

An Africanist in Search of a New Epistemological Framework

René Devisch, in his academic address given during his honorary doctorate award ceremony at the University of Kinshasa, ardently advocates a new foundation for anthropology whose complexity deserves an exceptionally firm commitment.

An anthropologist's vision of the cause of a new anthropology is naturally a very sensitive professional exercise. My spontaneous contribution to RD's enriching reflection is therefore both a question and an answer.

The problem he seeks to elucidate calls for more than a one-off reflection. He rather addresses it in an epistemological advocacy, to the extent that in spite of the statement of the problem, he sets out to produce a new anthropological discourse, which is a challenge in itself. Taking pains to internalise the problem cherished by the negro-African intelligentsia or rather because he has done it sufficiently, he resolves to take anthropology out of what he calls with his distinctive frankness, the decolonisation of anthropology or the alterity perspective. RD is of the view that it is by going back to the very origins of anthropology that African anthropologists will safeguard their precious contribution to the building

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of a new scientific approach based on endogenisation. From this standpoint, the anthropologist is perhaps the scientist who has the necessary tools for easily perceiving how the outlines of cultural and spiritual expression can be treated in the greatest interest of humanity as a whole.

From the research-action point of view, on which he strives to focus, RD advocates the promotion of an everyday culture through an instinct for appropriation and creation. In this drive for innovation, RD seeks to go back to his roots in Africa if only to make himself the successor of those whose authentic African tradition, rooted in endogenous knowledge and know-how, he dreams of handing down to posterity. Through this approach, RD unveils the anthropologist's role, which is similar to that of an artist striving to depict the complexity of a boundless landscape on a single plan. The model thus obtained cannot be reduced to a simplification of reality to the extent of

emptying it of its contents, but rather to the transition from one complex reality to a more obvious one.

In RD's view, one does not engage in anthropology for amateurish reasons, but to meet a social need. In fact, anthropology is, first and foremost, the expression of a need for exchange or dialogue with others. To exchange with others, we need to understand what our interlocutor is saying or wants to say. We, therefore, need to understand the interlocutor's codes or rules, in short, his/her language. To understand, you need to learn the language and codes. That is why the anthropologist is obliged to create a training field by being immersed in people's daily life. Unlike sociologists, anthropologists must be immersed in the community so as to look with a view to better observing the real life of the community. They have to listen in order to apprehend the implicit and feel emotions. It is through such participation in the day-to-day life of the community composed not only of dances and songs but also of tears, illness and witchcraft that the anthropologist is able to chart the course leading to the improvement of the wellbeing of the people.

That is the real challenge of the scientific approach in the social and human sciences, particularly in anthropology. As a discipline that is still in its infancy, anthropology has so far accumulated resources that constitute a rich nursery into which future generations will dip without depleting their main scientific preoccupations. Unfortunately, present-day anthropology is still heir to a tradition consisting mainly of field research, some perfect and some imperfect, and which confines the researcher in a prism of evolutionary, diffusion, functionalist and structuralist theories that blow out of proportion cultural differences between civilisations by bi-polarising humanity, with one half being civilised while the other is primitive. Hence the urgent need to decolonise anthropology.

As a scientific endeavour that is essentially colonial, anthropology will not survive the decolonisation movement unless its subject is completely restructured and its interpretation frameworks are liberated. This will give the historian a free hand to explore the past, thereby allowing future anthropologists to revisit the goal assigned to them by Claude Lévi-Strauss: 'holistic knowledge of the human being, embracing its subject in all its historic and geographical breadth from the vast modern city to the smallest Melanesian tribe and leading to conclusions that are positive or negative, but which are applicable to the whole human race', so that such knowledge may be rooted in a day-to-day anthropology.

Furthermore, RD recalls that since its origins anthropology remain the basis of any study of the human being and society. In the address, RD justifies the purpose of anthropological studies by pointing out that they help us understand the meaning of human activities at the various levels where they can be interpreted by the social actors themselves, on the one hand, and by the researchers who study them, on the other.

The proposed epistemological orientation is phenomenological and praxeological. And the methodology, as we have seen, is geared towards analyses of the meaning that emerges.

Indeed, on the African continent, anthropology is being phased out in research programmes and the few resistant strains are downsized and confined to ephemeral consultancies, and

the generous grants and scholarships disbursed in the past are today devoted to research for other ends, including environmental purposes.

The search for pluralist perspectives in the social and human sciences is one of RD's major research preoccupations. He was the first to draw up a table of all health systems in the former Zaire, in his 1988 publication titled *Health-care systems in Zaire*.

His research approach is in four stages. First, he revisits the goal of anthropology and explains the profound nature of his subject of study. Secondly, he re-examines the anthropological science itself with the avowed intention of identifying the real epistemological framework while ascertaining and assessing how the latter has been irrigated by different research streams throughout the history of anthropology. Thirdly, he carries out a critical analysis of colonial anthropology with a view to identifying and consolidating the achievements. Fourthly and lastly, in the firm hope of further fertilising the field of anthropology, he endeavours to propose a new analytical framework based on data culled from research works he has conducted over the past thirty years among the Yaka and in African universities.

