JJ Bachofen Lecture

Basic Questions of Anthropology

No 4

On Anthropology, Technology, the Importance of Telling Other Stories about African Cities: A Conversation with Katrien Pype

By Livia Wermuth and Jens Feurer

Picture: Katrien Pype at the J. J. Bachofen Lecture 2018, Basel (Wermuth, 28.09.2018).

On the occasion of this year's JJ Bachofen Lecture, two current students of Anthropology at the University of Basel had the pleasure to meet the anthropologist Katrien Pype on the 28th of September 2018 at the Institute of Social Anthropology in Basel for a conversation about her career and what it looks like to work as an anthropologist today.

Pype is an associate professor at the Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa at KU Leuven University and an honorary research fellow at the Department of African Studies and Anthropology at the University of Birmingham. Her main research interests include popular culture, media and technology in urban DR Congo. In her lecture, titled "Of Masters and Machines. Anthropological Reflections on Invention and Intelligence", she discussed the engagements between society and materiality in terms of belonging, representation and communication with a focus on so-called man-made machines.

When we asked her if she would allow us to record the interview, she laughed and pointed out that this basic question is directly related to the issues she would address in her speech: "This recorder is a machine, you are using a machine to record our conversation. Our ethnographic practice depends on machines. We constantly have to negotiate together with our research participants what we allow these machines to do or not to do".

Livia Wermuth (LW): *Do you remember how and when you decided to study anthropology?*

Katrien Pype (KP): I think I was born as an anthropologist. I remember that as a child I had a Flemish child book, which was called „People and Countries". On two pages you had drawings illustrating a specific topic, for example „Houses around the world". They showed drawings of different types of houses, like the igloos of the Inuit and other stereotypes. It is exactly that child book that triggered my curiosity in cultural and social variations around the world. When I was sixteen years old and was asked what I wanted to study, I already knew I wanted to be an anthropologist – without knowing the word for it. Later, on a study fair in Brussels, I was given an alphabetical list of professions. One of the first words was anthropologist. Since I did not know what it meant, I took the dictionary to look it up and I thought "that is it"! From this moment on I had a word for it.

LW: *That is a nice story reflecting on the importance of being curious, as an anthropologist, about the visible and invisible things of the world, or maybe even feeling the urge to understand things - to find words for things. If we look at one of your recent publications, titled "Smartness from Below: Variations on Technology and Creativity in Contemporary Kinshasa"[1], the dictionary seems to be an important tool for your anthropological practice. The use of the dictionary to look something up is therefore not just metaphorical. Before we discuss some major concepts of the mentioned text, I am interested in how you came to your specialisation. How did you find your own field of anthropological research interests?*

KP: The specialisation on DR Congo and its diasporic places was actually a coincidence. At that time, when my professor, Filip De Boeck, asked me to do a PhD, he himself and one of my senior professors had already been working on southwest Congo, and on Kinshasa, too. When Congo became more peaceful, I was asked to resume Kinshasa as an anthropological research field. The work on its diasporic places resulted from my recent research on social media. The Congolese blogger sphere and digital

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[1] Katrien Pype. 2017. "Smartness from Below: Variations on Technology and Creativity in Contemporary Kinshasa", in: Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga (Hg.), *What Do Science, Technology, and Innovation Mean from Africa?*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 97-115.

communication culture is not limited to its national territory. The whole digital world allows people to communicate across boundaries. So, if boundaries shift, as an anthropologist you have to shift your boundaries along.

LW: *The heart of the Master in Anthropology at the University of Basel is the guided ethnographic research project, which includes six weeks of fieldwork in a region of the global South. For the first time, several of my colleagues and I were confronted with the fact that key questions and issues developed during the preparation seminar in Basel changed completely while we were in the field. Did you also encounter this and how did you deal with it?*

KP: When my supervisor and I started reflecting on what I would do in Kinshasa, it was important for me to combine the two disciplines I had studied, Literature and Anthropology. We came up with the topic of development related theatre in Kinshasa. I started to follow and study drama groups that had been hired by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to instruct Kinshasa's citizens about certain topics such as HIV prevention. However, after six months in the field, I saw that my fieldwork was not going into the right direction.

