

# In Memoriam

## Matthew Schoffeleers (1928-2011)

by Wim M.J. van Binsbergen  
[wimvanbinsbergen@gmail.com](mailto:wimvanbinsbergen@gmail.com)

### Abstract

An obituary of Matthew Schoffeleers, a leading Dutch anthropologist of Malawi and of African religion, presenting his life, his work (under the headings of: religious anthropology; historicising anthropology; African religion and the state; religion and development; African religion and Christian theology), and a provisional appraisal.

### Key Words:

Anthropology of religion; historicising anthropology; African religion; state; development; Christian theology



With deep regret we announce the death of a leading anthropologist of Malawi and of African religion, Matthew (Jan Mathijs) Schoffeleers – sometime deputy chairman of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands (1980-1984), and for decades an important figure in Africanist research and teaching in Malawi, the Netherlands, and worldwide.

### Life

Matthew Schoffeleers was born to a peasant family in the hamlet of Geverik, near Beek, in the extreme southeast of the Netherlands, then still a wholly and emphatically Roman Catholic region. For a boy of his background a religious career was the obvious channel for bringing his talents to fruition, so in 1942 he joined the minor seminary, in 1949 he took his first vows within the religious congregation of Montfort, and in 1955 he was ordained as a priest and went to Malawi as a missionary. In Malawi he was stationed in the Lower Shire Valley, where rather than unreservedly proselytising for the Roman Catholic faith he increasingly became involved with the local cult of the martyr / demigod Mbona, and with the well-known *nyau* mask society. A conflict with his bishop ensued, and like so many members of his generation, including Johannes Fabian, Sjaak van der Geest, and René Devisch, Schoffeleers came to redefine his increasingly intimate

relationship with Africa from being a missionary to being an anthropologist *cum* local participant. At the time, the Jesuits' Lovanium University at Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) offered as a branch of Louvain Catholic University, Belgium an anthropology curriculum geared to missionaries' mounting needs for critical intercultural (self-)reflection. Schoffeleers studied there for one year (1963-1964); one of his classmates was the now prominent Congolese / American Africanist and classicist / Romanist Valentin Mudimbe. The leading Belgian Africanist René Devisch would soon begin his anthropological career there as well. Schoffeleers went on to Oxford, where he entered St Catherine's College. He matriculated at Oxford in October 1964; obtained the (one-year) Diploma in Social Anthropology in 1965; the Bachelor of Letters (B.Litt.) in 1966 (in record time; it is usually a 2-year degree); and the D.Phil. in 1968 (main supervisor Rodney Needham); throughout this Oxford period he focused on the Lower Shire Valley and the Mbona cult, mainly relying on the field data he had already collected previously. Without delay he returned to Malawi as a teacher at the Nguladi Roman Catholic seminary (1968-1970), subsequently as director of the Catechetical Training Centre in Likulezi (1970-1971), and finally as senior lecturer at Chancellor College, University of Malawi (Zomba, Malawi, 1971-1976). In 1976, succeeding the theologian J. Blauw, Schoffeleers was appointed Reader in the Anthropology of Religion at the Free University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands – a post that was converted, like all other Dutch readerships, into a full professorship in 1980. It was there that Schoffeleers also served as deputy chairman for a few years on the board of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands. In 1989 he exchanged his Amsterdam regular chair for a personal chair in religious anthropology at Utrecht University, the Netherlands, from which he retired in 1998 at the age of 70. After his retirement he continued his research and publication activities, including a history of the Dutch Montfortan missions worldwide (2006), until Alzheimer's disease made it impossible and forced him to give up his apartment in Leiden and live with his Montfortan *confratres* in the southeast of the country again, returning to where he was born. His eightieth birthday (2008) was still celebrated in great style, with a solemn celebration of the Holy Mass and a festive dinner for dozens of relatives, friends, colleagues, and former students. He passed away on Easter Day, 24 April 2011.

## Work

The following major strands can be distinguished in the work of Matthew Schoffeleers.

### *Religious Anthropology*

As an anthropologist, Schoffeleers saw his first task as putting the ethnography of the Malawian Mang'anja (a subdivision of the Chewa) on the map, and in particular to give an adequate account of their religious life. Here he avoided the reductionist, outsider perspective *en vogue* in religious anthropology in the second half of the twentieth century, and instead strove to encounter and understand the members of his local research population in their own, irreducible spirituality. In his attempts to make sense of the religious phenomena he studied and unreservedly shared in Southern Malawi, his main sources of inspiration were the *communitas*-centred religious anthropology of Victor Turner (the subject of his inaugural address as a reader at the Free University, 1977) and the anglicised forms of structuralism as mediated by Needham (the subject of his surprising inaugural address for his Utrecht chair: *Waarom God maar één been heeft*,

‘Why God has only one leg’ (1991a, 1991b), – a discussion of mutilation and asymmetry as hallmarks of the sacred, thus situating the Mbona figure in a global comparative, and especially in a universalising and timeless, typological perspective.

