

‘The Shadow You Shall Not Step Upon’

A Western researcher at the Nkoya girls’ puberty rite, western central Zambia

To my daughter Nezmja

3.1. The Nkoya girl’s puberty rite: Introductory evocation

Not until the wee hours of the morning does the dancing die down. The special festive xylophones (as large as a Dutch dining-room table for eight) begin to take longer pauses. The crowd, which has up to that point been dancing, singing and chanting around the musicians, is thinning. The guests of honour (old men in shabby clothes, some fattish men in their forties in jeans and embroidered multicoloured shirts, and a few other men dressed in that symbol of urban success: a striped three-piece suit) have been accommodated in houses not far from the dancing place. Some very young girls, who have not yet been initiated themselves, are still dancing in small groups at the xylophones, the eyes turned up in ecstasy and sometimes shut; but their teenage boyfriends have taken the place of the professional musicians and the music is no longer great. Yet every now and then spectacular musical battles develop between these amateur musicians at the various xylophones, in which they profile themselves and challenge each other, through the choice of their melodies and their partially extemporised wanton lyrics, as representatives of different clans, valleys, ethnic subgroups. Occasionally the fun-making threatens to evolve into an actual fight. But the tendency towards such active expressiveness diminishes strongly after three or four o’clock in the morning. Scores of people of all ages are sitting and lying around the men’s fire and the women’s fire. Those awake are still passing around the ‘seven-days’ home-brewed beer as provided by the family of the girl to be initiated; while those half drunk and asleep are treated with more consideration than earlier in the night.

The ten or twenty women who had come to sell a pail of their own home-brewed beer have long sold their merchandise. After having stored their valuable empty plastic or zinc container at an address nearby, these women have mingled with the

guests, joined in with the dancing and singing, and have finally also ended up at the women's fire.

In the atmosphere of sexual implications with which conversations, jokes and lyrics were saturated earlier that night, several have found a partner for the night, and have (after some arrangements with a resident of their acquaintance) retired together somewhere to a nearby house; this is a town and one has to do without the bushes that in villages are always within walking distance. The muted conversations around the fire now mainly concern national and regional politics, tension within kin groups, the cost of living, but now and then one does indeed give thought to the physical and domestic qualities of the one teenage girl who at this festival, before hundreds of people, is to be promoted to womanhood.

She lies in a house near the dancing place, and not, as she would in the village, on a bed especially constructed for her in the open air. But otherwise the rules are the same: she may not utter a sound, may not move, and may certainly not leave her place; even though she has pain from the big white trade bead that she holds clutched in her vagina, made very dry by means of obnoxious herbs; even if she is afraid and thinks she is suffocating under the loads of coarse horse blankets that cover her face and naked body; no matter how badly she has to urinate because of the beer that, against all rules, her mentrix has given her at the beginning of the evening. In between her spells of choked crying she listens to the diminishing sound of revelry. She is especially tuned to the sound of rain. For this is the celebration through which she shall finally become a woman, after months of seclusion in which the only manner she could set a step out of doors was in a stooping position and covered by a blanket; after months of intimidating and painful sexual and social teachings on the part of her mentrix and other elderly women in the evenings. If rain falls tonight, it means infertility, no sons that will protect her in future when she will be old and ugly, no fancy wraps in gaudy colours to tie around the waist, no jewellery, perhaps even no food.¹

The blood spirit Kanga that at her first menstruation, many months ago, had given evidence of possessing her body, will be permanently exorcised within a few hours by the public celebration of her coming-out. No longer will the girl dwell in the dangerous intermediate zone in which the powers that manifest themselves through her menstruation blood are still untamed, and cause damage to all vital processes in the community around her. She is familiar with the sight of open, suppurating wounds, tuberculosis, wilting leaves of maize and cassava in the fields,

¹ 'Rain', *Mvula*, the demiurge to mediate between heaven and earth, is more or less equivalent to the leopard (in Nkoya: *ka-mpulu*, which at least a popular etymology links to *Mvula*; the leopard's spots are equivalent to raindrops, although on an other level it is the *kings* – who used to be primarily or exclusively female – who constitute the 'Tears of Rain', hence the title of van Binsbergen 1992b). The spirit Kanga, and redness, belong to the same symbolic domain of the life force which is mainly embodied in women and which is therefore, from a nowadays dominant male perspective, considered as an anti-social, and subaltern state. The girl's initiation will elevate her to the exalted, leonine state of full womanhood, associated with sunshine and whiteness, not rain. Cf. van Binsbergen 1992b and forthcoming (e).

and knows that these are the evil effects of Kanga when still in a state in which the community cannot control this spirit's power: not only as menstruation blood, but also as the fruits of miscarriages, and through children that were 'set up blindly' – conceived without the mother having menstruated since her last pregnancy and delivery. The girl shivers at the thought of being the bearer of this force. But within a few hours her coming-out as a woman will (except for short periods of menstruation and childbirth) free her from this horrid accessory. She will not have to hide herself under a blanket any more; albeit that from now on she is to keep her thighs covered with a wrap when in public. She will no longer be *kankanga*, a novice, a 'trainee-woman' possessed by Kanga, but *mbereki*, a 'woman', a 'giver of birth', member of a solidary group of women, well informed about social and physical details of her roles as wife, daughter-in-law, mother and mistress, and well aware of the rights and duties that derive from them.

Taken by stage fright she traces in her mind the dancing movements that have been beaten into her over the past months. She will have to perform them solo before hundreds of men and women, later, after sunrise. But she will be beautiful. Her mentrix has already shown her the stack of cloth wraps with which she will give her hips and buttocks the volume of a matron;¹ the bright headscarves and the bead necklaces that her favourite sister has put at her disposal; the strings of beer-bottle tops that she will wear over her cloth wraps and which will jingle with every dancing movement, like the bells in the White Father's church; the rattles made of the ball-shaped *rushaka* fruit² that will accompany the light metal sound with the pointed shuffle of the numerous small seeds inside the hollow spherical fruits with their wooden peel; her uncle's trilby hat that she will wear on her head scarf and in whose sunken top the spectators will put their coins as a tribute to her mentrix who has guided her up to this point. And finally the long string of white beads that was once worn by her grandmother at the latter's coming-out ceremony – beads which were once traded for eagerly and brutally, in slaves (not infrequently young men sold by their mother's brother), cooking pots, hoes, guns and tobacco, and that will now be draped across her chest, over her shoulders and under her arms, accentuating her uncovered young breasts in all their shy glory.

Through the thin pole-and-dagga walls of her uncle's townhouse she hears the music diminish; now and then she recognises the voices of her younger girlfriends,

¹ On a less conscious level one might interpret this accentuating of the buttocks as an imitation of Khoi-San *steatopygia* — probably a memory, enshrined in ritual, of the Nkoya's predecessors (and probably, partly ancestors) as inhabitants of western central Zambia; cf. van Binsbergen 1992b. See below on enlargement of the labia.

