

## Literature and Anthropology on the Tunisian Mountains

### Review article of Wim van Binsbergen's novel "Een buik openen"

From the mid-sixties to the mid-eighties more one hundred Dutch anthropology students left for Tunisia to be initiated in fieldwork (1). Their main destination was Khrumiria, the highlands of North-West Tunisia. Over the years, very few of these students have published the results of their fieldwork. One notable exception, however, is the anthropologist Wim van Binsbergen, who participated as a student in the Tunisian project in 1968. Since then, Van Binsbergen has developed into a valued and productive anthropologist, with fieldwork experiences and who has produced many publications on Tunisia, Zambia and Indonesia. But not only has he written scholarly work, he has also produced a respectable corpus of literary work : three volumes of verse (Van Binsbergen 1977, 1979 and 1986), a book with four African stories (Van Binsbergen 1984), a translation of Okot p'Bitek's "Song of Lawino" and "Song of Ocol" (co-translated by Ad van Rijsewijk, 1980) and, recently, a bulky novel, situated in the highlands of North Tunisia (Van Binsbergen 1988).

This paper reviews Van Binsbergen's novel, entitled "Een buik openen" ("Opening a belly"). I will discuss this book mainly - though not exclusively - from an anthropological point of view : not only shall I consider it according to literary criteria, but I will also relate it to Van Binsbergen's anthropological writings on Tunisia and to his opinion on

---

(1) I myself being one of them : in 1981 and 1983 I conducted fieldwork in the small town of Ghardimaou. A few years ago the fieldwork trips to Tunisia, organized by the Department of Anthropology and Sociology of Non-Western Societies of the Free University of Amsterdam, came to an end. Because of reduced interest in Tunisia among students, the destination changed to Morocco. An account of the project during the end of the sixties is offered by Jongmans & Van der Veen (1968).

the relationship between anthropology and belles-lettres. This review thus links up with recent discussion on ethnographic writing, in which perspectives borrowed from literary criticism play an important role.

*"Opening a belly"*

Van Binsbergen's novel relates the experiences of the young Dutch anthropologist Pieter van der Starre. To obtain his doctorate degree he has decided to study saint veneration in Khrumiria, in the Valley of Sidi Mhammed. Throughout the novel, situated in 1968, the reader follows Pieter and his interpreter Hesnaoui during their exploration of the intricate complex of the population's genealogical, marital, territorial and symbolic relationships. Pieter tries to unravel the secrets of the region's history as it appears to permeate the relationships among its inhabitants. Indeed, on the cover the novel is announced as a kind of detective story: "The human relations seem to be overshadowed by a drama that was enacted at the beginning of this century. What has started as research, becomes a search, the fieldworker becomes a detective, the tracks he follows lead him towards two rivalling sanctuaries, and in the plot age-old rituals merge with a blood-stained encounter in colonial history" (2).

Together with his interpreter, Pieter settles in the village of Sidi Mhammed. They interview the local population, visit saint shrines, and observe and participate in popular religious practices, such as trance sessions and the sacrifice of animals. They collect data on kinship, marriage, migration, religious beliefs and concepts (e.g., saintly power, *baraka*, *jinn*, and sacrifice), and the relationship between migration and saint veneration.

Very soon after his arrival Pieter discovers that the relationship between the saints Sidi Mhammed and Sidi Bu-Qasbaya reflects some obscure, confusing developments from the past. Many locals express the opinion that Sidi Mhammed is the most powerful saint in the valley, yet some people argue that Sidi Bu-Qasbaya may be as great as Sidi Mhammed. Van Binsbergen's analysis of his data leads to the hypo-

(2) See also the section 'About the author' in *Leeftocht* where it is stated that van Binsbergen "is writing a novel which takes place in North Africa, and in which the reconstruction of a murder committed in the beginning of the colonial era constitutes the context for a confrontation with another culture and its gods" (1977 : 55; cf. Van Binsbergen 1979b : 117).

thesis that a process of fission occurred in the past, parallels of which can be observed at a symbolic level.

The valley comprises two great patronyms : the Arfawiya, descendants of Arfa, and the Zeghaidiya, descendants of Zaghoud. In the past, the Arfawiya used to occupy a major part of the valley, but nowadays the Zeghaidiya dominate its economic, political and religious life. They possess most of the arable land. Besides, development projects are carried out on Zeghaidi land only, its foremen and cashiers being Zeghaidi members. They also control the cult of Sidi Mhammed, although it once was in the hands of the Arfawiya.