#### *Historicising Anthropology*

Like many anthropologists in the second half of the twentieth century, Schoffeleers was fascinated by the historical implications of his (inevitably present-day) fieldwork data. He was greatly inspired by the movement of the historical study of African religion, initiated by the leading historian Terence Ranger (then University of California Los Angeles, later Manchester and Oxford) with a generous subsidy from the Ford Foundation. In the 1970s-1980s Schoffeleers would occupy a leading role here, with impressive papers on historical aspects of the *nyau* society and of the Southern African cult organisation around the High God Mwali, culminating in his editorship of the still authoritative collection *Guardians of the Land* (1979) on Southern African territorial cults. Realising that the retrieval of glimpses of the distant past through the analysis of oral traditions and of the details of ritual arrangements could only be taken seriously if based on an explicit and sophisticated methodological basis, Schoffeleers joined the small number of scholars, including Roy Willis at Edinburgh and Wim van Binsbergen at Leiden, who sought to forge the necessary methodological and theoretical instruments for this purpose. This endeavour also characterises Schoffeleers’s own contribution to the collective work he would publish with van Binsbergen in 1985 on the basis of a high-powered international conference that they organised on behalf of the African Studies Centre in 1979, *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion* (1985). This line of Schoffeleers’s work reached its culmination in *River of Blood: The Genesis of a Martyr Cult in Southern Malawi* (1992). A related field of study is that of legends and folktales as a form of historically relevant oral tradition; Schoffeleers made several contributions in this field of oral literature focusing on Malawi (1984; 1985).

#### *African Religion and the State*

While the political impact of the Mbona cult on the Malawi national scene appears to have remained minimal, the same cannot be said for the *nyau* cult. For instance, the latter was reputedly instrumental in the perpetuation of the Banda regime (1961-1994). While Schoffeleers disliked the imposition on African religion of analytical theoretical models that sought to reduce religion to the social, economic, or political field, he became more and more interested in the relations between religion and the state. From this concern stemmed, for instance, his major article (1991c) on political acquiescence as a conspicuous feature of African Independent Churches; here he revisited and revised a famous classic analysis by the pioneer analyst of African Independent Churches Bengt Sundkler.

#### *Religion and Development*

Having realised the Christian roots of much of the development endeavour into which north-south relations were to be redefined after World War II and especially after the demise of colonialism, Schoffeleers and his Free University colleague Philip Quarles van Ufford went one step further and set out to study development as religion, bringing to bear on that institutional complex the entire analytical and methodological apparatus of

religious anthropology. This made for an original and inspiring collective work (*Religion and Development*, with Ph. Quarles van Ufford, 1988) that is still relevant reading.

### *African Religion and Christian Theology*

In the beginning of his missionary career, Matthew Schoffeleers explored, with painful but productive results, to what extent one could identify with African forms of religion and still remain within Roman Catholic orthodoxy and church hierarchy. The struggle to arrive at an existential perspective in which Christianity and African religion could exist side by side, could meet each other and cross-fertilise each other, characterised his personal spiritual life and increasingly formed the underlying inspiration of his more theologically inclined explorations later in life, even though he remained remarkably silent on this personal, existential dimension. In this connexion he explored the relevance of the South Central African indigenous model of the *nganga* (diviner-priest-healer) for a better comparative understanding of the figure of Jesus Christ as treated in Christian theology (1989). From the same perspective the figure of Mbona also appears in a new light, as a mutilated martyr figure mediating between heaven and earth for the sake of crop fertility and human healing. Here we can understand why Schoffeleers did not think it preposterous to combine his active role as a Roman Catholic priest and as such be entrusted with the pastoral care of specific Dutch communities while passionately discharging that role, with being, for decades, the main driving force behind the survival of the Mbona cult. While most anthropological colleagues have had difficulty following him in his Christological explorations, Schoffeleers's insistence on taking African religion profoundly seriously at the personal, existential level and his distrust of all North Atlantic analytical imposition and deconstruction made him a trusted ally and an inspiring friend and teacher for a whole generation of religious anthropologists who, during fieldwork, had come closer to African religion than their freshman handbooks on anthropology had stipulated.

### **Appraisal**

If, at this most premature stage, we must reluctantly come to some provisional judgment of Matthew Schoffeleers's work, what stands out and will remain of lasting value is a splendid and extensive, profound, and unique contribution to Malawian ethnography and to Malawian studies in general.

Beyond that, I submit that Schoffeleers's career may be understood as an expression of fundamentally irreconcilable contradictions arising from various processes of profound change taking place during his lifetime in West European society, in the relationship between Africa and the North Atlantic region, in the world of scholarship, and in the Roman Catholic church. We cannot expect that most of the concerns and values governing the beginning of a lifespan of over 82 years will remain valid and relevant to the very end.

