

René DEVISCH, "WEAVING THE THREADS OF LIFE. THE KHITA GYN-ECO-LOGICAL HEALING CULT AMONG THE YAKA"

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Devisch is without any doubt one of the leading Belgian anthropologists. His theoretical framework (which he labels "semantic praxiology") is based, on the one hand on a profound knowledge of the relevant anthropological, philosophical, linguistic, and psychoanalytical literature, and on the other hand on a deep personal encounter with "his" Yaka of Zaire. This blend generates a rather personal view on doing fieldwork, and -above all- on the interpretation of cultural data. It is an anthropological mixture that leaves no room for much personal choice for the reader: either you follow his "weaving", or you don't, in which case you are lost in his "webs" of cultural meaning-construction. I tried to follow his line of reasoning, but it was a long and a hard way!

In an earlier document, I tried to summarize his theoretical framework, annotated by Devisch himself. In an introduction to a collective publication in 1989, I tried to make clear the correspondences and the discrepancies between his approach and mine. Now, five years later, similar points of appreciation and of criticism reappear, some modified, some more prominent.

The book contains three major parts: a discussion of his views on fieldwork and his theoretical framework for looking at culture and interpreting it; a presentation of Yaka culture in terms of his theoretical outlook within the domain of life-transmission; and an application of these data on illness and healing.

In this book Devisch adopts a "going native"- approach, although almost twenty years separate his interpretation of this healing ritual from his actual fieldwork -an occasional revisit put aside. As he phrases this himself, his

"method of writing about this reality will try to embrace the form of the healing practice and to unravel the very alchemy of healing. It is my feeling that in order to outgrow an all too western scholarly credo and masculine field of vision, my anthropological writings and audiovisual productions ought somehow to render the sensuous styles of producing and sharing experience and of empowerment among the people who adopted me." (p.2) In other words, in this book Devish distances himself from all post-modern and dialogical approaches (among which he reckons the praxiological approach), and assumes to render the Yaka point of view, but on a meta-level. This is participative observation in its purest -and much discussed- formulation, almost a broadening of the religious I-Thou relationship described by the theologian Martin Buber (who inspired the anthropologist Victor Turner is his interpretations of ritual) to the whole field of anthropology.

The question e.g. how his body-centered approach (which was developed largely after his fieldwork) is in accordance with their feelings and world view is discarded of: Devisch assumes he is, thinks, and writes like a Yaka would. That his approach is after all analytical (in an occidental scholarly fashion) rather than empathatic is not made explicit enough. The whole viewpoint seems to an important degree inspired by psychoanalytical insights, which makes me feel a bit at unease.

The book focuses on healing-rituals, more particularly the Yaka khita rituals intended to cure women's gynaecological disorders. But the book also contains a broad outlook on his viewpoints on traditional healing and on the anthropological endeavour. He considers indigenous healing practices as complementary to western biomedicine. African healing arts are not to be reduced to herbal medicine, since they possess additional cultural and psychological dimensions: "The traditional healer ... works from a broad definition of health pertaining to the interactive spheres of physical, social, and spiritual life... his etiology involves at least three fields of parallel investigation, namely of the body (luutu), of interacting persons (muutu) or group (tsi), and of the life-world (n-tootu)." (p.30) "Biomedicine, conversely, is ... concerned with physical disease and pathogens rather than with illness and sickness ... illness is naturalized and transformed from a cultural into a natural fact: it is defined in terms of a predominantly biological and functional view of the body." (p.31) I can agree with his general line of reasoning, but it seems however to me an over-idealisation of traditional healing and an unfair judgement of western medicine. Isn't there any place left then for interaction between the two, for a genuine and meaningful interdisciplinary reciprocity?