The questions Pieter seeks to answer are : how did the Arfawiya lose their position of power at the end of the nineteenth century, how could Sidi Mhammed's cult have been taken over in the first part of this century, and how can the current position of Sidi Bu-Qasbaya be explained? Gradually Pieter is able to collect the pieces of the puzzle. The missing piece is found on the final evening of his stay in the village, when a woman tells him the story of a violent conflict during the colonial era, which resulted in the expulsion of an Arfawi family from their land.

*Some literary criticisms*

Throughout the book Van Binsbergen offers detailed descriptions of Pieter's adventures in the area, especially during his first days (3). The most elaborated theme of the novel is Pieter's strained, at times even explosive, relationship with Hesnaoui. His attitude toward the interpreter is one of mistrust. Pieter suspects him of giving bad or incomplete translations and of enhancing his personal benefits. Actually, Pieter has great difficulty in recognizing his nearly total dependency of Hesnaoui. It is only with the lapse of time that their relationship ameliorates and that Pieter starts to accept and sympathize with him. Van Binsbergen's tone in describing this relationship is one of considerable self-irony and the respective sections form amusing reading, clearly recognizable for anyone who ever had to work with an interpreter.

A further attractive component of the novel is formed by the extensive and colourful descriptions of North Tunisian rural and religious life at the end of the sixties. The reader is offered inside views

(3) Actually, day 1-4 cover the pages 7-245 (out of 383 pages).

of the population's daily concerns and their popular Islamic beliefs and practices. I cannot but admit that Van Binsbergen sketches all these with great skill.

These subjects - Pieter's relationship with Hasnaoui and the lively vignettes of Tunisian rural life - belong to the more successful parts of the novel. Its main theme, however, is hard to follow. When Van Binsbergen writes that, during Pieter's last evening, the "thread of Ariadne" has completely been unravelled (p. 383), I was left in confusion. The end of the novel constitutes an anticlimax rather than a climax. Even today I can only guess why the account of the blood-stained encounter was not communicated to Pieter until the very last evening. In my view, the novel can hardly be considered a detective story, because it is anything but thrilling. Besides, I found the "thread" a very thin one, insufficiently woven into the rest of the novel. Many sections are only marginally integrated into what is said to be the major theme of the novel.

A further confusing aspect is constituted by the great number of characters figuring in the novel. I counted more than sixty persons by name, dead or alive. Most of them figure only marginally in the book, yet their complex relationships - genealogical and territorial - make up an integral part of the story; Peter seeks to reconstruct their historical development in order to understand the contemporary situation of saint veneration. However, what might be clear for an anthropologist in the field, armed with long sheets of paper full of genealogies, may appear confusing to the general reader. Even as an anthropologist more or less familiar with the setting, I got lost in the complicated construction of social relationships in the valley.

A last remark with regard to the characters is that only Pieter is portrayed with some, though not much, psychological depth. The novel is mainly written from his perspective. But where one would expect that belles-lettres would offer the writer-anthropologist the means with which to express personal feelings and attitudes, Van Binsbergen remains rather superficial. This is true, for instance, for Pieter's personal relations to women : his broken relationship with his girl friend in Holland as well as his admiration and sympathy for a local woman are mentioned, but not elaborated on (4). With regard to the

(4) See also "Een religieus gedicht" ("A Religious Poem") in *Klopsignalen* (van Binsbergen 1979a : 51), in which Van Binsbergen states that he is writing a novel in which a woman, whom he does not get, plays a part; more precisely, he writes that he did not even know he wanted her. Van Binsbergen's daughter Nedjma bears her name.

other persons, including Hesnaoui, one can only say that they all lack human-like qualities.

As a detective story the novel hardly captivates the reader. In this sense I consider the book a failure. Its attractive parts lie in the descriptions of the anthropologist's adventures, his relations with the local population and their popular religious life, rather than in the unravelling of a would-be mystery.

### *Literature and anthropology*

It is tempting compare Van Binsbergen's novel to his scientific work on North Tunisia, even more so as, in the past, he has been explicit on the relationship between his scientific research and literary activities.