Starting out in a milieu where Christianity was absolutely taken for granted as the pinnacle of human spirituality, it is very much to Matthew Schoffeleers's credit that as a missionary he could respond to African religion in the existential, inclusive, largely unconditional way he did. Here he showed himself a man of high principles, and a visionary ahead of his time who recognised true spirituality wherever he met it, and who would not compromise that insight no matter what the cost. As he once (1984, on the

occasion of solemnising my second marriage) publicly declared: ‘It is my task to make my God visible, wherever, and in whatever form under which He is permitted to manifest himself’, implying that Schoffeleers was also fully prepared to perceive and recognise his God, under whatever cultural trappings, in Africa.

Meanwhile, in Western Europe the tide of secularisation could not be turned. As a result, the automatic reverence he was brought up to expect and solicit from non-priests in his priestly role seldom came his way after his return to the Netherlands in 1976. In many ways an outsider—as a Roman Catholic priest, as a Southerner marked by his regional accent and mannerisms, and as one who took African religion seriously for its own sake—he ventured into the fortress of Dutch Protestantism that the Free University was at the time. Here he found that, despite his (already controversial) nomination to an initially junior chair, there was less and less institutional and national support for the study of African religion and religious anthropology, and that his co-workers were dwindling in number. He also found that he was more of a teacher and a writer, than an administrator. When he vacated his Amsterdam chair it was soon redesigned to focus on the study of Protestant church dynamics from a cultural studies perspective. Also, Schoffeleers increasingly sought to resolve his personal existential dilemmas by theological experiments that risked estrangement from his fellow anthropologists.

Meanwhile, the tables were turned in the relation between Africa and the North Atlantic region in the production of Africanist knowledge. The confrontational politicising of that relation by vocal and highly educated African colleagues was clearly regretted by Schoffeleers. Although he did teach in Africa (making a major impact on Malawian scholars, who are now preparing a collective volume in his memory) and did publish with African scholars, he appears to have lived most of his life using the old-fashioned, typically anthropological – and by now obsolete – illusory division of the world between a south where fieldwork was conducted and where *communitas* with one’s ‘informants’ was generated, and a north where writing was accomplished in splendid northern isolation and unaccountability.

Schoffeleers’s active career ended before international scholarship had rededicated itself to the study of religion, including African religion, from such new perspectives as postmodernism and globalisation. Because of his reluctance to discuss his personal spirituality, he largely missed out on the field of spirituality studies that was taking on much of what had formerly been classified as religious anthropology.

Finally, much to the dismay of Schoffeleers, the 1990s saw a virtual collapse of the once cutting-edge intellectual industry of the retrieval of the distant past through the structural analysis of oral traditions and ritual. A new comparative mythology arose that traces and compares local oral traditions, including myths and folktales, along much more extensive and much more complex trajectories of space and time. In this light, as Wrigley already argued in 1988, reducing (!) the putative history of Mbona to the local and relatively recent facts of Portuguese expansion in the sixteenth century CE appears to be somewhat myopic, although sympathetically Afrocentrist, in a way. After all, a martyr associated with crop fertility can only remind us, among others, of Osiris, Tammuz, Dionysus, and Christ in the Mediterranean region; the Japanese goddess Uke Mochi 保食神; several Mesoamerican crop deities; and, in Africa, Chihamba of the Ndembu as described by Victor Turner, of all people (see above).

For nearly four decades I was very close to Matthew Schoffeleers, not only as a friend, colleague, co-convener, co-editor and co-writer, but also formally as his student (I was the first person on whom he conferred a Ph.D., in 1979), and as beneficiary of his pastoral role – he solemnised my second marriage in 1985, and in recognition my eldest son is named after him. A sympathetic personal appraisal can therefore be expected from me, rather than the above assessment with some pretensions of objectivity. Most will remember Schoffeleers for his kindness; his occasionally slurred speech betraying the former stammerer; his hypersensitivity; his meticulous attention to details of social etiquette; his insistence on celebrating major events in his life with crowds of friends and colleagues; his attention to significant dates in his own life and that of his loved ones; his very productive scholarly life to which he devoted extremely long hours but which was yet combined with the more invisible tasks as a pastor and as a gardener in the convent garden; and his peculiar habit of keeping a full file of correspondence on everyone around him, a file from which he would lavishly quote during his unrivaled laudatory allocutions—gems of oratory, psychological and pedagogic skill—at the conclusion of each of the long series of Ph.D. defences under his supervision. His Ph.D. candidates include such Dutch Africanists as Gerry ter Haar, Simon Simonse, Rijk van Dijk, Annette Drews, and Ria Reis. Perhaps Schoffeleers’s main characteristic traits were his sense of religious mystery and of the miraculous; his tragic sense of loneliness and homelessness; and his lifelong struggle against what he considered – largely without grounds – his main sin, *pride*; and in which others who knew him well would merely detect the lifelong contradiction between the successful drive for achievement and his very modest family background. With great charisma and charm, for many years he constituted the living core of the ‘Werkgroep Afrikaanse Religie rond Schoffeleers’ – WARS (Working Group on African Religion Around Schoffeleers), where many of his Ph.D. students met and found lasting inspiration that brought them to internationally recognised publications. Many of their testimonials can be found in the Festschrift *Getuigen ondanks zichzelf* (Elias & Reis 1998), which was prepared for Schoffeleers’s seventieth birthday. It may well be that Matthew Schoffeleers will have his most lasting impact not only as a scholar of Malawi and African religion, but also as a passionate teacher.