His semantic-praxiological approach is particularly indebted to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, Kristéva's semiotics and the poststructuralist praxiology of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Comaroff. I would add Victor Turner's views on liminality and drama, although Devisch criticizes them extensively. The outcome of these influences is an approach that considers ritual praxis as a self-enclosed activity, not as activities referring to something outside: "Ritual activity in its most genuine characteristic is therefore not conceived here as a 're-presented' narrative, as a reproduction of a myth, or as a reflection or replay of a social reality." (p.39). To accomplish this, an alternative methodology is needed, in which the concepts of metaphor and metonym are crucial. The core question is: How are metaphoric and metonymic relations established in and between the semantic domains of body, social world, and cosmology? The focus of observation and interpretation is the body in its transformational capacities. Frits Staal -working on Indian ritual- adopts a similar point of departure: ritual is a self-enclosed activity, but he goes further. He also rejects all references to meaning: ritual is rule-governed action in its purest "meaningless" form; it is "Rules without Meaning". It would be interesting to confront more deeply both viewpoints on ritual action.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 respectively treat Yaka world view in terms of space-time arrangements and core symbols concerning fertility, regeneration, and life-transmission; social bodiliness and life transmission; and the Yaka view on bodiliness. It is impossible to go into the wealth of details of Devisch' analysis. The presentation of each item is interwoven with a wealth of ethnographic detail, making more concrete the general framework exposed in chapter 1. Being myself used to this kind of symbolic-semantic-metaphoric interpretations, I do not have too much difficulties to follow Devisch' reasoning, but I doubt if it is clear to someone unacquainted with this type of analysis. My major question is this: Where does Devisch draw a line between ethnographic information and the anthropologist's interpretation? It reminds me somewhat of the -remarkable- analyses of Dogon worldview "in which everything is potentially a symbol of anything else", but it makes me always -critically- wonder whether an anthropologist has not been caught in his own "webs of significance" (Geertz) or simply lost his way in a "forest of symbols" (Turner).

In general, it is impossible to criticize the analyses. But a broader question arises: In how far isn't this an idealized presentation of Yaka culture? I provide only one example, concerning the role of the core family in life-transmission: "As a protective shell for mother and nurseling, the home is the very icon of motherhood. In and around the house, a mother holds her

baby on her lap, carries it on her hip or in a cloth on her back; she keeps it close to her in bed. She nurses the child on demand and comforts it when it cries. She will hand it over to others only for brief periods. Mothers are very playful with their nurslings. Till weaning, the strong mother-child tie isolates the father. Life in the homestead is one of equal sharing. The sharing of table and of bed, the enduring intimacy of physical and olfactory contact between husband and wife, parents and children elicits affectionate fellow-feeling (yibuundwa) and, literary, "a unity of heart" (mbuundwa mosi) and confidence: members of the family offer mutual comfort and find protection in the familial dwelling at mealtime, around the hearth, and in the common sleeping place. The range of habitual and stable contacts in the home assures and supports the reciprocal identification of the family members while at the same time forming a boundary and a rampart that separate and protect the family. The maternal body and the family dwelling are one another's icon: here parents and children retire and confide in each other, abandoning themselves to the community of life and to the shared quest for well-being. In this way the home, and particularly its aspects of commensality and shared sleeping place, acquire a vital completeness and an inviolable integrity similar to that of the mother's body." (p.94) Symbolic images like this, based on metaphor and metonym, abound throughout the book. They are in fact a very complicated way of stating that "the house is like a womb", a well-known metaphor in anthropology.

But it is not only a complex way to make a simple statement, it is over-idealized: it is not the image of what a household really is, it is an almost Christian image of what it ought to be. Of course, real households are not like this. But -and here Devisch closes his "hermeneutic circle"- disturbances of this ideal-image provoke illness, and have to be restored by ritual practices in which the ideal is symbolically made present through principles that are at the fore of a theoretical framework which is based on observations they have to account for... We have come full circle. I cannot undo myself from the feeling that empirical data shaped a theory that perfectly fits the data. As a consequence, no external criticism is possible since the whole interpretation is self-contained. But I am aware Devisch does not consider this as a weakness, but precisely as the core of his approach.

These rituals of balance-restoration are the subject of the third part of the book. Chapters 5 to 8 deal more particularly with the khita healing cult to restore gynecological disorders. Chapter 5 discusses the Yaka impediments to life-transmission. Chapters 6 and 7 describe and interpret the khita ritual within the author's framework. Chapter 8 is particularly ambitious, since it attempts to understand the very source of healing rituals.

The book is certainly recommendable to those interested in Yaka culture, healing rituals, medical anthropology, and broad anthropological questions. But the average reader will feel lost in analytical details that do not contribute to the overall argument. Emergence in one culture is something to be applauded, being able to transmit one's inside-views in a discourse that is accessible to readers belonging to another culture is quite something else. It remains however a work of scholarly erudition. But given its broad theoretical outlook and its in-depth ethnological insights into a foreign culture, its scope could have been relevant for the human sciences as a whole. I cannot grasp why the author stuck to an over-elaborated style of presentation which encapsulates his strong arguments in an obscure personal idiom. It reads like a personal "rené-generation", an account of the author's struggle with his personal fieldwork experience, his coming back, and his final "digestion". It is the reader's challenge to struggle through all this.

Review by:

Dirk VERBOVEN

Antwerpse steenweg 818
B-9040 Sint-Amandsberg