² Nkoya believe that it is from this fruit, under its Nkoya name, that the name of Lusaka derives: that of a headman in Central Zambia who, in his turn, around the turn of the twentieth century gave his name to an early railway siding where, in the 1930s, Northern Rhodesia's new capital was built. As from the second half of the nineteenth century, various pockets of Nkoya hunting groups have existed in what is now the Lusaka area, and the interpretation is very plausible. At 400 km away from their rural home, Nkoya urban migrants in Lusaka in the 1970s referred to their putative kinsmen in the Lusaka rural area for assistance (drums, firewood) whenever they staged life-crisis rituals or healing rituals in town.

who may still dance carefree and sing to the music, and who are calling out to each other excitedly. Her over-full bladder causes a dull pain about to eclipse all other sensations, but she must persist.

In the corner of the room a much younger girl is peacefully asleep on a reed mat. As a second, almost as a bridesmaid, she will dance along with the *kankanga* the next morning, just as she has not moved from her side during the preceding months of training. But she still has a real child's body, is not yet menstruating, and it will be years until she herself will be at the centre of a coming-out ceremony.

At the break of day the mentrix and other women enter the bedroom and pull the blankets off the novice. One assesses if she is still dry, and if she has been able to hold the bead. She is praised for her endurance. Her naked body is rubbed with castor oil. Her crown, temples and breasts are sprinkled with white maize meal; here in town the ceremonial white *mpemba* clay prescribed for such ritual occasions is not available. Around her hips they drape the strings of multicoloured loin beads that for the rest of her life will be hidden under her clothes and demarcate the domain of her nudity, day and night. While the women finish her festive attire, they softly sing the initiation songs that were imprinted on her during these months:

'Listen to what we tell you
on your coming-out ceremony, kankanga.
Turn not your back on your man
Over his shadow you may never step
Avoid the place behind the house
where your father-in-law urinates.¹
Listen to what we tell you
on your coming-out ceremony, kankanga',

and

'The old woman told us²
They made a little girl into a woman
Although she had no breasts yet
The old woman told us

¹ Conceptions of social and sacred space are central to any society, and (largely by reference to the four directions) South Central African village society has elaborated a division of the village space into female and male domains, informing public and private uses of space for social contact, storage, safe-keeping, food preparation, personal hygiene and sanitation, sexual activities, veneration of the ancestors, etc.

² In South Central Africa, the songs sung at public musical occasions (puberty rites, marriages, funerals etc.) have an important function as social comment through which social control is exercised. Such songs often originate in a singer's extemporising on specific infringements of norms and obligations by members of the community. Puberty rites should only be initiated when a girl begins to develop breasts and/or has her first menstruation. The elderly lady featuring in the song is therefore using her considerable authority to protest against an infringement of this important norm. While puberty initiation gives a young woman the right to engage in sexual activity and to openly speak about sexuality (both absolute prerogatives of adults), salt (an immensely valued and indispensable commodity) is a common symbol of adult sexuality. Menstruating women, who have to abstain from sexual activity lest they pollute their partner and the community with their menstrual secretion, are not supposed to cook meals: in that condition they are not allowed to handle the salt without which a meal would be considered inedible.

They made a little girl into a woman
But there is no salt for the porridge yet'.

(Incidentally it is a line of the former song that suggested the title for the present chapter.) These and other songs are repeated indefinitely.

The second is also awakened and dressed beautifully, in a manner that only differs in slight details from that of the *kankanga*.

When all is done the mentrix wraps herself in a big blanket. The novice and her second crawl under it. In stooping position, their hands resting on the woman's back, they blindly shuffle behind her onto the dancing place, where dawn has broken and the xylophones and drums have once again been brought to harmony through painstaking tuning.

In the morning light, practically all those present during the night have gathered again on the dancing place. Beside the few who are obstinately sleeping off their beer, the places around the men's fire and the women's fire are now empty. Neighbours and passers-by (in town, the latter usually belong to other ethnic groups than the Nkoya, who constitute only a small minority) stop and stand in the passages between the houses. For, although the coming-out ceremony of the Nkoya is in many ways unique, and although no other Zambian people is as skilful on the xylophone, practically everyone in South Central Africa is, on the basis of his or her own ethnic group's cultural tradition, familiar with the institution of the coming-out ceremony at which a girl is to dance solo in order to be made into a woman. One stops and stands, not because it is an exotic ceremony performed by the rather despised Nkoya minority, but because the coming-out of a girl is regarded as of universal human significance. The members of the family and of the ethnic group, and other spectators, are crowding up to such an extent that the brothers and younger uncles of the *kankanga* have to break off branches from the few scrawny town trees in order to sweep, in an exaggeratedly threatening manner, the onlookers off the dancing place. Thus a square is cleared in which the girl is to dance, but it keeps filling up again with onlookers.

A small group of women is posted near the musicians. The mentrix and the girls hidden under the blanket arrive at the dancing place like a poorly imitated giant beetle. Accompanied by the unexpectedly virtuoso music of xylophones and drums (you would not say the musicians have a hangover), the women sing high-pitched initiation songs. The mentrix pulls away the blanket and the novice rises limp and dizzy, her eyes squinting against the morning light – a butterfly emerging from her chrysalis. But she soon finds her balance and she begins to dance as she has been taught: taking small steps, barely moving from her place, but with the ankle rattles giving the rushing and sharp tickling sound; with slight, subdued shaking movements of her pelvis, causing the thick pack of cloth wraps to sway and the strings of bottle tops to jingle; her arms bent at some distance in front of her breast, her hands sometimes loosely closed to form fists, and then again stretched out with the palms opened and turned up, as if she were receiving a great gift, or as if she were devotedly offering to the gathered community, in a big half-gourd, all the food

that in the course of her life will pass through her hands, being prepared by her for her husband, children, and in-laws. Her eyes are almost closed and her head is inclined forward as if she is attentively listening to the music. Humble and modest, she avoids the eyes that are fixed on her so intensely.

The fierce concentration with which the audience observes her at the beginning of each sequence of music lasts but a few seconds. Then relatives and friends struggle to make their way through the crowd, in order to put money or white beads on the top of her hat. The girl stops her dance after every song that the musicians play and the women's choir sings. She stands still in the same characteristic posture (inclined head, arms bent in front of her, hands in half-open fists) while the mentrix removes the donations from her hat. Her second dances along by her side (but nowhere as beautifully) and also stops at these moments. The young male relatives use the opportunity to clear the dancing square by frighteningly whipping around their branches (but without really hitting anyone); they are so proud of their 'sister'¹ that they insist on maximum dancing space and attention for her. Cheers of encouragement and other comments rise from the group of spectators. Close female relatives are crying openly. Many a woman, having come to the end of her small supply of coins, pulls the beads from her own neck, makes her way through the on-pushing crowd, and deposits them on the girl's hat. Close male relatives are loudly boasting about their 'sister'. Many are deeply moved, both men and women, and obviously have lumps in their throats when shouting or singing.