RD's experience among the Yaka innovatively leads him back to his native Flemish cultural heritage and, in particular, opens his eyes to cultural symbolism. It is from this view point that he analyses the manner in which the human body obeys the laws of an anatomy that is somewhat fantasised or symbolised by domestic habitation, cosmic groups and concepts, rather than the laws of the anatomy described in medical textbooks (Lapika, Eulogy at the honorary doctorate award ceremony).

As Professor Shomba Kinyamba recalls in his speech at the honorary doctorate award ceremony, RD made the ritual one of the fundamentals of anthropology. In his view, the ritual explores and reaffirms the fundamentals of life, such as sharing, the hierarchical order and the ethical order. He unveils and establishes a relationship between practices and representations. Ritual creativity, RD points out, is inherent in everyday gestures, in the conviviality around a glass of palm wine or a bottle of beer, in the divinatory oracle, just as in therapies.

As regards teaching, RD has always taken a keen interest in the endogenisation of knowledge in African universities. As Professor Gaston Mwene Batende says in his eulogy to the recipient of the honorary doctorate, RD has relentlessly called on African universities to 'design and apply models of endogenous development in the educational system'. RD is of the view that endogenisation of scientific knowledge will enable Africa to firmly assert its influence and identity, by making its invaluable contribution to such an endeavour. RD believes the time has come to rate African universities by their level of involvement in the endogenisation of knowledge and their active participation in the reconstruction of the African cultural identity and holistic promotion of the human being in the global and pluralist village. However, most African universities continue to cling to the structural models and curricula of Western universities on which they were founded during the colonial era, whereas they operate in new sociohistorical, sociopolitical and sociocultural contexts.

RD's research reveals, furthermore, that some of the human sciences minimise endogenous knowledge. For instance, conventional law has put customary law on the back-burner since only a few hours of lectures are devoted to it. The highlight and emphasis are on European laws copied from the Western cultural model, under the pretext that customary law is obsolete. Holders of endogenous knowledge can be co-opted into teaching and research projects. They will make their contribution, for instance, to oral African literature studies, medical anthropology, physiotherapy, African psychotherapy, African sociology, customary law, rural and agricultural economics, etc. (see Mwene Batende, speech at the honorary doctorate award ceremony).

Would exotic anthropology or alterisation of the African therefore be dead where there are no anthropologists to teach long courses? The vacancy is stealthily filled by modernist contemporary sociology, which supplants cultural and social anthropology that should normally boost endogenisation of knowledge. Some African anthropologists, bending under the yoke of deculturalising modernity, prefer to be called sociologists instead of fighting tooth and nail to develop and promote an anthropology that, coupled with sociology, contributes positively to sociology, equipping the general theory

of sociology (Mwene Batende, speech at the honorary doctorate inaugural ceremony).

To side-step this trap, RD finds in the new anthropology a field for analysing and validating the dual problem of individual experience of socialisation and the relationship with the growth of society through the individual. Relying on his experience of clinical anthropology in Antwerp, Brussels and Tunis, and on a limited psychoanalytic practice, RD decides to organise the funeral of rural culture that is relatively well adapted in order to start replicating his perspectives on urban areas. At this stage, RD clarifies his objective: this is not an attempt to develop a new general theory of anthropology; based on existing theoretical and methodological instruments, it is important to organise an updated approach that allows us to deal with facts that give access to what he himself calls intersubjectivity and the collective memory or intermemory that constitutes the melting pot of professional anthropology.

In light of this new approach, we dare to think that the path leading to a true anthropology premised on completely new foundations is built step by step, in particular with a review of the dimensions of the human being who has to be observed by the anthropologist, no longer as a mere physiological substrate but rather as a complex entity that moves and changes in an unpredictable social environment governed by very specific rules of communication. In other words, it is in the epistemological constructivist basin that a research project in the restructured anthropology will bathe; such a project is both a quest for meaning and an investigation of the actors involved in this search, that is, the human beings situated in both the integrated interactive order and the societal order (Jean-Christien Ekambo 2006 *Pour une nouvelle anthropologie de la communication*, Kinshasa, Éditions IFASIC).

In practical terms, the researcher who plunges into the anthropology of communication first has to take into

account the language of the practitioners themselves with a view to choosing the activity that will be the subject of study.

Hence, for any blueprint of the new anthropology to be scientifically recognised, it must be based on a new vision of anthropology and a methodological approach that is adapted to the epistemological status of the subject of study.

This eminent anthropologist's contribution to theory revolves around his semantic and praxeological approach to concepts of matrilineal village formation, endogenisation of knowledge and management as well as the domestication of the crisis facing social institutions (Shomba, speech at the honorary doctorate award ceremony).

We conclude this brief commentary on RD's address by inviting readers who so wish to engage in a genuine and constructive debate with RD on this vast and enriching research field of endogenisation of knowledge in African universities.

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