IN MEMORIAM
MATTHEW SCHOFFELEERS (1928-2011)

by Wim van Binsbergen (ASC)

With deep regret we announce the death of a leading anthropologist of Malawi and of African religion, Matthew Schoffeleers – sometime Deputy Chairman of the African Studies Centre (1980-1984), and for decades an important figure in Africanist research and teaching in Malawi as well as in the Netherlands.

Life

Matthew Schoffeleers was born as child of a peasant family in the hamlet of Geverik, near Beek, in the extreme South East 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 to bring 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 priest and went off 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 / demi-god Mbomma, 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) Matthew Schoffeleers was brought 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, and here Schoffeleers studied for a year (1963); one of his class mates was the, now prominent, Congolese / American Africanist and classicist / Romanist Valentino Mudimbe, while soon also the leading Belgian Africanist René Devisch would also begin his anthropological career there. Schoffeleers went on to Oxford University, where with amazing rapidity he took a BA in 1964, and a PhD in 1968 (main supervisor Rodney Needham), both on the Lower Shire Valley and the Mbomma cult. In the same year he returned to Malawi, as 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 the University College, Zomba, Malawi (1971-1976). In 1976 he was appointed Reader in the Anthropology of Religion at the Free University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands – a post to be converted, like all other Dutch readerships, into a full professorship in 1980. It was then, also, that he acted, for a few years, on the Board of the African Studies Centre, Leiden, the Netherlands, as Deputy Chairman. 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 seventy. After his retirement he continued his research and publication activities,
including a history of the Dutch Montfortan missions worldwide, until Alzheimer’s dis-
ease made it impossible for him to do so, forcing him to give up his apartment in Leiden
and to live with his Montfortan confratres in the South East of the country again, back 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 diner for dozens of relatives, friends,
colleagues and former students. He passed away on Easter Day, 24 April 2011.

**Work**

In the work of Matthew Schoffeleers the following major strands may be distinguished.

(a) *Religious anthropology*

As an anthropologist, he saw it as his first task to put the ethnography of the Malawian
Manganja (a subdivision of the Chewa) on the map, and in particular to give an adequate
account of their religious life. Here he rather avoided the reductionist, outsider perspec-
tive *en vogue* in religious anthropology in the second half of the 20th century, and instead
he strove to encounter and understand the members 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) and the anglicised forms of struc-
turalism as mediated by Needham (the subject of his surprising inaugural address for his
Utrecht chair, 1991: *Waarom God maar één been heeft*, ‘Why God has only one leg’, – 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.

(b) *Historicising anthropology*

Like many anthropologists in the second half of the 20th century, Schoffeleers was fasci-
nated by the historical implications of his (necessarily present-day) fieldwork data. He
was greatly inspired by the movement of the Historical Study of African Religion, initi-
ated by the leading historian Terence Ranger (then University of California Los Angeles,
later Manchester and Oxford) with a generous subsid y of the Ford Foundation. Here
Schoffeleers was to occupy, in the 1970s-80s, a leading role, 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 collection, still au-
thoritative, on *Guardians of the Land* (1979), on Southern African territorial cults. Real-
ising that the retrieval of (glimpses of) the distant past through the analysis of oral tradi-
tions 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 of Edinburgh, and Wim van Binsbergen of the Leiden Af-
rican Studies Centre) who sought to forge the necessary methodological and theoretical
instruments for this purpose. This endeavour also characterises Schoffeleers’ own contri-
bution to the collective work he was to publish with van Binsbergen in 1985 on the basis
of a high-powered international conference the two of them organised on behalf of the
Studies Centre series with Kegan Paul International). This line of Schoffeleers’ work
reached its culmination in *River of Blood: The genesis of a martyr cult in southern Malawi* (1992, Wisconsin UP). A related field of study is that of legends and folk tales as a form of historically-relevant oral tradition, and also in this field of oral literature Schoffeleers has made several contributions as far as Malawi is concerned.

(c) **African religion and the state**
While the political impact of the Mbona cult on the Malawi national scene appear to have remained minimal, the same cannot be said for the *nyau* cult; the latter, for instance, was reputedly instrumental in the perpetuation of the Banda regime (1961-1994). While Schoffeleers disliked the imposition, upon 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 (in the journal *Africa*, 1991) 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.

(d) **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 upon that institutional complex the entire analytical and methodological apparatus of religious anthropology. This made for an original and inspiring collective work (Religion and development, 1988) that still makes relevant reading.