Before the girl starts her last dance, the square is once again cleared of the on-pushing crowd. At the edge of the square a chair is placed, on which a father of the girl is seated. This may be her actual genitor or one of his many 'brothers' – that is to say one of his brothers, cousins, second cousins, later male partners of the girl's mother, etc. The genitor (whose identity is always known) does not automatically take precedence over the girl's other fathers, it is far from self-evident which of the men present is most eligible to take the seat, and a sharp dispute behind or even in front of the scene often takes place in this phase of the coming-out ceremony.

The girl dances up to the seated father and kneels down. She claps a woman's respectful greeting and, with her head humbly turned away, she offers the father all the money that she has collected so that he may ultimately pass it on to the girl's mentrix. The father can barely hide his emotion. There is a lot at stake. The collection is a measure of the degree to which the community is pleased with this new woman, and with her mentrix. If the breasts of the girl are yet too small, if her dancing movements are not found sufficiently subdued or musical, or if she has to stop after a few songs for lack of repertoire, she will reap little appreciation. There are, however, girls who dance like the Nkoya queens of pre-colonial times, with

¹ Kinship terms among the Nkoya, and in most African societies, are used in a classificatory sense. A person eligible to be called 'sister' (*mukondo, yaya, mpanda*) is not necessarily a biological sister, but may be a first, second or third cousin, and in fact any socially recognised daughter of any classificatory father or mother; of the latter type of kin again one has dozens instead of just one.

large full breasts that (anointed with castor oil) shine deeply in the gathering morning light; and they work not only through the entire range of familiar Nkoya songs, but also boast quite a repertoire of dancing tunes of the Nkoya's neighbouring peoples in western Zambia. The coming-out ceremony of a girl like that is long reminisced, her mentrix may expect an extremely high fee, and the girl will be considered an ideal wife.

By greeting the father and handing over the collected money, the novice has definitely left her girl's life behind her. She is led away under the blanket one more time, to the yard of a nearby house, where she is seated on a mat on proud and formal display. She receives all kinds of gifts: cloth wraps, beads, head scarves, kitchen utensils, a handkerchief (to clean the penis of her partner after intercourse) and a suitcase that can be locked – for both male and female Nkoya such a suitcase is the only physical private domain from which they can exclude all others.

The second also receives a small gift and is dismissed from her obligations.

For the first time in months the *kankanga* may show her face to men. A blanket still covers her hair, bare shoulders and upper body; but those who address her elder relatives and are willing to donate a small coin, may fold away the blanket and thus inspect a large part of her naked physical beauty, with an eye to assessing her as a possible wife. Traditionally, this is the moment for the girl to enter the marriage market but in fact nowadays most girls have a steady boyfriend by the time they celebrate their coming-out ceremony. The fact remains that the *kankanga* coyly but as matter of course undergoes this inspection by the few men who still show an interest. Most of the guests leave right after the dancing is over; habitually complaining about the quality or quantity of the festival beer, or expressing disappointment in the performance of the *kankanga*. Those who stay on finish the beer. A few male elders (up to this point everything has been in the hands of women) are preparing to finish the girl's puberty training with a stern talk about her duties and obligations as a grown woman. It is impressed upon the mentrix that she will be held responsible if in future the girl fails to fulfil her duties towards her husband, father-in-law and other affines (relatives by marriage).

After this final training session the coming-out ceremony is over, and the girl is prepared to go through life as a grown woman. Within a few years her relatives will arrange a first marriage for her. There will almost certainly be other marriages after that first one. But never again will a celebration be so dramatically centred around her, as was her initiation – except perhaps her funeral, if she reaches a ripe enough age and proves sufficiently fertile for her funeral to be a moment of fulfilment and not just of grief.

3.2. The female puberty rite in western Zambia

Like women throughout South Central and Southern Africa, and in many other parts of the continent,¹ all maturing Nkoya girls have to go through the training period and coming-out ceremony as described above. Women, as well as men, villagers and urban migrants alike, consider this form of initiation (*ku tembwisha kankanga*: ‘to make the *kankanga* come out’) as the most specific and valid aspect that Nkoya culture has to offer. The day when she finishes her training period by coming out is the most beautiful one for every Nkoya woman. In telling her life story it is a calibrating point in time for all other events and occasions. In the months from April to July one can witness a Nkoya coming-out ceremony almost every weekend, either in the rural areas where the Nkoya form the majority (Kaoma district and its surroundings in western central Zambia) or in the towns of Central and Southern Zambia where the Nkoya immigrants form a small minority. Over the decades that I did research amongst the Nkoya people, I visited many of these coming-out ceremonies. While in the beginning I was moved merely by that which was outwardly perceptible, the public aspects of the event, I gradually acquired more insight into its background and meaning. On the one hand, it is the threshold to adulthood; on the other, it is the most comprehensive and compelling expression of the complex of representations, symbols, norms and patterns of behaviour through which, among the Nkoya, the relationships between the sexes are structured and carried over to the next generation.

It is remarkable that there is no male counterpart to the coming-out ceremony. Up to around 1920 the Nkoya did pursue a form of boys’ initiation, a variant of the *Mukanda* cultural complex (of circumcision, secret teachings, masked dances, etc.) that is practiced by many peoples of East Angola, Southern Zaïre, and North-west Zambia.² Today, however, Nkoya boys are no longer circumcised and (except occasional hunting camps in the depths of forest, which last for a few weeks) not exposed to any kind of traditional, formal training. The Nkoya now even make fun of the surrounding peoples that do practise circumcision. The disappearance of the boys’ initiation has further emphasised the meaning of the girls’ initiation as characteristic of Nkoya culture, and as a concentration point of their cultural heritage. Elderly men and women, who in modern times have rather lost their grip on the youngsters, emphasise the fact that (as compared to girls – even though nowadays even the latter have grown somewhat rebellious by traditional norms) it is the boys who are really barbarous, unmanageable and uncivilised: for the boys miss the detailed knowledge of and respect for social and sexual rules that are forcibly

¹ The literature on female puberty rites in Africa is extensive, but scarcely touches on the central issues of the present chapter. I may refer the interested reader to the following publications: Blacking 1969; Chakanza 1998; de Boeck 1992; Hinfelaar 1989; Hoch 1968; Huffman 1984; Jules-Rosette 1979; La Fontaine 1972, 1986; Rasing 1995, 2001; Richards 1945, 1982; Simonsen 2000; Turner 1967a; White 1953; White *et al.* 1958.

