

READING WIM VAN BINSBERGEN'S RECENT BOOK
INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

by René Devisch

ABSTRACT. The author offers a critical though sympathetic assessment of Wim van Binsbergen's recent book *Intercultural Encounters: African and anthropological lessons towards a philosophy of interculturality*. Realising that van Binsbergen's argument hinges on a passionate critique of the academic reification and estranging formalisation of cultural others, the author has chosen the greatest possible informality and intimacy for his own address: that of a personal letter as among friends. He understands the book as replete with multi-layered and multi-centred Janus-like texts, journeys and undertakings, in which the sustained field-work experience of over three decades is combined with an emergent intercultural politics of knowledge – taking issue with the sacrosanct positions of anthropology as well as with the political correctness governing North-South intercultural debate. A specialist in Central African religion – notably divination – himself, the author recognises his own ethnographic and analytical struggles most in van Binsbergen's chapters dealing with Southern African tablet divination and the ecstatic cult. A kaleidoscopic short review of twentieth century philosophy brings the author to recognise both the resonances in van Binsbergen's work, and the missed chances, especially those of linking up with feminist and Lacanian approaches. Suggesting that the book's struggle for 'intercultural encounters' aims at a sharing of the sciences at the borders, and at the linking of borders on the intercultural plane, the author advocates the psychoanalytical-artistic work of Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger as a further road ahead.

KEY WORDS. border, border linking, Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, critique of anthropology, divination, feminist philosophy fieldwork, *Intercultural Encounters*, intercultural philosophy, Janus, Lacan, multi-centredness, multi-layeredness, scientific knowledge

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Dear Professor van Binsbergen, dear colleague, my dear friend Wim,

I hope that by addressing you this letter rather than a scholarly essay I might better live up to the spirit of your most innovative writing in *Intercultural Encounters*. Is a letter to a dear friend not a genuine mode of encounter? In

reading your path-breaking *magnum opus* I have relived the rich exchanges that we have shared over the past years. Itself an expression of a deeply ethical intercultural commitment, your book interweaves, in very subtle ways a number of poignant issues regarding the intercultural encounter and its elucidation. First, your work reflects a sustained effort to rethink the constitutive grounds of your hermeneutic-philosophical endeavour. This endeavour is, second, revealingly placed in confrontation with your passionate ethnographic sensitivity that resonates with the sociality, numinous powers, inventive governance and healing arts displayed and deployed by your many hosts. Third, the work gives full expression to your lucid, postcolonial interrogations regarding our ethnocentric blockage vis-à-vis open-minded intercultural encounter and science-sharing – whether in academia or cyberspace – between and across North and South and South and North. You thus invite us, as colleague anthropologists and philosophers, to rethink, in and from a multicultural variety of social scenes and epistemological presuppositions, our by definition limited and biasing modes of understanding reality and representation, meaning and agency, and culture and power, as well as space, place and time (or locality and belonging, identification and history).

Let me confess at the start how much I am both intimidated and fascinated by your *oeuvre*. And allow me to speak quite frankly in expressing my hope that my letter to you, dear friend Wim, may soon find itself enfolded somewhere in your book and thereby, I presume, escape the oblivion that might befall an all too sketchy scholarly essay relegated to the shadow of your fifteen solid chapters. Your relentless quest, chapter after chapter, to elucidate and theorise where you stand and from which perspectives and neo-colonial contexts of inequality you might speak, is part of your ethical positioning in the North-South encounter. All too much simplification and ethnocentric disfigurement has already occurred in the discourse that the North has shamelessly formulated with regard to the South. And in the present-day world context of both the wars of the sciences and increasing global interdependence accompanied by massive asymmetry, it is undoubtedly only the qualities of friendship, political solidarity and lucid expertise, such as yours, regarding anthropology's or philosophy's presuppositions and proper conceptual spaces, that might possibly offer the expatriate-anthropologist or -philosopher a legitimate forum for intercultural dialogue.