There were actually three main reasons that made me change my topic towards television drama. The first reason is probably the most ethical one; it is related to the basic question of the role of the anthropologist and his or her relationship to the research participants. In Kinshasa, very quickly I had established some good contacts to artists who were hired by NGOs. I was able to follow them whenever they were sent to perform a play. I remember one situation, when one of the sponsors came and gave a whole box of condoms to the artists, saying that „the pay will come later but already we are giving you this". They refused to take the box of condoms, because they had no use for it. I had already followed and worked with this

group for some months and I knew that some of them had multiple sexual partners. This situation was highly conflicting, and I simply did not know how to describe the observed scenario in my scientific work. Since I had to ask the NGOs for permission to follow those artists, I was working with both sides. I knew that the NGOs were interested in reading my results and I was aware that they were the most important sponsors for the artists. However, I already anticipated what could be the consequences of me reporting the mentioned statements of the artists about not using condoms themselves while performing for the sake of HIV prevention. I felt like this was too much of a burden, I did not want to be responsible for those NGOs suddenly saying, "if we cannot convince our messengers of our message, how can we expect that our messengers are able to convince the population of the city!" I was afraid that the NGOs would stop using theatre as a channel for their communication with the citizen and that actually my interlocutors would be victims of my scientific output.

Secondly, people in Kinshasa associate the genre "théâtre populaire" immediately with local produced television series. It is actually the local term used for television series. Thus, there was this constant confusion between me talking about "théâtre populaire" meaning the mentioned drama groups and the local concept of "théâtre populaire" as television series.

Finally, I simply saw that people had to be paid to attend those plays. Thus, the NGOs sponsor not only the organisation and content of the play and its performing artists, they also pay for the transport of the audience to the play, and there were always food and drinks. The only reason people went to see those plays was because they knew there would be free food and drinks. But if there is electricity at people's home, already at 7am everyone in Kinshasa would be watching television drama - until midnight. And they enjoy it much more.

So, I had to ask myself "what kind of anthropologist am I?" and so I started to do research on locally produced television series. That is what we call induction. If you want to do anthropological research in a particular group or society, you have to allow that group or society to determine themselves what is important to them. Indeed, I defined key questions and key issues of my ethnographic fieldwork in my office in Leuven and after six months in Kinshasa I noticed that the provided topics were not so relevant.

LW: *You are interested in the social and cultural contours of communication, which includes the transfer of messages to masses. Is this also about the power relations that undergird technical tools of communication?*

KP: Yes, I did a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in Literature before I did a Master's degree in Anthropology. I do see that there is a continuation of my studies in Literature and Linguistics into my anthropological perspectives.

My PhD was about the study of prediction of television fiction, I studied these storylines. The key idea of my dissertation was that the television series in Kinshasa visualise a key scenario of their society. Key scenarios mean specific symbols that cover a society. One of the best known key scenario is probably that one of American society with its ideal of "from zero to hero".

In the television series of Kinshasa I identified ideas like "Be careful of the devil", "Pray to God" and so on as part of the basic key scenario. You hear those phrases in churches, in houses, as well as when people give you advice. If you follow this advice you will succeed, because you will do what God wants you to do. The idea of the key scenario became one of the leading elements of my PhD thesis, titled „The Making

of the Pentecostal Melodrama"[2] – which is a genre. That is for example one of the elements of my background in literature and linguistics that continues in my anthropological research.

LW: *The mentioned change of your research interests from the study of theatre with its drama groups to television series brings us to another keyword: the actual machine, your analysis on how people make sense of communication technologies in their daily lives and how it impacts urban life worlds.*

KP: I started with the work on media aesthetics, like the aesthetics of television series, and then got more and more interested in the technical aspects of the media itself. Questions like "What role does technology play in people's everyday life?" arised.

After my PhD I carried out two postdoc projects. The first one was about politics, memory and audio-visual journalism, where I studied the social role of television journalism regarding the issue of political propaganda. The second one was about Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and old age in contemporary Kinshasa, where I focused on the relationship between elderly people and media in the city. The first project was carried out at the University of Birmingham with Karin Barber, who is one of the anthropological role models of popular culture studies in Africa, with a focus on aesthetics, contents and genres.