² Van Binsbergen 1992b, 1993c.

imprinted upon women during the girl's initiation, but that of course concern both sexes.

3.3. Witnessing the female puberty rite as a North Atlantic anthropologist

Every time I witnessed a coming-out ceremony, I was moved in my innermost being. As the girl danced, the female relatives burst out crying, and also the men showed their enthusiasm and emotion, tears would run down my own cheeks, too. I have written several poems about the coming-out ceremony, and a long story situated in a Nkoya environment of a century and a half ago and centring on this puberty rite. For years I played with the thought of having my own eldest daughter, Dutch as she may be but whose first language was Nkoya, undergo the initiation and coming-out ceremony, when her time came.

But what then makes this rite so beautiful and sacred? In its musical, dramatic, physical and public manner this initiation ceremony is so completely different from the way my North Atlantic urban culture deals with girls coming of age. What does the Nkoya rite have to offer, so that it could time and time again be a highlight in the participant observation of a North Atlantic male researcher?

At my first introduction to the Nkoya coming-out ceremony, in 1972, I did not pose these questions in terms of self-analysis, but tried to control my emotions. I took these to be a confusing by-product of what I held to be the purely scientific, objective pursuit of knowledge. In the meantime I have experienced dozens of coming-out ceremonies, and after the first years I could rely on a certain knowledge of the Nkoya culture, language and social organisation. My interest developed from the detached ethnographic registration of an alien culture, to trying to acquire insight into the political, symbolic and aesthetic implications of the interaction between cultures, social classes and sexes, including my own. My profession as an anthropologist has aimed at purposely bringing about such interaction, as a main context for the production of intercultural knowledge. I have come to doubt more and more the value of the distant, ephemeral and instrumental methods that are considered to constitute the conditions for professional ethnographic fieldwork. Much of my literary work contains the overflow of contents, images and emotions resulting from that approach and impossible to accommodate in an academic context; I have come to realise more and more that one word or gesture easily understood and answered in the field, in interaction with one's hosts, implies knowledge of greater validity and range than most formal social-scientific discourses. The question I raise in this chapter is not a scientific one, and when seeking to answer it, science can only be of indirect assistance. Introspective self-examination, and reconstruction of emotions and experiences of 'informants', hardly fit within the framework of current social sciences, and demand a more personal approach.

In my question, two problem areas intersect. In the first place, the contact between the researcher and an African host community forms the nodal point in a

network of political relations, emotions, and transference of unconscious conflict matter that we do not normally accommodate into our ethnographic reports, but that is nevertheless worth analysing, if only to take a relative view of our scientific findings. Secondly, in the present case, the North–South confrontation of cultures is crossed by the confrontation between men and women – a confrontation that since the revival of feminism is similarly recognised to be informed by power relations, emotions and transference. The researcher is, in this case, both a Westerner visiting Africa, and a man visiting a women’s ceremony.

In an attempt to trace the source of my emotion at the coming-out ceremony, a number of additional explanations should not be overlooked.

By the time the solo dance is performed, in the morning, the receptivity and emotional susceptibility of the spectators, including my own, is heightened by the use of alcohol and the lack of sleep; the joy, excitement and emotion of the scores of onlookers is highly contagious.

Then there is perhaps a certain pin-up effect. A woman breast-feeding her child is a everyday sight in the streets of urban Zambia, and certainly within the greater intimacy of village life; but for the rest of the time women’s breasts are only incidentally shown: at nocturnal healing rituals and at funerals – occasions at which women publicly seek contact with a higher, spiritual order of existence. I always found it shocking to see the upper bodies of little girls at the coming-out ceremony suddenly stripped of their childlike neutrality and presented as ostentatious female nudity, accentuated by the crossed white string of beads separating the breasts and the heavy layers of cloth wraps underneath. Only a few months earlier these girls were still publicly carefree in their underpants, lugging their little brothers and sisters about. Nevertheless the dancing *kankanga* is by no means a provocative sight, not to the African men present (for whom female breasts are hardly erotic) nor to the Western male spectator, who may come from a breast-obsessed culture, but for whom the girl is too young, and her dancing too reticent (her upper body practically motionless) to rouse any other than fatherly, brotherly, or clinical feelings.

And thirdly, the coming-out ceremony is indeed a condensation of the Nkoya group identity: what they consider most essential for their own culture is here visibly performed. The few pot-bellied, socially fairly successful townsmen, who exuberantly indulge in dance, song and drink, who shake the hand-rattles and are crowding up for a turn at the xylophone, by attending the coming-out ceremony noisily compensate for the fact that in everyday urban life they tend to conceal as much as possible their belonging to the despised Nkoya minority. But because of their leadership *malgré eux*, the few Nkoya people who have acquired a respected position in the wider Zambian society, can just as little be spared at a night like this as the average participants: the many teenage girls, still not initiated and too young for the role of *kankanga*, who rock to the music in near-ecstatic trance and could not be kept away from the xylophones; or the adults who are passionately and hardly secretively taking care of their love-affairs in recognition of the fact that the coming-out ceremony is also a fertility cult.

All this contributes to the total effect, but does not seem to reach the core. The most profound explanation for the anthropologist's emotion generated by the puberty rite is perhaps the one based on the universal aspect of so-called *rites de passage*.¹ They are to be found in all cultures. Everywhere they have the dual function of emphasising and safeguarding the normal order of social life, on the one hand, and of offering – on the other hand – to selected individuals the opportunity, against a set high price, of a personal boundary-crossing from one life sphere to another within that order: from foetus to human being, from childhood to adulthood, from the status of an outsider to that of a member, from life to death. These life spheres are demarcated from one another by means of prohibitions, privileges, anxieties. The drama of growing up, the hope, the yearning and the inevitable disappointment connected with it, is universally felt, and thus appears to be as emotional as the spectator's personal projection can possibly make it. Witnessing other people's profound experiences at moments of birth, illness and death during fieldwork, induces a similar recognition of a shared humanity, even though the cultural forms in which *rites of passage* are cast usually differ greatly from those at home. The courage, the tests, the promises, the glory of the Nkoya novice during her solo dance bring up typical adolescent issues that are also widely recognised in North Atlantic society, through pop music, literature and film. The Nkoya women who burst into tears during the solo dance of their young sister the *kankanga*, when questioned explained to me that it makes them think of their own coming-out ceremony, long ago, and of their many beloved agemates who died before they could witness the coming-out of the present *kankanga*. Over and above this aspect, I suspect that they, like myself, are overcome by the infinite grace and tenderness of the moment, through which the *kankanga* for a little while becomes the incarnation of all human potential at self-realisation, beauty and integrity, that for them (for us) has long been lost. Surrounded conspicuously by older female bodies, the *kankanga* is an almost unbearable symbol of transitory perfection that saddens because it is so fleeting, but also gives pride because the unattainable perfection, for one moment, appears to be attainable.