## References

- Elias, M., and R. Reis, eds. 1998. *Getuigen ondanks zichzelf: Voor Jan-Matthijs Schoffeleers bij zijn zeventigste verjaardag*. Maastricht: Shaker.
- Quarles van Ufford, P., and J. Mathijs Schoffeleers, eds. 1988. *Religion and Development*. Amsterdam: Free University Press.
- Schoffeleers, J. Mathijs. 1966. ‘M’Bona the Guardian-Spirit of the Mang’anja’. B.Litt. thesis, Oxford, St.Catherine’s College.
- 1968. ‘Symbolic and Social Aspects of Spirit Worship Among the Mang’anja’. Ph.D. thesis, St. Catherine’s College, Oxford; published in Malawi, 2008.
- 1972a. ‘The History and Political Role of the Mbona Cult among the Mang’anja’. In T.O. Ranger and I. Kimambo (eds.), *The Historical Study of African Religion*. London: Heinemann, 73-94.
- 1975. ‘The Interaction between the Mbona Cult and Christianity’. In T.O. Ranger and I. Kimambo (eds.), *The Historical Study of African Religion*. London: Heinemann, 14-29.

- , 1977a. 'Cult Idioms and the Dialectics of a Region'. In R. Werbner (ed.), *Regional Cults*, A.S.A. Monograph no. 16. London: Academic Press, 219-239.
- , 1977b. *Particularisme en Profanatie*. Inaugural address, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.
- , ed. 1979. *Guardians of the Land: Essays on Central African Territorial Cults*. Gwelo: Mambo Press for the University of Salisbury (now Harare).
- , 1984. 'Mythen als historische bronnen: Een Malawische casus'. *Antropologische Verkenningen* 3.2, 99-119.
- , 1985. 'Oral History and the Retrieval of the Distant Past: On the Use of Legendary Chronicles as Sources of Historical Information'. In Wim M.J. van Binsbergen and J. Mathijs Schoffeleers (eds.), *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion*. London: Kegan Paul International, 164-188.
- , 1988. 'Myth and/or history: A reply to Christopher Wrigley'. *Journal of African History* 29.3, 385-390.
- , 1989. 'Folk Christology in Africa: The Dialectics of the Nganga Paradigm'. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 19.2, 157-183.
- , 1991a. 'Twins and Unilateral Figures in Central and Southern Africa: Symmetry and Asymmetry in the Symbolization of the Sacred'. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 21.4, 345-372.
- , 1991b. *Waarom God maar één been heeft. Naar een post-structuralistische antropologie van de religie*. Inaugural address, Universiteit Utrecht, Utrecht.
- , 1991c. 'Ritual Healing and Political Acquiescence: The Case of the Zionist Churches in Southern Africa'. *Africa* 61.1, 1-25.
- , 1992. *River of Blood: The Genesis of a Martyr Cult in Southern Malawi, c. A.D. 1600*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- , 2006. *Montfortanen in de Lage Landen: 'Een klein en arm gezelschap', 1881-2006*. Oirschot: Provinciaal Montfortanen.
- Schoffeleers, J. Mathijs, and I. Linden. 1972b. 'The Resistance of the Nyau Cult to the Catholic Missions in Malawi'. In T.O. Ranger and I. Kimambo (eds.), *The Historical Study of African Religion*. London: Heinemann, 252-273.
- Schoffeleers, J. Mathijs, and A.A. Roscoe, eds. 1985. *Land of Fire: Oral Literature from Malawi*. Limbe/Lilongwe: Popular Publications/Likuni Press & Publishing House.
- van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., and J. Mathijs Schoffeleers, eds. 1985. *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion*. London: Kegan Paul International.
- Van Binsbergen, Wim M.J. 1991. 'Religion and Development: Contributions to a New Discourse'. *Antropologische Verkenningen* 10.3, 1-17.
- Wrigley, Christopher. 1988. 'The River-god and the Historians: Myth in the Shire Valley and Elsewhere'. *Journal of African History* 29.3, 367-383.