1. First let me try to formulate how I understand your philosophical-cum-anthropological epistemic endeavour

As announced by its cover drawing, your book is replete with multi-layered and multi-centred Janus-like texts, journeys and undertakings. These unfold in a spiralling movement between multiple scenes and voices that witness to various modes in which African societies develop, systematise and share knowledge in and through their world-making.

On the one hand, I as a reader am dazzled by your sharply designed and incisive debates (particularly in chapters 2 to 4, 9, and 12 to 14) regarding the opposition between endogenously heuristic perspectives and ethnocentric or exogenously imposed epistemes, whether in Africanist ethnography or intercultural philosophy. Your witty discussions range in focus from R.A. Mall to Mogobe Ramose's *ubuntu* philosophy, or move from reflection on Emmanuel Kant's theory of aesthetic judgement to analysis of Information and Communication Technology. Spurred by Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, your chapters 7 and 15 aim at re-designing some of Africa's knowledge contribution, in particular that of geomancy, to Global Cultural History. Again and again you put forward a lucid socio-political macro-analysis of post-colonial and post-apartheid Africa. Throughout, your book forcefully unmasks many sexist, gender-biased, racist and patriarchal power constellations and hegemonic modes of world-making as they are reflected, in particular, in the Centre-Periphery inequalities in internationally accepted knowledge production, or in the modernist disregard for the numinous, for human frailty, or for the paradoxical and the heterogeneous. And, you cannot but acknowledge that an unprejudiced polylogue has not yet gotten off the ground between, on the one hand, western-borne modern science (whose development owes much to the sciences of other civilizations) and, on the other, authentically non-western, civilisation-specific epistemes and sciences. Among the latter one thinks of Amerindian, Arabic-Islamic, Bantu, Persian, Ayurvedic, Hindu or Han-Chinese sciences, and other elaborate knowledge systems that entail diverse geometries and mathematics, each of them based on partially heterogeneous metaphysical assumptions regarding nature, the universe, time and logic.

On the other hand, I very much cherish your chapters successively dealing with

- shrines and saints' cults in northwestern Tunisia,
- Nkoya girls' puberty rites in western-central Zambia,
- tablet divination
- and with *Sangoma* in Francistown and across Botswana and South Africa.

These chapters vividly transmit something of the haunting unruliness and muddled intersubjective transferences – and in particular of the fleshy and seductive or at times disempowering intercorporeity – that typify the ethnographic encounter, as well as the physicality of knowing as a continuous becoming.

I confess, dear Wim, that your traineeship and practice as a *sangoma* deeply challenge me. I cannot help but surmise that you consider me, a hybrid ethnographer-psychoanalyst, as a disembedded and unfulfilled Africanist scholar. Yes, unlike cult initiates and healers such as yourself, I am as yet unable trans-subjectively, and hence intercorporeally, to bind myself, or for that matter the afflicted others who occasionally seek my help in Kinshasa, with the ancestral or healing cult spirits. I find myself capable only of poetically evoking the spirit realm of my Yaka hosts in southwestern Congo, and am not enabled to link up existentially with the most potent 'invisible realm', namely that of *ngoongu*, which I – all too romantically perhaps – depict in my writings on the Yaka as their primal maternal life-source, which ceaselessly and rhythmically oozes from the womb of the earth. Could we perhaps imagine the 'invisible' in Bantu cultures as the ever virtual? Moreover, would not the invisible and cunning realm of nameless ghosts (seemingly involving an imaginary similar to that of the North-African realm of *djiins*), imbricating as it does with the more institutionalised ancestral and cult spirits, be best understood as setting out the primordial axioms of a people's life-world? In the popular life-world of the Yaka, ghosts and spirits namely appear as the great organising unsaid. Through their cunningly unsettling effect on people's dreams and moods, spirits and ghosts – it appears to me – to a great extent offer people an imaginary space to externalise whatever is frustrating and alienating. Yet they thereby create an in-between or virtual, as yet unthought-of, space for exploring ever-new conduct.