The extent to which I can identify with the *kankanga*'s boundary transgression, is thus closely linked to the extent to which the boundaries between my own culture and that of the *kankanga* dissolve in an awareness of universal recognisability of human themes.

This answer may convince up to a point, but it is not sufficient. For this universal aspect might by definition have yielded an infinite number of condensation points for my emotion: among the Nkoya, in western Europe, anywhere in the world. Why then precisely here and now? Probably because there is an additional autobiographical aspect that projects that universal aspect onto my very specific situation as a researcher confronted with this specific other culture.

¹ Van Gennep 1909; La Fontaine 1986.

But before this personal aspect opens itself to analysis, I want to assess whether perhaps some other universal factor is the decisive one. While the initiation ending in the festive coming-out ceremony of the *kankanga* settles the transition from child to adult, at the same time it expresses an equally sharp distinction that is central to the ceremony and the preceding training, but that is absolutely not transgressed, conquered or neutralised: the one between male and female gender. Undoubtedly, this distinction, so prominent precisely at the coming-out ceremony, contributes to the experience one has as a male anthropologist amongst the audience. And it is here that my emotions, matter of course and universal as long as they concern the mere passage to adulthood, suddenly become problematic. Is it due to identification based on my being a fellow human being, or rather due to an emphasis on my being male and by implication fundamentally different, that I as a man am so moved at this women's celebration? Is then the beauty that I experience a liberating one ('even although I am a man, I may take part in women's affairs') or an oppressive one ('because I am a man, I enjoy this women's affair in which the subordination and potential male appropriation of women is the main theme')? Am I crying for pride over this new woman, human like myself, who after a painful learning process, and with a whole life full of economic, social and emotional uncertainties yet before her, may nevertheless manifest a proud identity as a human being (who happens to be female)? Or am I merely shedding crocodile tears, and is my emotion partially caused by the fact that I, as a man, again see a woman being imprisoned within a web of oppressive rules and representations that make her subservient to male interests – interests with which, across cultural boundaries, I can perhaps identify even more than with the transition to female adulthood that the girl goes through?¹

The question concerning the roots of my emotion at the coming-out ceremony has also to do with the relationship between the researcher, the culture under study and the researcher's own culture, particularly in so far as the structuring of gender relations is concerned. Since the optimistic days of Margaret Mead, Clyde Kluckhohn and other 'humanistic' American anthropologists, anthropology has often claimed to hold up a mirror to North Atlantic society.² Only by showing how comparable socio-cultural phenomena are structured differently elsewhere, would one acquire an explicit awareness of structures, rules, and presumptions of one's own culture. For instance, North American urban middle-class patterns of puberty seem even more tumultuous and conflictive by contrast with the image of the har-

¹ In retrospect, I am surprised that when I first wrote this, I did not hit here on a third perspective which seems the most obvious: not a play on universal, non-gendered recognition of *humanity*, nor on male subjugation of women, but a *gendered* celebration of female reproductive and nurturative powers as superior to male ones, or at least as worthy of celebration in their own right. Cf. van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e). However, the thrust of my argument in section 3.4 is precisely along such lines. This tallies with the idea that female puberty rites have their roots in the Neolithic if not in the Upper Palaeolithic, before the installation of a fully-fledged ideology of male dominance (cf. Gimbutas 1982, 1991; Rasing 2001; van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e)). Long-range historical comparison beyond the second millennium CE was still outside my scope when I first wrote this chapter.

² Kluckhohn 1949; Mead 1942.

monious puberty on Samoa as depicted by Mead. Recently doubt has been cast on the validity of Mead's analysis: according to a contemporary critic, a girl's life on Samoa was not nearly as harmonious as she claimed it to be on the basis of allegedly one-sided material.¹ This suggests that the mirror can work two ways: perhaps the anthropologist only finds what she is looking for; perhaps we merely project, onto the cultures to be researched, our own experiences as shaped by the North Atlantic culture, and mainly report about ourselves under the cloak of writing about distant others. This transference effect is probably inevitable and can perhaps be compensated, but that does not make it less relevant.

What kind of mirror, then, does my description of the Nkoya coming-out ceremony hold up to us? Is it yet another image of female oppression, a variation of the widespread patriarchal syndrome, even more deceptive because it leads to concentrated expressions of great beauty and drama? In that case, the man delivering the description is either naïve, or a partisan of a male chauvinism surpassing cultural borders. Or does the Nkoya coming-out ceremony indeed contain something that rises above female oppression, and may the man who enthusiastically reports on it flatter himself that his emotions spring from admiration for and solidarity with women? As a man and as a researcher, I feel the profound need to formulate this dilemma, supply the ethnographic material towards such an answer, and attempt to give the answer myself. I am aware of the fact that my argumentation will rouse irritation among certain exponents of the feminist movement: they will possibly detect a suspicious eagerness to please, and explain my positive assessment of gender relations among the Nkoya as expressions of a hidden sexism, all the more dangerous because of its proclaimed good intentions.

The extent to which the Nkoya coming-out ceremony is a ritual of female oppression, can only be traced against the background of gender relationships amongst this people in general. I apologise for the ethnographic detail required in this case; it is a necessary step in the self-investigation on which this essay revolves. I realise moreover that in order to tighten my argument, not only the ethnography, but also the autobiography of the researcher should be dealt with in greater detail than I am prepared to do in this chapter – so that also in this aspect I have no defence against the obvious reproach of projection and distortion on my part.

3.4. The female puberty rite and women's oppression

Looking at Nkoya culture from the viewpoint of women's oppression, one's first impression is probably that such oppression is a dominant feature, but a closer look may largely dispel this view.

In a humiliating training of months, during which the girl is frequently beaten and scolded, while going naked indoors except for a blanket underneath which she

¹ Mead 1928; Freeman 1983; Kloos 1988; Shore 1983.

wears the flimsiest symbolic dress of plant fibres,¹ the girl acquires all knowledge and attitudes that she needs as an adult Nkoya woman. Besides specific sexual functioning, the initiation teachings relate mainly to two other subjects: dancing and daily life (from cooking and agriculture, via all subtleties concerning the dealings with relatives and relations, up to ritual taboos concerning female pollution). Many of these teachings are embedded in aphorisms and songs that condense the material in a rather cryptic, emblematic way. The initiation into the mystical solidarity of all women entails the learning of an esoteric language, in which key words of everyday life are substituted by secret women's words. Furthermore, the emphasis lies on imprinting ideal female behaviour, focusing on unconditional display of respect for elders (regardless of sex) and for men; such display is however not incompatible with a good deal of strategic manipulation of elders and men of her own age in concrete situations.