The latter project was carried out at the Massachusetts' Institute of Technology (MIT) and KU Leuven University, where a lot of the talks I attended were about the infrastructure rather than the aesthetics of technology. I was confronted with the situation of anthropologists working alongside with engineers and it probably was at this moment that the shift from the focus on the aesthetical to the material and technical aspects of technology happened. I feel

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[2] Pype, Katrien. 2012. *The Making of the Pentecostal Melodrama. Religion, Media, and Gender in Kinshasa.* New York: Berghahn Books.

indebted to conversations with Michael Fischer, who was the promotor of my research at MIT and Clapperton Mavhunga, a historian of technology in Africa.

LW: *Are there other factors besides the changing relevance of key questions and issues that determine or change your perspective on your ethnographic work?*

KP: Even if there seem to be many coincidences, the choice of one's research topic depends on one's character. The decision on what you want and can spend your time with is on some level a very personal one. In going into a field and participating in others' life, I guess it is not just about finding out what you want or do not want to study - but also about what you are able to carry.

For example, when I worked on old age in Kinshasa I went to retirement homes. There were a few of these retirement homes where life is really miserable, and I noticed I felt relieved that I did not need to work in this environment every day. Emotionally it would have been too much of a burden. I think this sounds very harsh – *(sighs and laughs)* I never had this conversation before! – but I think that as an anthropologist you are supposed to become immersed in the world that you are studying and that you have to set boundaries for yourself as well. The period working in these retirement homes, which was only a part of my research on elderly people and media in Kinshasa, was the hardest fieldwork I have ever done. The contrast of the research settings was somehow schizophrenic, because one day I worked with elderly people dancing in television shows and the morning after I was in one of this retirement homes where people are highly isolated, are destitute, and unfortunately very often also lacking care.

There I learned that I would not be able to work with groups who have heavy emotional burdens or work in a field of constant conflict. I think that I would empathise it too much, I would probably not be able to take the distance required to scientifically analyse the data. I would most probably not be emotionally able to work with people who have only traumatic stories to tell.

There is a lot of fun and joy and entertainment going on in a city like Kinshasa. Furthermore, I think it is also important to correct the stereotyped images of African cities. There is indeed a lot of poverty, a lot of exploitation, a lot of conflicts, but there are many other stories to tell about African cities.

Jens Feurer (JF): *In your chapter "Smartness from Below", you investigate different social spheres where the term 'smartness' and its synonym expressions in local languages transcend the heterogeneity of innovation and creativity in contemporary Kinshasa. You distinguish between two concepts of smartness related to cities. One is a more global understanding of smartness, illustrated by "smart cities" with electronically enhanced infrastructure, as a western-centric concept. The second one is a more local understanding of smartness, "smartness from below", which expresses the streetwise capacity to survive in the city. Could you explain the difference of these concepts and maybe how this difference is related to other discourses in anthropology?*

KP: Actually, my goal is to look for the vernacular. The whole question is about looking for the vernacular form, using this global-local binary. Remember that child book I mentioned at the beginning of our meeting: I think I am interested exactly in this kind of variation of humanity. The concept of "smart cities" is a global concept that was developed in the global North, but it is being used everywhere, for political economic purposes and also for ideological reasons. But it does not mean that it is embodied and practiced everywhere in the same way. That is what I showed in this chapter, which is an epistemological

exercise. I took this concept of "smartness" and showed how that concept is used in varied ways depending on the context, within different spheres of Kinshasa. I wanted to show that this idea of "smartness" is lived in various ways, even if – or because – that notion of "smart city" gets transposed elsewhere. You can define what a "smart city" is but you do not know how it is lived. So, when you bring in smart cities and its infrastructure to a city like Kinshasa it arrives in a socio-cultural context where you already have words and ideas about smartness. It is not a blank space, "the smart city" will be introduced into a world where there are other notions of smartness and of being clever and being efficient.

So, "smartness", "urban smartness" and "smart cities" become localized. Thus, I am looking for the vernacular of a particular concept, of a particular universal - although "universal" is a dangerous concept. I feel that this is what I do as an anthropologist.