Nonetheless, your endeavour by no means represents a surrender to a

romantic or *New Age*-type of escape away from globally accepted scholarly standards in the social sciences. It is preoccupied, rather, by the very humbling question confronting any social scientist, namely: in which domains do the models of the social sciences and philosophy make our worlds more predictable, first, and second, more communicable and consensual on the intercultural level?

Your book maintains a spiralling Janus-like tension between the contradictory impulses at work in the intercultural encounter envisaged by the social scientist: it reflects, on the one hand, the pull towards clarity of thought and, on the other, the more empathic fascination for the inexpressible, invisible, and hence numinous. Yet your work, perhaps in line with more classical anthropological traditions, aims at establishing a reliable point of view and a trustworthy hermeneutic, or even at achieving a voice of scholarly authority if not with regard to truth then to some ultimate nature of our social worlds. On the one hand, you are calling towards ever greater discursive scrutiny and polylogue in intercultural philosophy while, on the other, you share with us your intimate involvement with Nkoya puberty initiation, with fieldwork as initiation (in your novel *Een buik openen – Opening a belly*), as well as with initiation into divinership (which you describe in your *Becoming a sangoma*, chapter 5). Here, your highly sensorial, hence sensual, metaphoric depiction of such initiations, seen both as something *produced* and as an *affective weave embracing you*, is perhaps most genuine there where it conveys to us the Bantu mediumnic divination and healing arts. Unlike an objective sociological analysis, your sensual metaphoric and self-engaged depiction does not entail that the empathic anthropologist obnubilates what it is intersubjectively and intrasubjectively that his or her sentences report or discuss. On the contrary, such open-minded depiction lies perhaps at the very heart of the most valid form of intercultural encounter between the participant anthropologist and the host community. Indeed, the latter transferentially negotiates, produces and reciprocally corrects a real story, which then is simultaneously locally and transculturally relevant. Such mutually entrusted anthropological 'story' critically investigates and discloses – primarily from within the community's rationale but nonetheless for an external audience – the community's genius in the production and self-correcting of a reliable social knowledge, in brief, in world-making. From here, I would radicalise your intercultural endeavour and argue that all valid knowledge,

including science, is first of all local or site-specific knowledge, before it can be shared interculturally on a larger, and thus more dislocated, scale by means of a polylogue across heterogeneous epistemes. Across the globe, communities or networks generate intellectuals – some of whom we may call informal intellectuals – who seek self-critically to uncover their world, life and society along genuine and potentially most insightful lines.

2. Let us then revisit your ethnographic fieldwork

Dear Wim, am I fair when I sense in your book some ambivalence vis-à-vis ethnography? You quite evidently favour minute ethnographic specificity. Although you are tired of superficial and spectacular empiricism and a fetishisation of the local, you nevertheless urge your ‘local’ scientific interlocutors – be they African or Asian, Flemish or Zambian scholars, to debate and theorise until a consensus is achieved via clearly-defined analytic tools.

Although your at times very loquacious book and your introspective confession espouse to some degree your own society’s televisual conditions of social reality production, and comply to the mere text-bound production of highly-coded and extravert knowledge in North-Atlantic academia, your acute visionary sense, however, constantly struggles to untie these very text-bound, if not socio-culturally specific, intersubjective and discursive conditions of knowledge production. Beneath these resistances that I sense, to my mind the basic question that your book poses is this: in which fields exactly does fieldwork occur? In other words, in which intersubjective and trans-world spheres – partly nondiscursive – of drives and desire, memories and longings, power relations and shifting identities, numinous presence and delusions, does the ethnographic participant observation of initiation and divination, healing and trance-possession, for example, occur?