'Fact' and 'fiction'. Van Binsbergen has published five papers in journals and books on the results of his fieldwork in Khrumiria. Four of them deal with various aspects of saint veneration (Van Binsbergen 1980a, 1980b, 1985a and 1985b) (5). Among other things, they inform the reader on topics such as the relation between local popular Islam and (the introduction of) formal Islam, set against the radical changes in socio-political structure since 1800; the interpretation of myth; and pilgrimage structures in contemporary saint cults. All are based on field research in Khrumiria in 1968, 1970 and 1979.

The novel shares many elements with the representation of Khrumiria in Van Binsbergen's scientific publications : timing, natural setting, saints, myths and, incidentally, personal characters correspond. It is obvious that the author's field experience has formed the basis of the novel. On the other hand, the novel is not a mere reflection of Van Binsbergen's personal adventures in the field. In an epilogue to the novel he enumerates several examples of the freedom he has taken as a novelist. Besides, he states (Van Binsbergen 1988 : 384) :

All similarities between the characters, their society and popular religion described here, and reality are completely accidental.

To be precise, the same coincidence that placed me in the, from a literary point of view suspect, circumstance to be able to draw upon an number of scientific

(5) Van Binsbergen (1985b) is a revised edition of Van Binsbergen (1980a). I will only refer to this latter article and consider both papers as similar. As a matter of fact, Van Binsbergen, referring to his scientific papers in the afterword to the novel, does not mention the 1980-version (see Van Binsbergen 1988 : 384).

publications of my pedantic namesake, the Leyden anthropologist [Wim van Binsbergen] (...).

Thus, 'fiction' and 'reality' merge in the novel (6) - as they do in ethnographic presentation! But despite its fictional elements, the descriptions of North Tunisian society ring 'true'. If not 'true', they are 'plausible'; if 'fiction', they give the illusion to be 'fact' (cf. Maso 1989 : 332-26). However, hardly convincing to me as an anthropologist is that Pieter within three or four days of his research already has gained his main insights into the society he studies and is able to suggest his central hypotheses.

*Segmentation.* A more concealed but actually very relevant topic in the novel, elaborated extensively in Van Binsbergen's scientific publications, is the socio-political organization in Khrumiria and its relation to the changes in the cult of saints. Segmentation is a basic concept used by Van Binsbergen in this context.

Khrumiria is characterized, according to Van Binsbergen, by a segmentary social organization which "(...) was (and is) more a matter of geographical propinquity than of unilineal descent", based "on locality rather than descent" (Van Binsbergen 1980b : 74; cf. 1985a : 200-05, 233, and 1985b : 204-09). He argues that the contemporary local ritual structures can adequately be described and explained in terms of the residential units which combine in a "segmentary pyramidal fashion" (Van Binsbergen 1985b : 207; cf. 1987 : 43).

This representation or conception of North Tunisia's socio-political and religious structures prevails in Van Binsbergen's novel too. It is the way in which the relations among people are termed. Also the mystery itself is framed in these terms : the segmentary model is used by the anthropologist *cum* detective as a device to explain the violent conflict that occurred in the distant past and which still overshadows the local population's relationships.

The segmentary model is a very simple one and in the past it was quite popular among anthropologists. However, recently the model has been criticized for its inadequacy to describe North African society (see for instance Combs-Schilling 1985, Munson Jr. 1989; cf. Dresch 1986). I leave the question here as it is, as my aim is not to discuss the scientific adequacy of this model in the North Tunisian context. I merely wish to

(6) The description of reality always implies one or another form of representation. In the words of Clifford (1986 : 7): "Ethnographic truths are (...) inherently *partial* - committed and incomplete".

point out that if the model appears to be inadequate to describe contemporary Khrumirian society in an accurate way - and who can better react to these criticisms than van Binsbergen himself - then the novel even contains more 'fiction' than the author probably has ever meant - not to speak of his scientific work...

*Writing belles-lettres or anthropology ?* Another example of the merging of 'fiction' and 'reality' refers to the character of Pieter. As stated above, the novel is directly based on Van Binsbergen's personal experiences and feelings. The latter are the subject of Van Binsbergen's fifth scientific paper on Tunisia (7). In contrast with the other papers, it focuses explicitly on the fieldworker - in the other cases, the anthropologist is completely absent. As can be deduced from a comparison between the novel and this paper, the first contains many autobiographical elements. Van Binsbergen remains very close to his personal adventures in the field. He has chosen to express his experiences in a literary way with a strong autobiographical accent. In the past, he has expressed some interesting views on this subject which are worth considering here.