Daily instruction is given by the mentrix, who is in charge of the girl. The mentrix is a woman between thirty and sixty years old. She is generally known as someone who successfully lives up to and propagates the rules of womanhood. She should not have strong family ties with her pupil; she is expected to inculcate the Nkoya rules and representations in all objectivity, and to underline these forcefully where necessary, without the danger of preferential treatment, and without the risk that what she teaches the girl is not general Nkoya custom, but simply the custom of one family or village.

After practical work in the fields (to which the girl is guided blindly, stooped under a blanket that covers her entire body and face) in the daytime, there follows a somewhat formal training session in most of the evenings. The mentrix is assisted in her task by other adult women. They take on a distant and unfriendly attitude; a hard-headed or impudent pupil gets a beating. Little wonder girls experience their formal training period as an ordeal. Great emphasis is put on the acquisition of an adult female sexual role. The girl is taught to enlarge her vagina to the point when three fingers can go in; she is taught to wiggle and incline her pelvis during the coitus; and acquires knowledge about secret herbs that (unfortunately at the cost of damage to her fertility)² prevent vaginal lubrication – in order to serve the Nkoya ideal: penetration in a bone-dry vagina. Long before her formal training she has

¹ This flimsy *cache-sexe* of plant fibres is another evocation of what, from the point of view of contemporary Nkoya historical awareness, must be considered prehistory — a primordial time when human life was less divorced from nature. Cat's cradles (the formation of figures by the manipulation of string, one of the very few cultural universals and hence also with Palaeolithic resonances) are associated with the training period of the *kankanga*. Interestingly, most food taboos to which the *kankanga* is subjected during the months of her seclusion, relate to species of fish; fishing has been a very old and originally more prominent element of the economy of the well-watered region of western central Zambia. This taboo has resonances in Khoi-San beliefs today, in European prehistoric Goddess-centred cosmology, and in Indus civilisation fish symbolism.

² Comparative library research conducted by the Central Statistical Office, Lusaka, Zambia, in the 1970s revealed that the very low level of fertility obtaining in the so-called matrilineal belt stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean in Africa between roughly latitudes 5° and 15° South, coincides with the cultural practice of inserting obnoxious, alkaloid vegetal material into the vagina, which is taken to cause infertility.

already started to make her labia minora larger than nature provides: from her ninth or tenth year up until her coming-out ceremony, the girl spends hundreds of hours, by herself or in company of girlfriends, indoors or somewhere in an open spot in the woods, stretching these parts of her body until they have reached an extra length of up to seven or eight centimetres.¹

Nkoya women take pride in their sexual skills. As long as their claims are made at the abstract, formal normative level of expressing their own culture in general ideal terms (the level that every anthropologist tries to break through in search of statements that are closer to real life) those skills are solely presented as a contribution to the satisfaction of male desires. Women are taught always to take male sexual advances seriously; if you nevertheless do not wish to oblige, it is better to make up an excuse that leaves the male ego intact: simulating menstruation is the easiest solution, and you can always put a bulging, but unnecessary sanitary towel in your underpants. To sexually refuse your own steady male partner is hardly possible at all. On the other hand, a woman must suppress all manifestations of her own excitement let alone orgasm. Having an orgasm is the right of men, and women who show that they 'feel something' (the euphemism I seek to convey here is the Nkoya, not the English one) stand a chance of getting a beating: the man feels insulted, as if 'it is not he trying to make her pregnant, but the other way around'. Nkoya women believe that they can abstain from sexual delight for a longer period than their men; and such profound pleasure as they occasionally hope to experience, they derive not so much from their husband, but from a lover – and preferably without even him noticing it.

Considering the fact that sexual delight among Nkoya women often remains latent, it is not exclusively the prospect of orgasmic ecstasy that drives them into the arms of their partners. Among women, the threshold to sexual activity is likely to be lowered by their awareness of a steady male partner's sexual rights (as conferred, and confirmed, by kin groups through formal agreements and payments: in other words by marriage) and by the hope for the gifts (clothes, money) that lovers tend to dispense. Moreover, every woman wants to give birth to as many children as possible: the basis for cosmological self-realisation and social respect in the present, and a stake in the future, when the children will be adults and will support and defend her. There are few cultures in the world today where the causal connection between sexual intercourse and pregnancy is not acknowledged, and Nkoya culture is not among these few. As the main incentive for sexual intercourse, however, Nkoya women mention that they, especially during the formal training for *kankanga*, were taught that male sperm is an extraordinary strong medicine, indispensable for the proper functioning of the female body. A man who gives a woman his seed

¹ Could not this custom, which in Bantu-speaking Africa is by no means unique to the Nkoya, again be interpreted as an attempt to imitate another physical feature of the pre-Bantu Khoi-San-speaking inhabitants: their relatively very large labia minora (described in the older literature, with a no longer tolerable choice of words, as the 'Hottentot apron')? Cf. van Binsbergen 1992b.

provides her with something of unique value, not only in the way of future offspring but also towards her own well-being in the present; and this is the main conscious reason why a Nkoya woman, after intercourse, kneels down before her partner and claps her hands respectfully, genuinely pleased that, of all women, this man has chosen her to manifest his manhood and donate his seed, and has been able to do so. The gesture does not differ from that by which a woman in any other situation thanks a higher ranked man or woman; and only in the clapping rhythm and position of the hands does it differ from formal greetings between men (women clap more monotonously, with their hands more cupped).

This is just one aspect of a whole complex of behaviour by which the symbolic subordination of a woman to her male partner is accentuated. Many other examples could be given. A woman may not go to sleep before her man, nor rise after him. She must not leave the bed without his explicit permission, and for this she has to wake him up. He must sit up in order to allow her to crawl behind him from her appointed spot, the furthest from the outside door, where she can best be protected by the man. If (as one of the initiation songs stipulates) she cannot step on his shadow, it is even more unthinkable that she would step over his very body. A nightly little pee thus becomes quite a formal enterprise. She must prepare and serve his food, then kneel before him and by hand-clapping invite him to come and eat it. But she may not eat with him from one dish. She must heat his bathing water on the fire, and wash him according to strict rules that stipulate which hand she may use when and in which sequence the parts of his body may be washed. She must keep his bodily hair shaven. Above all she is the 'keeper of the house': hidden diseases, defects, shortcomings, weaknesses, fears, passions, distasteful consequences of excessive drinking – all that is wrong with her husband she must intercept without complaining, without speaking about it to a third party, without the outside world even noticing.

Many elements of what we could call the patriarchal syndrome are thus also present in the Nkoya culture: older women who pass on to the younger women, practically without direct intervention on the part of men, their own internalised values and representations of female submissiveness and male superiority; sexual servitude; absence of an explicit right to sexual enjoyment; the belief that the normal physiology of the healthy female body, in menstruation and childbirth, is repulsive and dangerous; male privileges that have no female counterpart, etc.