Radical feminist post-structuralist and post-Lacanian approaches – such as those advanced by Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Gail Weiss and Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, who break with Lévi-Strauss’ and Lacan’s so-called phallogocentrism – depict the largely non-representational and nondiscursive fields of intercorporeity and intersubjective encounter as unruly fields of *forces*. Fits of undirected and multisensory empathy, abet-

ted by shifting consensual and dialogical *finesse*, can be said to make the encounter, and not least the encounter envisaged in anthropological, intercultural, fieldwork. The notion of forces is understood here both in the Freudian sense of impulse (want, desire, *drift*, *Trieb*) and in line with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the sensory and affective relational body. Unlike the Lacanian notion of desire, 'forces' evoke the embedding in the *flesh* of affects, wants and imaginaries. The French notion of *con-naissance*, literally co-birth, renders the sensuous intercorporeal and responsive encounter and comprehension so dear to you, Wim, much more aptly than the all too cognitively-oriented concept of knowledge. Your chapters on Nkoya puberty rituals and *sangoma*, in particular, demonstrate how much the encounter unfolds as a complex transferential and counter-transferential embroidery of approval or disapproval, information or exclusion, affection or rejection. Such encounter, based on the participants' embodied intersubjectivity, forges and re-forges their affects, old and new imageries, sensitivities and intimate memories, just as it does the anthropologist's insider's understanding of local idioms, conventions and practices.

Seen from this post-structuralist and post-Lacanian perspective, the 'real' is what the subject (such as the participant anthropologist) experiences and imagines as a relevant event, a piece of information, an intent. The 'real' arises out of both a libidinally-driven and a discursive transactional setting of fellow-subjects who share some *con-naissance*. According to Kristeva, the 'real' in an intersubjective encounter, such as the one that produces well-grounded intercultural knowledge, is more akin to Lacan's co-implicating orders of "the *real*, the *imaginary* and the *symbolic*", rather than to the empiricist's nude *facts*, depicted as they are by the inductive sociological account of their observable constituents and plots. Moreover, the bifurcation between the contingent (singular, place-bound) experiential, on the one hand, and the time-based (historical) discursive individual consciousness, on the other, constitutes perhaps the crucial founding moment of modern philosophy. It enabled the reduction of the real to forms of consciousness, experience and mental attitudes (subjectivity and agency) that underpin identity, meaning, process and history.

You yourself have been able to escape being seduced by a modernist historical perspective and the notion of the great universal river of western science inasmuch as your Africanist experience has led you to contest the

very basis of much modern thinking regarding what constitutes both the purity, impartiality and universality of scientific research. Indeed, your anthropological work is witness to that predilection of African societies to favour people's multi-sited knots, webs and weaves as the very tissue of becoming, rather than focussing on temporal developments or the subject's autonomy across the march of time. Becoming is then the process of spatialisation or localisation of transformation, articulation and embedding that a subject traverses across the space of existence. Life in Central Africa is a becoming, an intercorporeal, intersubjective and trans-world weaving of the threads of life.

3 . Your intercultural encounters aim, it would appear to me, at a sharing of the sciences at the borders and at the linking of borders on the intercultural plane

Though moved by sociology's founding desire to know the nature of social and political reality from the site-specific perspective of the collective actor, your book profoundly problematises ethnography's classical status insofar as it has been defined as a window on the real and the Other. Indeed, you have been a most committed fieldworker. Anthropological fieldwork in Africa, and the scholarly reporting it is assumed to produce, entail major dislocations or shifts from the centrality of the interactional or the verbal and the observable, to the transactional, the interior and the invisible. In these shifts, such as they occur in your various ethnographic fields, you have been led to impersonate some of the generative symbols and values that mobilise the intersubjective co-implication at play in the host group's leadership models as in their hermeneutic devices or mediumnic divination and healing. With regard to the anthropological report, you again and again allude to the detours imposed upon us in anthropological or philosophical writing. Indeed, classical-academic dissertation urges us to cleanse our text of all traces of unruliness, puzzles and doubts, chaotic desires, anxieties, subjectivity, and those transferential and invisible phenomena which are so much at play in our fieldwork. But, as you demonstrate, an ethically committed anthropologist cannot *a priori* exclude from the intercultural encounter whatever ap-

pears to be at odds with hegemonic modes of scholarly knowledge production. Entrenched in intercultural encounter, your book's horizon is beset by a host of concerns, of which I will here attempt to sketch only three.

