

# René Devisch

(1944–2020)

Filip De Boeck and Sjaak van der Geest

On 3 February 2020, René (Renaat) Devisch—Africanist, cultural/medical anthropologist, and emeritus professor at the Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa (IARA), University of Leuven—passed away after a long and drawn-out illness. Devisch became the co-founder of the Dutch–Belgian journal *Medische Antropologie* [Medical Anthropology] in 1989. From then until 2006 he acted as editor of the journal, which later transformed into the current international Europe-based journal *Medicine Anthropology Theory* (MAT) in 2013.

One of the initial objectives of *Medische Antropologie* was to offer a forum where medical anthropologists in the Netherlands and Dutch-speaking Belgium could meet, exchange research, and publish work in the field of health and illness from a social and cultural perspective. Advanced students were explicitly invited to contribute to the journal. By choosing Dutch as the journal's first language, the editors hoped to attract a wider public of writers and readers. It was also at this time that medical anthropology was surfacing as the fastest-growing sub-discipline of anthropology.

René Devisch will be especially remembered for his pioneering anthropological research among the Yaka people of the Kwaango region, a rural area in the province of Bandundu a few hundred kilometres south of Kinshasa, the capital of the present Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Raised as the youngest member of a Catholic farming family in the western part of Flanders, near the French border, Devisch joined the religious order of the Jesuits in his early twenties. He was sent to Kinshasa where, during the turbulent years following independence, he successively studied philosophy at the St Pierre

Canisius Institute in Kimwenza and social sciences at the University of Kinshasa, where he soon fell under the spell of anthropology. It was also in Kinshasa that he met like-minded mentors, fellow students, and later colleagues such as Wauthier de Mahieu, Mbonyenkebe Sebahire, Gilles Bibeau, and Ellen Corin. The latter two would later feed Devisch's interest in medical anthropology and psychoanalysis.

After a short stay in troubled Leuven in 1969, Devisch returned to what was then the Republic of Zaire, where in 1971 he decided to leave the Jesuit order and devote himself to anthropological fieldwork. In January 1972, he moved to a Yaka village in the northern Kwaango region. He would be their guest until October 1974, immersing himself in their complex ritual universe and following in the footsteps of earlier generations of anthropologists such as Michel Plancquaert, Léon de Beir, and Eugeen Roosens. His fascination with Yaka culture never released him and, drawing on this initial field research (as well as his annual stays with the Yaka population in Kinshasa), Devisch continued to publish extensively throughout his life on various aspects of their world.

After his return from Congo, Devisch became a researcher at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Leuven. There he wrote his thesis on Khita, a healing cult among the Yaka, which continued to intrigue him throughout his career and to which he devoted various studies (see, among others, Devisch 1984; 1993). Until his retirement in 2009, he remained inextricably linked to the Leuven Department of Anthropology, where he trained a new generation of young anthropologists from the end of the 1980s onward and became the inspiring force behind CADES (Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies), a new (and still successful) international advanced master's programme.

His first publications were strongly inspired by the French structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the symbolic anthropology of Victor Turner, the semiotics of Greimas and Kristeva, and the semantic anthropology of Wauthier de Mahieu, with whom he published his first work—on funeral rites among the Yaka and the Komo—in 1979 (Devisch and De Mahieu 1979).

Throughout his life, Devisch kept returning to this ethnographic world in what he called a respectful handling of the uniqueness of the Yaka culture. From the 1980s onwards, he gradually developed his own original theoretical approach that he described as 'semantic praxiology'.

From about 1980, Devisch profiled himself as the founder of medical anthropology in the Flemish and, more generally, Belgian contexts. His PhD research among the Yaka became the main inspiration for his medical anthropological initiatives. Between 1980 and 1986, he led a flourishing medical anthropological joint venture with the Institute for Family Medicine at the University of Antwerp. Prominent

themes of research and debate included the mirroring of therapist and client; the semantic analysis of psychosomatic complaints among Italian, Moroccan, and Turkish immigrants; and abdominal complaints of Flemish patients visiting Belgian general practitioners. This cross-disciplinary project ended when the Antwerp institute opted for a more mono-disciplinary biomedical profile, much to Devisch's dismay.

Between 1978 and 1992, he animated a lively interdisciplinary seminar on 'symbol and symptom', which featured many prominent guest speakers from Europe, Canada, the USA, and Tunisia.