Nevertheless, when taking a closer look, the picture will prove to be much less negative, and in many ways not more oppressive than the situation of women in western Europe until the middle of the twentieth century.

As far as a woman's acceptance of, pride in, knowledge of, and control over the integrity of her own body is concerned (which is something very different from access to the labour market – although the two viewpoints may merge in particular versions of North Atlantic feminist discourse) we cannot fail to appreciate that many of the recent achievements of the sexual and feminist revolution in the North Atlantic region have been matter of course to Nkoya women for centuries.

Not much different from the western European women under the Victorian ideal, the discouragement of overt manifestations of female sexual gratification is brought about through social and psychological mechanisms, and not by physical mutilation. Clitoridectomy does not occur among the Nkoya, and my information that it does occur elsewhere horrifies them.

The symbolic subordination that exists between man and woman does not appear to be incompatible with a pattern of mutual respect, based on the idea that man and woman belong to two mutually irreducible, yet basically equivalent, cosmological categories. The opposition, and union, of the female and male genders is primarily one of the most important manifestations of the fundamental complementarity that constitutes the world: the complementarity between heaven and earth, dry land and water, day and night, sun and moon, life and death, etc. Every marriage therefore is a *hieros gamos*, a sacred marriage involving and expressing the union of these cosmic opposites; and even every sexual act, every coitus, in or outside wedlock, is in principle sanctified and justified by this cosmology.¹

Gender complementarity, instead of subordination, is most strikingly expressed by what the Nkoya consider the ideal position for sexual intercourse. The missionary position, where the woman is on her back and the man on his belly on top of her, is considered a recent innovation. What is seen as the traditional Nkoya position is free of connotations of female subordination: man and woman are on their sides, locked in embrace and penetration, facing each other, as equals who are well up to each other. Telling is also the term that is used for conjugal partners as well as for steady lovers regardless of marital status: man and woman are *muntu wenji*, 'each other's person'. And the ideal conjugal partner is the *karemba*, the man who, as a teenager, was marked to be the fiancé of a particular girl and, up to some decades ago, in that role played an important part at her coming-out ceremony as the main supplier of firewood for the men's and women's fires. Amongst aged Nkoya people one sometimes still finds *karemba* marriages that were contracted with practically no bride price some forty or fifty years ago (a practically inconceivable term of marriage, in the face of current marital conditions: the average lifespan of a Nkoya marriage is about ten years); and these partners can still delightedly recount the tenderness and the patience with which, over a period of months, the boy gradually ushered in the little girl to consummated sexuality, five or six decades ago.

But these have become exceptions, if they were ever more than that. Nkoya women generally have but little benefit from their husbands when it comes to sexual satisfaction. After their physical training – so shockingly explicit to Europeans – they do however command enough sexual knowledge to find such satisfaction with a lover. The Nkoya are keenly aware of the difference in role behaviour between

¹ The oppositions together making up the Nkoya cosmology are set out in van Binsbergen 1992b. That this cosmology is far from unique to the Nkoya and has a wide distribution inside and outside Africa, is clear from Baumann 1955, and especially from van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e). For other studies of gendered cosmology in the Zambian context, cf. Hinfelaar 1989; Rasing 2001.

husbands and lovers. Among unwed lovers, there is indeed room for tenderness and excitement. As restricted and bound to rules, almost ritualistic, as physical intercourse is within wedlock, so free is it between unwed lovers – one boasts that there is not a single spot of each other's body, not a single copulating position, that is forbidden; but, as said, preferably even a woman's lover does not notice it when she has an orgasm. However, he may freely eat with her from the same plate.

Nkoya women have vast opportunities to acquire lovers. Relatively mobile, they can (in the context of visiting relatives, particularly in the context of funerals) spend weeks and often months away from the house that they share with their husbands. Their sexual escapades are certainly registered by public opinion, but seldom condemned.

Since the second decade of the twentieth century the formal Nkoya marriage has been sealed by an ever-increasing bride-price. Nevertheless, the rights that the husband acquires are limited. He has the right to the wife's culturally defined activities within the house (in bed and in bath), in his yard (where the kitchen is located) and to a certain degree in his field. She may cultivate on the husband's land, but she may also have land of her own to cultivate. Finally, the husband acquires paternity rights over the children that the wife will bear during the marriage. If the bride price has not yet been fully paid (and this may take years, even decades), a man cannot insist on these rights. The bride price is not seen as purchase money. On the contrary, it is the acknowledgement of the human value of the wife, and as a pledge for the husband's good behaviour. By paying the bride price, the man and his family acknowledge that the woman is a free person, the *opposite* of a slave that could be bought for money. The image of the slave, over whose person the master has absolute command at all times, is brought up in many arguments between married couples and between in-laws. If the man should go too far in his matrimonial claims, or should dramatically fail in fulfilling his matrimonial duties, then he is invariably accused of treating his wife like a slave – and he is reminded of the fact that he has only limited, specific rights, that can easily be undone if his behaviour does not improve.

The leading idea behind the marriage ceremony itself seems to be that the man is made aware of the conditional nature of his rights. Through a fence of brothers-in-law to be, he has to literally fight his way into the room where the bride is with her mentrix. Upon arrival, he must bribe this chaperone to leave the room (after she has given her last sexual instructions to the couple), and once alone with the bride, he has to pay money (formerly beads) before she takes off her clothes, and then again before she allows him to penetrate her. Early the next morning the mentrix returns to the bridal room to ask the couple 'if all went well': whether penetration took place and semen flowed. If these are the criteria for the success or failure of the wedding night, clearly it is the man and not the woman who is being tested here. Admittedly, at the wedding also the sexual skills of the bride are for the first time submitted to the scrutiny of the wider society (as represented by her mentrix), but virginity is by no means a requirement. It is not clear whether in the nineteenth century, bridal

virginity mattered equally little; some sources suggest that it was more of an explicit value then. The payments made on the wedding night are part of an elaborate circuit of ceremonial payments, to which also belong the bride price itself, the donations in cash at the dance of the *kankanga*, and payments made at childbirth. The transfer of money marks the individual crossing of boundaries between social groups (genders, generations, bride-givers versus bride-takers), and defines or redefines the rights of each of these groups and of their individual members. These are ceremonial gifts, and even though they are situated in the domain of intimate relationships and sexuality, they should not be mistaken to be indications of a commodification of that domain. Prostitution (*wuhule*) is a clear concept in Nkoya culture, and has nothing to do with the ceremonial payments in the marital process; the etymology of *wuhule* (from Afrikaans *hoer*, 'whore') identifies prostitution as sexual intercourse in exchange for money in distant places with strangers in a context of labour migration.

