The Anthropologist in Four Phases

Noël Obotela Rashidi
University of Kinshasa,
Political Science Centre,
Democratic Republic of Congo

On 4 April, an honorary doctorate was awarded to René Devisch, Professor at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. In his inaugural lectu

re given in gratitude for the award, René Devisch focuses on the question: What is an anthropologist? Instead of merely acknowledging the award in the usual way, he draws his message from his four-leg 'journey', his life and visits as an anthropologist or social player. He, therefore, glances at a number of places he visited and which are like stopovers on his four-leg journey.

In the 'immersion' phase, the wealth of alterity leaves its mark on him and he draws from it, in particular, the characteristics of the practice of anthropology, namely, proximity, close contact, particular attention to gestures, language, the diversity of utterances and listening to collective memories. In spite of the fascination he feels and the mutual adoption, RD is preoccupied with his 'acrobatic' position, his being torn between two worlds, two cultures…

The next leg of the journey is the return to the native land. How can he erase the look or the weight of alterity in his own society? Is universal culture not put in jeopardy by ignorance of the other? Long accustomed to the North–South transfer, RD attempts the opposite. The fruits of his research in Congo are the vector of conscientisation, inculturation and 'decolonisation'. He has sought to meet this challenge in his teachings.

In the last-but-one leg of the journey, he becomes the 'witness of the clash of cultures'. Transformed into a globetrotter, RD visits nine other African countries, apart from Congo (Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Namibia, Tunisia and Egypt). He believes that the dynamics of local networks are crucial to the success of anthropological research. He asks: 'does the genuine development of both the North and the South not entail, above all, mutual research on the "collective wellbeing", in accordance with the various modalities of exchange and mutual assistance, not solely in the technical or economic spheres, but also in the cultural and even spiritual realms?'

Acknowledging that 'he has been shaped by the rich diversity of Africa's networks, its endogenous knowledge forms and the post-colonial course plied by African universities', RD talks about his 'intercultural concerns and inter-university commitment' in two propositions. The first consists in rethinking, on new foundations, 'the academic encounter to share knowledge … both global and local', by taking into account 'more lucidly, the presuppositions, frameworks of perception, forms of communication and the ethical foundations of the two-fold universe of the knowledge involved'. He makes the distinction between knowledge conveyed by 'uni-versity' academic programmes, 'the multi-versity of knowledge, different forms of knowledge and endogenous cultural programmes rooted in non-Western schools of thought'.

The second proposition is based on the promotion of 'multi-versity', a function that could be fulfilled by the university. Such a function could lead to 'inter-associations and platforms of poly-logue and creativity among colleagues, researchers, experts or artists from the North and the South', offered to the ambient society and the rich and diverse North–South and South–South partnership.

RD's fourth journey is a kind of soft landing that consists in presenting the profile of 'the future anthropologist'. He views the future anthropologist as the one who draws up an inventory of 'local, diverse and complex, ancient and contemporary arts and knowledge; he/she is an inter-cultural and inter-generational diplomat'. According to RD, 'anthropology is the science that is in close contact with the real-life experience of human beings'.

Let us consider the vision of others: RD's testimony is a good illustration of problems encountered in carrying out research on a 'mined' field and on subjects or issues that need to be thoroughly grasped. Théodore Trefon and Pierre Petit have experimented on this in their 2006 work, 'Expériences de recherche en République démocratique du Congo: Méthodes et contextes' [Research Experiments in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Methods and Context] (in *Civilisations* 54.1–2, 274pp.) in which twenty studies are devoted to research on mined fields in various regions of Congo. Petit and Trefon, co-directors of these studies, point out that as 'a true paradigm of an Africa confronted by the horrors of war, state disintegration and informalization of the economy, Congo appears to shoulder all the obstacles to field research that is in conformity with the methodological canons of the various disciplines' (2006: 9). This reflects the concerns voiced by RD above.

Conducting research in a postcolonial society presents another obstacle to the European. Petit and Trefon seem to assert this fact. They argue that 'White researchers cannot dilute their colour and become invisible in a society where the very colour of the skin makes them relatives of the former colonialists. This position of alterity lends them a very variable status, depending on the context' (2006: 12-13). The situation is very different in the case of RD. Instead of 'sticking out like a sore thumb', he has, quite on the contrary, won the confidence of the people through close contact and prolonged immersion. The result is a certain trivialisation of alterity.

A quick glance at recent publications on Congo by the Anthropology Centre at the Université Libre de Bruxelles reveals an ever-growing interest in urban studies. The Observatoire du changement urbain [Urban development observatory] established in 2000 in Lubumbashi has recorded results of research on that town. Several years earlier, Luc Heusch had initiated studies on the traditional societies of Central Africa (see Petit and Trefon 2006).

The field is an unavoidable area in any anthropological research. However, what differs is the manner in which research is conducted. Marc Eric Gruenais (2005) proposes 'upgrading of fieldwork' ('Le renouvellement du terrain: Quelques considérations sur l'évolution des méthodes ethnographiques' [Upgrading of fieldwork: Some considerations on the evolution of ethnographic methods], *The African Anthropologist / L'Anthropologue Africain*, 12.2: 172–80). The outline presented, though very brief, is worthy of consideration.

Now, a word on the workshop conducted in Kinshasa, from 17 to 21 September 2007, on the urban history of Central Africa. At that workshop, historians, sociologists, economists, anthropologists, geographers, demographers, architects and town planners reflected on upgrading of theories and methodologies, and on the establishment of new reference frameworks. The 'frameworks' on which research sites are based call for a series of 'perspectives'. At that workshop, Professor Elikia M'Bokolo presented 'new perspectives' in the study of urban history. The complexity of the urban phenomenon, the difficulty in measuring particularly growth, the importance of the long duration of the study, the town viewed as a laboratory, etc., were raised. In towns as in the rural areas, the field is vast, but approaches vary widely.

RD explained the manner in which the anthropologist's role should be construed. He experienced it through his research and concerns as a European torn between two worlds. Such a vision should be placed in context. Some people have reproached him for neglecting the quantitative aspect of research, in favour of the qualitative dimension. Others have opted for a compromise between the two approaches. In any case, the debate remains open.