JF: *In your article you cite Zacharie Bababaswe, one of Kinshasa's innovators in street language, who says that* boule, *a synonym for smartness, is "the supreme phase of intelligence. A* boule *stands above all reflection. While reflections are limited,* boule *knows no intellectual limitation."[3] Is the term "smart" connected to the desirable state of a thing, in this case the ideal way of acting in the city?*

KP: Actually, the term *boule* comes from a subculture of people who smoke "*chanvre*" - weed. The *boule* means the knot, in which the herb is kept together. So, when you are smoking weed, then suddenly things seem clearer and you see things you would not see otherwise. his word has now become a common concept in Kinshasa. "*Ahh oza na boule*" means "you see things, you have visions" - it is a compliment. It refers to a particular state of mind that is kind of mystical and maybe dangerous as well. And in a

city like Kinshasa you need that kind of risk, that kind of transgressive knowledge. In this text I discussed various rubrics that speak to the particular type of smartness that the idea of a "smart city" conveys. So, *boule* is one of these and then there is *mystique.* There is an example of the evangelic pastor who repaired a radio and then said, "when acting like a blacksmith you become a blacksmith". Blacksmiths are known to have alliances with the spiritual world. This pastor was not necessarily saying that spirits helped him, but he meant "I managed to do this but not on my own, there is something unexplainable that helped me to fix it". I will also talk about blacksmiths tonight.

JF: *Staying with that evangelic pastor, there is another remark he makes about the repair of the radio: "The goods of the white men are capricious"[4]. Could you elaborate why you chose this scene and these expressions and how this connects to the different concepts?*

KP: In that scene the pastor was making a distinction between the goods of the white people, the technology, the engineering which is called in Lingala, the main language in Kinshasa, *kindoki ya mindele*, the witchcraft of the white people, versus *kindoki ya biso,* "their" witchcraft. So, he was referencing the sphere of witchcraft and making a distinction between the "witchcraft of the white" and the witchcraft of the Congolese" or "the Africans". It is not that people literally believe that this is witchcraft. But in Kinshasa and various other parts of Africa people without technological background like engineers will say that it is "witchcraft of the white people". If you then ask further, they will say something like witchcraft of the white people is witchcraft that advances society, benefits the material progress versus the witchcraft of us - *kindoki ya biso* - which is only to harm

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[3] Ibid., 108.

[4] Ibid., 102.

each other and is based on jealousy and is more to block one another rather than to contribute for the country, and that is why we have this huge gap between the material environment in the West and in Africa". That is a cliché answer. Of course, it is not true, but it is a discursive tool that people mobilize to make sense of the difference between the global North and the global South. It is also used to appropriate these technologies: they use the vernacular of *kindoki* to refer to these apparatuses which most people cannot explain how they work.

JF: *For the last part of the conversation I would like to know what you see as upcoming topics in anthropology?*

KP: Anthropology is a science of society; what I am seeing is that machines are already very important in our everyday life. Imagine an inventory of all the devices you use on a daily basis and try to think them away, you would not be able to function anymore in our society. This is not only a phenomenon of the global North, in a city as Kinshasa you also need mobile phones, radio, television and so on. How do societies manage, or do not manage, the boundaries between human and non-human? How did societies in the past manage that question? And on a very crude level, which societies survived? What can we learn from the past?

JF: *How can anthropology contribute to better handle these topics?*

KP: I think, and that will be the key idea of my talk tonight, that societies are now constantly negotiating and renegotiating innovations in the industrial and electronic domains. But we do not pay attention to that. In most societies you have got either a utopian or a dystopian vision on what technology will do. What anthropologists actually can do is to show how technology is always socialized. There will always be people who will reject or accept technology for certain reasons. Anthropologists can

help to get rid of these very opposite views about technology as utopian or dystopian by writing ethnographies with lived insights into what people expect from technology, how they handle and deal with certain technologies. Then we will get to a more realistic sense, which I think is lacking in the moral panics around the fact that we get more and more machines in our cities, public and private places, as well as in our bodies. As anthropologists, through writing ethnographies, we should be able to diminish these moral panics and also show how people actually are in control of technologies. What a machine will do will depend on what people allow a certain machine to do. In my lecture I will discuss this issue under the notion of technology contracts.