(e) **African religion and Christian theology**
In the beginning of his career, as a missionary, Matthew Schoffeleers explored, with painful but productive results, to what extent one could identity 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 could cross-fertilise each other, has characterised his personal spiritual life and increasingly formed the underlying inspiration of his more theologically-inclined explorations later in life – even though he has 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. From the same perspective, also the figure of Mbona 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 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 to follow him in his Christological explorations, Schoffeleers’ insistence on taking African religion profoundly serious 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 rather closer to African religion than their freshman handbooks of anthropology had stipulated.

**Appraisal**

If, at this most premature stage, we must reluctantly come to some provisional judgment of Matthew Schoffeleers’ 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’ 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. A lifespan of over 82 years is far too long than that we can expect that most of the concerns and values governing its beginning, will remain valid and relevant to the very end. Starting out in a milieu where Christianity was absolutely taken for granted as the paroxysm of human spirituality, it has been very much to Matthew Schoffeleers’ 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, at whatever costs. As Schoffeleers said at an historical occasion:

> “It is my task to make my God visible, wherever, and in whatever form under which he is permitted to manifest himself”,

implying that he was also fully prepared to perceive and recognise his God under whatever cultural trappings, also in Africa. However, 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 to 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 priest, a Southerner, and 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 controversial nomination, there was less and less institutional and national support for the study of African religion and religious anthropology, and that the number of his co-workers was dwindling. He also found that he was more of a teacher and a writer, than of an administrator. When he had vacated his Amsterdam chair, this was soon redesigned into a focus for the study of Protestant church dynamics from a cultural-studies perspective. Increasingly, also, Schoffeleers sought to resolve his personal existential dilemmas by theological experiments that risked to estrange him from his fellow anthropologists. Meanwhile tables were turned in the relation between Africa and the North Atlantic region in the production of Africanist knowledge. The politicising of that relation by vocal and highly educated African colleagues was clearly regretted by Schoffeleers; and although he did teach in Africa and did publish with African scholars, most
of his life he appears to have lived the old-fashioned, typically anthropological – and by
now totally obsolete – illusory division of the world between a South were fieldwork was
being done and communitas with one’s ‘informants’ was being generated, and a North
were writing was to be done, in splendid Northern isolation and unaccountability. Schof-
feeleers’ active career ended before international scholarship had re-dedicated itself to the
study of religion, including African religion, from such new perspectives as postmodern-
ism and globalisation; also because of his reluctance to discuss his personal spirituality,
he largely missed the boat of spirituality studies that was taking aboard much of what
formerly went under the flag of religious anthropology. Finally, the 1990s saw (much to
the dismay of Schoffeleers) a virtual collapse of the once cutting-edge intellectual indus-
try of the retrieval of the distant past through the structural analysis of oral traditions and
ritual. Meanwhile a new comparative mythology has arisen, that traces and compares lo-
cal oral traditions including myths and folktales along much more extensive and much
more complex trajectories of space and time – and in this light (as C. Wrigley already
argued in 1988 in the Journal of African History), to reduce (!) the history of Mbona to
the local and relatively recent facts of Portuguese expansion in the 16th century CE, ap-
pears, on second thought, somewhat myopic, although sympathetically Afrocentrist, in a
way. After all, a martyr associated with crop fertility can only remind us of Osiris, Tam-
muz, Dionysus and Christ in the Mediterranean region, the Japanese goddess Uke Mochi
保食神, several Meso American crop deities, and, in Africa, Chihamba of the Ndembu as
described by Victor Turner, of all people, etc.

For nearly four decades, I have been very close to Matthew Schoffeleers, not only as a
friend, colleague, co-convener and co-editor, but also as formally his student (I was the
first person upon whom he was to confer a PhD, in 1979), and as beneficiary of his pas-
toral role – he solemnised my second marriage in 1985, and in recognition my eldest son
was named after him. A sympathetic personal appraisal is therefore expected from me,
rather than the above assessment with some pretensions of objectivity. Most will remem-
ber 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 pro-
ductive scholarly life for which he made extremely long hours but which was yet to be
combined with the – more invisible – tasks as a pastor and gardener in the convent gar-
den; and the peculiar habit of keeping a full file of correspondence on everyone around
him – a file from which he would lavishly quote during his unrivalled laudatory allocu-
tions (gems of oratory, psychological and pedagogic skill) at the conclusion of each of
the long series of PhD defences under his supervision. His PhDs include such prominent
Africanists as Gerry ter Haar, Rijk van Dijk, Annette Drews and Ria Reis. Perhaps Schof-
feeleers’ main characteristic traits were his sense of religious mystery and of the miracu-
lous; 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 success-
ful 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 Schof-
feleers), where many of his PhD 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* (1998), which was prepared for his 70\textsuperscript{th} birthday. It may well be as a passionate teacher that Matthew Schoffeleers will yet have the most lasting impact.