An initial concern that underlies your writing is this: how can vital world-making practices of particular communities or networks – such as the cult of saints, puberty initiation rituals, tablet divination, initiatory healing (of, say, deeply depressed initiands), as well as communitarian modes of decision-making or sharing responsibility – breed in rhizome-like ways as webs or matrices across linguistic, cultural, intellectual and socio-political borders? In particular, can or should the compassionate anthropologist espouse the distress or the beauty, hence the dignity and numinous inspiration, of the host by way of a becoming part of himself or herself?

In spelling out another concern of yours, I rely heavily on Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger's (1999, 2000) grasp of matrixial border-linking. This concern might be posed as the question under what transactional conditions and along which intersubjective and epistemological tracks may an intercultural encounter yield a truly trans-subjective and transmuting border-zone that would allow for some measure of an in-depth border-linking of culture-specific knowledge practices? Such border-linking is neither a mere hegemonic or counter-hegemonic modality of colonising border-crossing, nor the postulate of a third or hybrid space of 'interbeing' or becoming-the-other. Your book again and again interrogates your readers as to the conditions under which a genuine intercultural encounter might come to unleash a dialectic and full accreditation of transsubjective and transmuting border-linking. How does the encounter yield a self-critical yet non-colonising knowledge-sharing that is able to move beyond the endless stereotypes to which alien societies and ways of life so easily fall prey? Such processes of science-sharing or knowledge-sharing perhaps entail the mutual acceptance that civilisation-specific sciences are to some degree society-bound institutional crafts seeking to unravel indices of quality of being and clarity of knowledge in parallel with the quests for reason and truth.

I know from our many encounters how much you are concerned with looking back from your African experience at your native society and the habitus of North-Atlantic scientists. Like you, I wonder whether the anthropologist returning home to the North, and perhaps embracing psychoanalysis or intercultural philosophy, is able precisely to unravel the unthought or

deeply suppressed in mainstream North-Atlantic consciousness, namely that which escapes the slipstream of ongoing scientific research? Is it not the particular role of anthropology and intercultural philosophy to privilege what French semiologists, such as Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, have labelled as *signifiante*, in referring to processes of interactional and fluid meaning production that move beyond rigidity, known grounds and simulacrum? Such anthropological attention attuned to the intercultural encounter, both away from and back home, may thus come to grasp and endorse the as-yet-unthought-in-thought, the ever virtual as well as the ceaselessly unfolding and indeterminable, polymorphous fields of *connaissance* and intersubjectivity that so inevitably evade the snares of institutional power and the predefined tracks of knowledge.

Indeed, intercultural research may examine, for example, how emotions, knowledge or inequalities of power, as well as conceptual patterns of truth, help, crisis, pain, redemption or normalcy, and their opposites, are articulated in culture-specific ways. In the border-zones in-between communities or networks, to put it in Deleuzian terms, both difference and inventiveness are favoured in their own right, as they are manifested in such phenomena as ecstatic pilgrimage, cult initiatory identity, feminine hospitality or the healing cults. On a more daily basis, affective expressions such as tears of sharing loss, laughter and humour all yield intercorporeal energy and explore such border-zones. Here, one is situated in a fold of inter-being, of unstable body-self morphing, of inventing and inhabiting multiple subselves, of ties and places of sharing confidence or strategic resistance.

Conclusion

You will have perceived, dear Wim, how the many journeys and shifts in your work have led me to rethink the anthropological endeavour and its research methods and theory. Many of your points have certainly brought me further along rhizome-like hermeneutic tracks towards more lucid intercultural border-linking. You have left us a most rich, colourful and dense intellectual embroidery, and this work is an important scholarly legacy. I thank you so much for having associated me in this celebration extending a new lease of life to *QUEST*, and hope that our exchange may become even more

challenging and rewarding.

Van harte – Cordially,

Renaat

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