Devisch taught a successful advanced graduate course in medical anthropology for 28 years at the University of Leuven, some 10 years at Louvain-la-Neuve University, and one year at the Université de Montréal and the Université de Kinshasa.

Some of his former PhD students, including Filip De Boeck, Stefan Bekaert, Patrick Meurs, and Steven van Wolputte, joined him as co-editors of the journal *Medische Antropologie*. Stefan Bekaert, a promising young scholar who succeeded him as editor, died in a tragic accident in northern Italy in 1998. Bekaert's death stayed with Devisch for the rest of his life, as did the loss of one of his own children a few years later.

1989, the year the journal was founded, was also a time when publications in anthropology were increasingly being written in English to reach the international academic community. As a result, the journal slowly lost its Dutch–Belgian signature and became an international journal with a Dutch name. This name remained until 2013, when *MAT* took over (Van der Geest et al. 2011).

Throughout this period, Devisch built up an imposing assemblage of publications encompassing medicine, religion, and psychiatry. Following and parallel to new developments in anthropological theories (which in the 1980s were moving away from comprehensive explanatory theoretical frameworks and beginning to pay attention to more corporeal and subjective dimensions such as emotion, affect and praxis), Devisch placed the body at the centre in his analysis of the Yaka world. Partly inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, especially his concept of 'habitus' as formulated in *Le Sens Pratique* (Bourdieu 1980), Devisch developed what he described as a 'three-field approach' between the physical body, social body, and cosmological environment. This approach culminated in what is undoubtedly his most important book, *Weaving the Threads of Life: The Khita Gyn-Eco-Logical Healing Cult Among the Yaka* (1993).

In addition, Devisch published several contributions on Central African divination practices (cf. De Boeck and Devisch 1994; Devisch 1985; 1991), a subject about which, together with Dirk Dumon, he made an ethnographic film that documents the initiation ritual of a female Yaka fortune teller (Devisch and Dumon 1991).

In 1991, Devisch witnessed the wave of looting that engulfed Kinshasa and the whole of the DRC. This traumatic event, about which he wrote a number of articles and book chapters (see, for example, Devisch 1995), formed a caesura in his life and work. For him, it marked the end of the possibility of a classical anthropology about the 'Other'. Partly as a result of this, the focus of his work gradually shifted from the rural to the urban, which translated into paying increasing attention to the growing impact of charismatic healing churches in Kinshasa, but also, for example, into a concern about the possibility of the 'endogenisation' of the university curriculum in the Congolese context (Devisch 2001). In addition, there was the desire to develop a new intercultural anthropology in light of the post-colonial theory that, in the 1990s, was swiftly gaining momentum (Devisch and Nyamnjoh 2011).

However, in addition to this expansion, his later work is characterised by a more introverted deepening. Devisch, who was a member of the Belgian School for Psychoanalysis and who also worked as a psychoanalyst, searched for a cross-fertilisation between anthropology and psychoanalysis inspired by a Lacanian perspective (Brodeur and Devisch 1996). The emphasis here was on questions of culture and alterity as uncovered by an in-depth investigation into the possibility of an authentic and respectful affective intercultural encounter. It was an exploration of what connects or distinguishes people both individually and collectively (Devisch 2017). In this quest for the 'unspeakable', the anthropologist's own personal life story gradually came to resonate with those of his interlocutors.

This life story inspired the Belgian novelist and anthropologist Koen Peters (2017) to write a prize-winning fictionalised biography of René Devisch, who, as a young anthropologist, is welcomed by Yaka villagers as an ancestral spirit. Dreams and memories from his youth in western Flanders, torn apart by two wars, return and are fulfilled in rituals and the daily enactments of belief in a Congolese village. More empirically inclined anthropologists may find the rendering of these 'unspeakable' experiences and biographical elements awkward, but they probably reflect the aspirations and motivations of René Devisch towards the end of his life rather well.

In 2007, Devisch received an honorary doctorate from the University of Kinshasa for both his ground-breaking and original reflections on Yaka religion and ritual and his consistent attempts to de-exoticise the world of the Yaka. Although his work continues to inspire many scholars in the fields of medical anthropology, ritual, and

religion, his legacy probably remains most palpable in the way in which his colleagues and former students have continued to build an international Congo-centred anthropological research hub at the University of Leuven and the University of Kinshasa.

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