

2. Towards a Reappropriation of Local Knowledge and Practices

Anthropology Without Borders

On Anthropology

How can one dialogue, without sweating, with an anthropologist, one who, in principle, is destined to ... reconstitute human beings, to retrace their sinuous physical and metaphysical pathways? How do we meet the one who is explorer, nomad for all seasons, diviner, reader of dementia, the man with four eyes, as we say in my country?

These are the naïve questions I started by asking, as a man of letters, an idealist of the imaginary world, a hunter of others' dreams, since he has none of his own ... the list of questions continues: how can one do an in-depth assessment of human beings while tracking them down, as anthropologists do, in their final place of refuge, in both the visible and invisible realms, without implicating oneself in a lasting manner, without soiling one's hands and soul?

Moreover, I initially bungled all those seers together – ethnologists, anthropologists and sociologists alike. And the dominant thought appeared to share out the work, spaces and privileges, assigning all 'civilisations' to anthropologists, 'advanced societies' to sociologists, and 'early settlements' to ethnologists, unless of course you were 'primitive'...

But the times have changed, smoothing over the rough edges of prejudices and customs. We, the Young Turks, disbanded our forces and hung up our weapons, and dialogued with one another.

The first professional anthropologists I met, who were real explorers of the future, in particular those who were foreign, included René Devisch and Filip de Boeck. The interpersonal contact, friendship and erudition helped to screen and dispel a good number of prejudices and to make us understand that all would ultimately be anthropology, in the sense that it is the inevitable path to the rediscovery of the human being in society. And journeying from interpersonal inter-comprehension, I naturally got to inter-comprehension of cultures and customs.

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Education at a Time of Crisis

It appears that one of the crucial factors in understanding the human being in society is the mode of transmission of knowledge, including indigenous knowledge. Knowledge, know-how, skills, transmission of skills – this is the challenge for our generations. And here culture is one of the keys, as a method, genius, a permanent and identity value in such transmission of knowledge and skills.

At this juncture, it is perhaps appropriate to raise the question of the backwardness of our Sub-Saharan African countries and the challenges of modernising them. A tentative answer to this question is that modes of transmission have been entropic insofar as the clash of civilisations has not been on a level playing field. Moreover, political authorities have continued to control genius and to try to muzzle subversive and creative expression and thought, to impose imposture, to hollow out and disfigure the dream, imagination and utopia.

In Africa, it has always been more than a clash; it is a real *tsunami*, be it in the colonial or neocolonial period. Only the law of totalitarianism, profiteering and the wild instinct of survival and conservation takes precedence, particularly after the independence years and the single-party political era. The consequences of the law of the jungle are superstitious, fetishistic and cannibalistic 'demon-cracry', the leader's personality cult, the culture of gatherers and endless demagoguery.

Throughout our colonial and neocolonial history, three concepts – knowing, being able, having – have been at war and their opportunistic collusion has always been fatal.

Knowing, Being Able and Having

In a paradoxical global village in which everything tends to be standardised, while being geared towards monopolies, towards a uniform mindset, knowing – in terms of the power and efficiency of knowledge – becomes a costly product.

Knowledge and the technocratic system that is its tentacular offshoot henceforth manifests itself as a determination to possess uncontrollable power. In the global village, knowing, being able and having ultimately become selective – an infernal trinity.

The Buffalo and the Antelope

What is the place and role of the social sciences and, in particular, anthropology when confronted by visible and invisible forces, in this infernal mechanism, in this terrible machination of globalisation? This place or role cannot but be subversive. Here, the social sciences are the magic candle that lights up dark tunnels of material and moral misery, and that chart all courses against so many odds. It is somewhat akin to the subversive place and role of our folktales used whenever it was necessary to teach shortcuts that are lessons in audacity and malicious genius. This is a bit like the fables of the buffalo and the antelope. Honestly, is it possible for carnivores and herbivores to have a candid and face-to-face dialogue, at times of tension, without the weakest resorting to cunning and guerilla warfare?

The social sciences, unfortunately, attained a middle-class status precisely on account of contact with globalisation and the transverse nature of knowledge. They have remained accumulations of knowledge, as opposed to functional knowledge. For knowledge to be functional, the social sciences in Africa would have had to humble themselves in order to be truly interactive channels of mobilisation and, in the final analysis, 'initiators' (in the first redemptive sense) and transforming initiatives.

I talk of the social sciences humbling themselves in the literal sense of *humilis* (from *humus*, nourishing soil). The term *humilis* connotes not only that which takes root, which dies and grows in the humus, but also a person who has not stopped learning, who is still learning, and is always learning, though in the heat of initiation; who reinvents his/her permanent and adapted critical discourse and self-critique through fieldwork, close contact with subjects, subversion, revolt and guerilla warfare.

Epilogue

I have heard – I do not remember where – that growing old is swapping one's dreams for regrets. I have just read, in an excerpt, the following Yoruba proverb in Wole Soyinka's autobiography, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2007) (published by Actes

Sud): 'as one approaches an elder's status, one ceases to indulge in battles'.

Strangely, there is a corollary to this proverb in the culture of my ancestors of the Bandundu savannah, and it is quite amusing that the ambiguity in French stems from the play on the homophonic words, *statut* [status] and *statue* [statue]. Here is the proverb: 'When you start resembling the ancestors' statue, your wisdom grows like them.'

I feel like telling René that, on the contrary, his battles have started; that, at last, he is 'reborn': has his pilgrim and initiatory speech testified to this fact? As in every magical act of initiation, he was already 'dead' in Africa and by Africa. Now he is reborn of her because the anthropologist has at last met the man, like Diogenes looking for dawn and the sun in himself,

at the depths of his being, where life dwells, where life moves.

The thoroughbred *Kinois* that I am, riddled with paradoxes, gnawed by centrifugal temptations, and who dies daily in the fire of sacrifices and propitiatory violence, knows what it means 'to move life'. Does the Congolese musician Koffi Olomide not exclaim in one of his big hits: *Ve dir, tozali na sistem ya lifelo, kasi motu akozika te* (We are all in hellfire but nobody will be scathed)? After all, it is thanks to art that I have learnt to die and be born again every day like ritual bread: power of knowing, power of being able, power of having by 'Article 15', by the struggle of Sisyphus (*kobeta libanga*, 'to cut stone'). In other words, not to exist but to resist!