Some ten years ago, Van Binsbergen expressed his doubts about "science" (i.e. anthropology). In a "semi-feigned letter to his publisher" (Van Binsbergen 1979b : 115-16) he stated that he has always been conscious of the boundaries of scientific conventions, and of the conflict between scientific work and the thing he really wanted, i.e. writing (ibid. : 117). In his own words : "The basic defect of scientific

(7) This paper was published under the title "Eerste veldwerk : Tunesië 1968" ("First Fieldwork : Tunisia 1968") in 1987, although an earlier unpublished version exists too. Actually, the first is a revised and elaborated version of the latter, which Van Binsbergen probably wrote shortly after his return from the field in 1968. It circulated for years among students who likewise planned to undertake their first fieldwork in North Tunisia. Both papers can be considered as examples of the still growing corpus of personal accounts of fieldwork experiences. The contents of both versions overlap to a great extent. The 1987 edition, however, is more reflective and contains some added sections; Van Binsbergen is now able to consider his first field research in the light of later fieldwork experiences and to situate it within the transactionalist approach in anthropology of those days. Topics entered into, in both papers are : the preparations at the university and in the research area; the relationship with university staff members in the field; the relationship with his interpreter, and with other members of the local population; the doubts about the relevance of his research, and a reflection upon his scientific activities and choices made during fieldwork; the manipulation of informants in order to obtain data; and the personal lessons learnt from these first fieldwork experiences.

learning, at least *in its current form* (accentuation by r.s.), is that, in its reporting, it is completely dominated by group conventions, in comparison with which the most ossified practices of rhetoricians form a creative paradise" (ibid. ; cf. Van Binsbergen 1987 : 55).

Referring to his poetry, Van Binsbergen (1979b : 121) has pointed out that his poems" (...) are an attempt to bridge fundamentally irresolvable contradictions that dominate my life and thinking (and which are anchored in our social and economic system to such an extent that they will arise in an analogical form with others, my readers for instance) in a way that is only possible within the helpless and yet compelling design of the work of art, and by nothing else than design." Thus, art, and poetry in the first place, offers Van Binsbergen the means with which he expresses thoughts and feelings which he can not communicate otherwise. The novel is a further illustration of this view and van Binsbergen considers it as a kind of birth (8).

Literature is valued more by Van Binsbergen than anthropology. That is why he has chosen the vehicle of literature instead of anthropology to express himself. However, the weak part of the novel is exactly its literary dimension, whereas the more anthropological oriented sections belong to its stronger parts. For this reason I regret Van Binsbergen's decision to write literary instead of an anthropological work. Indeed, I would have preferred the latter, the more so as contemporary anthropology does offer Van Binsbergen some of the alternatives he was so desperately looking for, ten years ago.

During the last decade anthropology has seen some important transformations in (the assessment of) ethnographic writing. The 1980's have been characterized by a growing concern in anthropology for literary conventions. Former ethnographic conventions have been blurred and alternative modes of expression have emerged. A rapprochement between social science and literary science can be observed. Anthropology has been enriched by a number of 'experimental' ethnographies, several of which deal with North Africa (e.g. Crapanzano 1980, Dwyer 1982, and Munson Jr. 1984) (9). In short,

(8) "(...) *Opening a belly*, the novel that Khrumiria has incited me to write in the end, not only refers in its title to the blood-stained sacrifices that I had to go through, and the secret information that, in Khrumiria, is read from the intestines of sacrificial animals (...), but also to a birth - as if the so much stereotypical comparison of fieldwork and initiation, and the rebirth that universally forms the basic model of initiation, here, on second thoughts, really held" (Van Binsbergen 1987 : 55).

(9) See also the recently published studies by Loeffler and Friedl on an Iranian village.

the past decade has offered anthropologists alternatives for rendering their scientific research, including its personal dimensions. Van Maanen (1988) distinguishes various of these alternatives, some of which might have been promising to Van Binsbergen had he chosen to write anthropology instead of literature (cf. Marcus & Fischer 1986).

Indeed, he might have done so. The novel contains many autobiographical elements, the setting many 'realist' ones. As a novel, I do not consider his book a success, as I tried to outline above. Had Van Binsbergen written some kind of 'experimental' anthropological study, his contribution to anthropology might have been greater than I judge his present contribution to literature. However, he might still do it : his "Shrines and Ecstasy in the Social Structure of North-Western Tunisia", announced several years ago, has still to be published.

