

Female initiation in Melanesia past and present.

While ethnographic studies conducted in Amazonia have made it possible to re-theorise relations between humans and non-humans (e.g. Vivieros de Castro 1998, Descola 2005, Kohn 2013), research in Melanesia has provided essential analyses for understanding gender and constructions of personhood (Strathern 1988), particularly through the study of life cycle rituals and exchange. (eg. Bonnemère 2018; Leach 2019; etc.)

Compared with male initiations, which have been the subject of numerous in-depth analyses since the beginning of anthropological research on the island of New Guinea, female rituals have attracted little attention or, when they have, they have usually been approached using the same paradigm of male domination as rituals for young boys (Godelier 1986 [1982]). Nor is there much about their form, precise content or variability in the anthropological literature on the scale of the descriptions available for male initiations. Considered as individual rites that merely celebrate the arrival of a physiological event, they have not been analysed in the same way as ceremonies that appeared at first glance to have more important social dimensions. As Lutkehaus outlines (1995), there may be several reasons for this, including the ‘individual’ nature of the rites (they are focussed on just one or on a few girls at once); the focus on exchange in a literature that became dominated by Highlands ethnographies; or even simple ignorance/chauvinism/lack of data.

In 1995, following one of the annual conferences of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania (ASAO), Nancy Lutkehaus and Paul Roscoe, both specialists of the Sepik region, (Papua New Guinea), co-edited the book *Gender Rituals: Female Initiation in Melanesia*, in which the contributors sought to understand female rituals not as simple events marking the crossing of a threshold but as prolonged temporal processes having to do with the transformation of women, and even with the reproduction of society and the cosmos. In her introduction, Lutkehaus points out that women's rituals are described by some as puberty rites and by others as initiations, although she does not consider the distinction relevant (Lutkehaus 1995: 48). What matters is rather how these events relate to other rituals in the life cycle and to the political and economic organisation that prevails in the group that celebrates them. Whether they are organised in isolation, or as part of a series or in connection with marriage, they are indeed one of the rituals of the life cycle.

We first thought to convene some colleagues to participate in a workshop on this topic because James has ethnography of contemporary rituals for girls from Reite (Madang) and Pascale is working on Baruya collective rites for girls through Maurice Godeliers' fieldnotes, and also working on Allison Jablonko's film and notes and her own, more recent, ethnography.

We recognize the coverage of the Lutkehaus and Roscoe 1995 volume, but hope it is worthwhile to revisit it after 30 years, even if it is seemingly a rather ‘old fashioned’ subject. We also know that many of these rituals are no longer practiced, and so we are interested in historical or second-hand ethnographical material as well as contemporary forms of rituals organised by women and/or for them.

We plan something quite informal to start with - to see what kind of material people have about contemporary and past female rituals in Melanesia – and if there is a common interest or debate we could work on together around it. If possible we will build a national and international network of researchers able to grasp this theme in the light of recent developments in anthropology.

The first workshop will bring together a small group of Melanesianist with Laurent Gabail. Laurent has worked on initiations in West Africa (see below), and has agreed to bring his

expertise and comparative ethnographic material (Di Muro & Gabail 2021) to our discussions as a commentator rather than present a formal paper.

A recent issue of the journal *L'Homme* (Gobin, Hamberger & Houseman, eds, 2021) was devoted to 'Expériences initiatiques du genre', mainly in Africa. It demonstrates the potential of taking a fresh look at the theme of female initiations. The volume brings together articles devoted to the description and analysis of female rites that vary widely in content, form and purpose, including in groups that share the same language but live in different territories and countries. For example, among the Senoufo of Senegal, the women's ritual is individual and elective, and produces divination specialists (Lemaire 2021), while among two different Bassari groups in Senegal and Guinea, male initiation is identical but the female rituals differ from one another: in Senegal, the female initiation rite is secret and concerns women in their thirties within a system of rigorous age levels where the primary symbolism is maternity and filiation. Among the Bassari of Guinea, the women hijack the male initiation during their own *eyuk* initiation, and the symbolism deployed is that of sexuality and alliance (Di Muro & Gabail 2021).

The aim of our workshop is to produce ethnographic descriptions that will enable new comparative and theoretical analyses to be proposed.

One objective, rarely before pursued in the anthropology of Melanesia, is to consider female rituals alongside male initiations. While recent work has sought to reveal the involvement of women in the latter rituals, helping to show that the presence of certain categories of women (mothers, sisters) was essential and that they had to adopt specific behaviour in relation to what their sons and brothers were doing in the forest (Bonnemère 2018), the idea of systematically comparing what happens to boys and girls in parallel during their respective lives has not been considered necessary for theoretical analyses.

Moreover, any analysis of gender and initiation in this part of the world must focus on the form of exchanges and rituals, as it is usually these that operate the transformation from one gendered state to another.

What are the mechanisms, the focus, the processes, gestures, and the objects or materials that are significant? Are these rites about knowledge transmission, about moral instruction, are they a form of education, or are they concerned with norms and rules for conduct?

What other questions are pertinent to ask of the ethnography?

Since the work of Marilyn Strathern, particularly the publication of *The Gender of the Gift* in 1988, the expression "transformation from one gendered state to another" has had to be taken in a relational rather than essentialist sense. In Melanesia, a child is considered to be the product of multiple relationships, resulting from the contribution of substances, including paternal and maternal sexual substances, as well as food given by close relatives during childhood. How could these ideas inform our analysis of female rituals?

After some discussion between us (and because now there are only a few of us who work on life cycle rituals), we decided for this first workshop not to restrict the discussion to "puberty rites" for girls in Papua New Guinea, as we first had thought. This move implies that presentations about past and present ethnographical material on birth rituals or other events, in island Melanesia, or in PNG are welcome.

So, we would be happy to listen to people answering at least some of the following questions:

- what is the ethnographical material that you have on female rituals?
- what are they in terms of their general organisation and objective?

– what seems to you of key or core interest in these rituals? Is there anything that stands out? (the materials/processes involved? the contrast with other ethnographic material? how central they are/are not etc.?).

– which theoretical framework do you think might be of use to understand this?

We hope to finish with a sense of what people have found valuable about listening to other people's ethnography.

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