sharing, with a view to building interdependent worlds, to use less poetic and 'structured' words than his. Being grateful to those who have 'built' it, in every sense of the word, is a beautiful homage to the Africa whose radiant face he visited and loved, and which gives him the sense of fulfilment that sums up and paradoxically reassumes the 'silence', a silence replete with unspeakable words.

Notes

1. James Spradley and David McCurdy, 1972, *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society*, Prospect Heights, Waveland Press.
2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1950, 'Introduction à l'Œuvre de Marcel Mauss', in Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France.
3. See Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, 1985, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, chap. 11. Quant à lui, l'art congolais rend aussi compte et à sa façon de cette période critique; see Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 2003, *Mami Wata: La peinture urbaine au Congo*, Paris, Gallimard.
4. See in particular René Devisch, 1993, *Weaving the Threads of Life: The Khita Gyneco-logical Healing Cult among the Yaka*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press. We have tried to explore his complex and innovative approach presented in Mbonyinkebe Sebahire, 1995, 'Rite et efficacité symbolique: questions de méthode', *Revue philosophique de Kinshasa / Kinshasa Philosophical Review* 8.14: 113–51. See also René Devisch and Claude Brodeur, 1996, *Forces et signes: Regards croisés d'un anthropologue et d'un psychanalyste sur les Yaka*, Paris, Editions des Archives contemporaines.
5. Francesca Polidori, 2004, 'Rwanda 10 anni dopo: I tribunali Gacaca e le sfide della riconciliazione' [Rwanda 10 ans après: Les juridictions Gacaca et les défis de la réconciliation] *Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale* 73.
6. See Michael Angrosino, 1994, 'The Culture Concept and Applied Anthropology', *American Anthropologist* 96: 824–32.
7. Paulin Hountondji, 2007, 'Au delà de l'ethnoscience: Pour une réappropriation critique des savoirs endogènes', www.google.fr [accessed on 1.11.2007].
8. Florence Bernault, 2001, 'L'Afrique et la modernité des sciences sociales', *Vingtième siècle: Revue d'histoire* 70: 127–38.
9. See Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, 2006, *Culture Troubles: Politics and Interpretation of Meaning*, London, Hurst, chap. 6.