Nimègue, mars 1990

Ruad STRIJP

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BINSBERGEN, W. van  
 n.d. Een deelnemer aver het leonderzoek in Tunisië (A Participant on Apprentice Fieldwork in Tunisia). Unpublished manuscript.  
 1977 *Leeftocht*. Haarlem : In de Knipscheer.  
 1979a *Klopsignalen*. Haarlem : In de Knipscheer.  
 1979b *Wetenschap en dichterschap : een brief* (Science and Poetry : A Letter). *Mandala* 3, 1, pp. 115-21.  
 1980a *Interpreting the Myth of Sidi Mhâmed : Oral History in the Highlands of North-Western Tunisia*. *Social Analysis* 4, pp. 51-73.  
 1980b *Popular and Formal Islam, and Supra-Local Relations : The Highlands of North-Western Tunisia, 1800-1970*. *Middle Eastern Studies* 16, 1, pp. 71-91.  
 1984 *Zusters, dochters. Afrikaanse verhalen*. Haarlem : In de Knipscheer.  
 1985a *The Cult of Saints in North-Western Tunisia : An Analysis of Contemporary Pilgrimage Structures*. In : E. GELLNER (ed.) : *Islamic Dilemmas : Reformers, Nationalists, and Industrialization*. Amsterdam : Mouton, pp. 199-239.  
 1985b *The Historical Interpretation of Myth in the Context of Popular Islam*. In : W. van BINSBERGEN & M. SCHOFFELEERS (eds.) : *Theoretical Explorations in African Religion*. London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 189-224.  
 1986 *Vrijgeleide. Gedichten 1977-1985*. Haarlem : In de Knipscheer.  
 1987 *Eerste veldwerk : Tunesië 1968* (First Fieldwork : Tunisia 1968). In : W.M.J. van BINSBERGEN & M.R. DOORBOS (red.) : *Afrika in spiegelbeeld*. Haarlem : In de Knipscheer, pp. 21-55.

## NOTE DE LECTURE

- 1988 *Een buik openen. Roman* (Opening a Belly. Novel). Haarlem : In de Knipscheer.
- CLIFFORD, J.
- 1986 Introduction : Partial Truths. In : J. CLIFFORD & G.E. MARCUS (eds.) : *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Anthropology*. Berkeley : University of California Press, pp. 1- 26.
- COMBS-SCHILLING, M.E.
- 1985 Family and Friend in a Moroccan Boom Town : The Segmentary Debate Reconsidered. *American Ethnologist* 12, 4, pp. 659-75.
- CRAPANZANO, V.
- 1980 *Tuhami. A Portrait of a Moroccan*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press.
- DRESCH, P.
- 1986 The Significance of the Course Events Take in Segmentary Systems. *American Ethnologist* 13, 2, pp. 309-24.
- DWYER, K.
- 1982 *Moroccan Dialogues. Anthropology in Question*. Baltimore : John Hopkins University Press.
- FRIEDL, E.
- 1989 *Women of Deh Koh. Lives in an Iranian Village*. Washington : Smithsonian Institution Press.
- JONGMANS, D.G. & K.W. van der VEEN
- 1968 Het leeronderzoek in Tunesië (Apprentice Research in Tunisia). *Sociologische Gids* 16, pp. 175-83.
- LOEFFLER, R.
- 1988 *Islam in Practice. Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village*. Albany : State University of New York Press.
- MARCUS, G.E. & M.M.J. FISCHER
- 1986 *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press.
- MASO, B.
- 1989 Literatuur als bron voor historisch en sociologisch onderzoek (Literature as a Resource for Historical and Sociological Research). *Kennis en Methode* 13, pp. 315-32.
- MUNSON Jr., H.
- 1984 *The House of Si Abd Allah. The Oral History of a Moroccan Family*. New Haven : Yale University Press.
- 1989 On the Irrelevance of the segmentary Lineage Model in the Moroccan Rif. *American Anthropologist* 91, pp. 386-400.
- p'BITEK, O.
- 1980 *Lied van Lawino/Lied van Ocol*. (Vert. W. van Binsbergen en A. van Rijsewijk). Maasbree : Corrie Zelen.
- Van MAANEN, J.
- 1988 *Tales of the Field. On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago : University of Chicago Press.