If a first marriage is concerned, the girl is rarely free in the choice of her marriage partner; the choice is strongly determined by existing or desirable alliances between villages and between clans, and a possible pre-marital boyfriend has to make way. However, the chance is quite considerable that this first marriage will be dissolved through divorce within a few years. Personal grievances of one of the partners (often the woman) then tend to outweigh village political considerations – though elders will try to keep up a marriage that is politically beneficial to them as long as possible, and only reluctantly will consent to its dissolution.¹

All this contributes to an awareness of balance and relative equality between the sexes, such that the patriarchal syndrome in the attitudes and representations, as found among Nkoya women, is often mitigated on the men's side by a rather considerable loyalty – of which the *karemba* marriage is considered to be the highest expression. When menstruation or childbirth make it impossible for the woman to light a fire and cook (due to the anti-social connotations of menstruation blood), it is normal that the husband relieves her from these tasks – especially in urban situations, where (classificatory) 'sisters' of the wife tend to be unavailable. A heavy taboo forbids the husband to commit adultery when his wife is pregnant or even (according to one particular version of this norm) to fulfil his marital duties towards his other wives, in a polygamous situation. In general men are loyally committed to the well-being of their wives, and besides the medical interventions (collecting medicinal herbs, having diagnostic dreams, officiating in ancestral rituals) that are expected from them as head of the family, they often spend enormous sums as sponsors of healing cults in which their wives are active.² A woman's rights to her activities in the economic and kinship domains are usually acknowledged without fuss, even if they entail her long absence and the resulting inconvenience for her husband. It is part of the accepted manners that a wife speaks freely with other men (in the family's own yard but also outside, for instance at parties and funerals, at the

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1977.

² For the differences between these types of cults, cf. van Binsbergen 1981a.

market or in working situations), jokes with them, and touches them in socially accepted parts of their bodies when such is appropriate during the conversation. A husband who would object to this would make himself ridiculous. Much further, bordering on sexual liberties, may go the recognised rights of a woman's male joking partners from the clan with which her own clan is traditionally paired; and the same would apply to her *mufwala* (cross-cousin), whose ideal marriage partner she is after all, even though the actual incidence of cross-cousin marriages is low. The recognition of male needs makes it normal that a woman, in cases of long periods of absence, looks for a temporary substitute for both her domestic and her sexual tasks: a 'sister' or a friend, that will not represent a threat to her relationship with her husband. Among the Nkoya the sexual and the domestic domains are obviously much less sharply distinguished than in North Atlantic culture. For both domains the woman can fall back on the normal domestic assistance that women lend each other in cases of menstruation or childbirth.

A Nkoya man is aware that his wife is rather well protected by a complex of rules of law and social standards, and that he can easily be divorced if she is dissatisfied with the treatment she gets from him. If she can come up with an actionable shortcoming or offence on the part of her husband and win a divorce on that basis (mainly: inability to supply her with clothes and housing; or complaints in the sexual sphere: having intercourse with her in her sleep, or suffering from a venereal disease, or from impotence), the husband loses the bride price he paid for her. Moreover, his reputation will have suffered such damage that it will be difficult for him to find a new wife in his immediate social surroundings. The man accepts rather resignedly the fact that his wife in many ways leads her own life. He does insist that she keeps to the public etiquette between man and wife as it was imprinted upon her during her initiation training: the man does know the outlines of these rules, although he misses insight into the details and their symbolic background. The vision of all marriage and sexuality as a cosmologically underlined *hieros gamos* is cherished far more by women than by men. Should the wife commit a serious offence against marital etiquette, then the husband is supposed to discuss this with his in-laws in the first place; they will call the wife and her mentrix to task and will, in case of continued complaints, have no other choice than to dissolve the marriage and return the bride price.

Being informed by a set of explicit, formally taught and sanctioned rules, the daily association between man and wife among the Nkoya can best be described as a rather distant mutual manifestation of respect (*shishemi*) – between people who see each other, not as unique lifelong partners predestined for each other, but rather as more or less coincidentally bound together and representing two fundamental social and cosmological categories: husband and wife. The respect shown to the mutual in-laws is an extension of this attitude. The marital bond is not a continual quest for authenticity, originality and the desire for individual psychological and sexual fulfilment, and it is far less dominated than in the North Atlantic region today by subconscious, eminently personal perceptions and motivations. The possibilities for

negotiation and intimidation on both sides are limited. The woman's viewpoints and norms are firmly set, especially since these are rooted in the initiation training that she shares with all other women. Although the couple are granted their domestic and sexual privacy, the outside world has the right and the duty to test the day-to-day state of affairs within the marriage against these criteria, and effectively does so. Mutual complaints about the spouses' functioning within the marriage may be expressed without reticence – that is as long as the 'domestic secrets' remain untouched. And if redress does not come about, divorce is simple. A high degree of erotic and psychological fulfilment is thus just as exceptional as sinking deeper and deeper, over the years, into a swamp of mutually reinforced transference from unresolved infantile conflicts in the subconscious – as so often marks marriages in North Atlantic society.

Judicial authorities (village moots as well as Local Courts of justice created by the government) contribute to this configuration. Their accommodating attitude towards women is clear from the relative ease with which women are granted a divorce – sometimes (but not always) even against the political interests of the village elders; or in the degree to which women find redress with the court when they feel sexually abused by men. Nkoya women may have to hide their orgasms, but their right to self-determination over their own body is judicially acknowledged. A woman may associate herself with a man, be married to him, sleep next to him; but as long as she has not given her explicit and specific permission for every single coitus, sexual contact with her is considered rape and if she presses charges she will meet much sympathy from the judges – as expressed by judicially enforced compensatory payments and easy conditions for divorce.

The fact that many Nkoya women, in spite of all this, find neither social nor sexual fulfilment in their marriages (nor do men for that matter, but that is another story), is not easily admitted in everyday life, but it is indicated in artistic, mythical and ritual expressions. Many traditional songs (recognisable by their archaic language) sing of murder between married couples. There are numerous rumours about women who, in the forest away from the village, breed a snake with a human head (*jirombo*), a terrible form of sorcery; the snake waylays and kills – on command of his mistress – the villagers whom she hates, but in the first place her husband and his other women if any. The interpretation of actual marital conflict in terms of such sorcery is rare. But what is absolutely common usage among the Nkoya is that every death of a man is followed by an inquest within his kin group, whereby his wife must be cleared of guilt from his death; only after acquittal (which is usually, but not always, the outcome of such inquests) can she be ritually cleansed (traditionally by intercourse with the deceased's brother) and return to her own relatives. In connection with this it is significant that Nkoya women have rejected a change of legislation recently enacted in Zambia, that contrary to customary law would finally enable women to inherit from their husbands. This new law makes Nkoya women uncomfortable, for any suggestion that a woman could materially benefit from the death of her husband must be avoided: from there to an accusation

of killing the husband for personal gain is considered only a small step. Of course, this state of affairs is in itself sufficient indication of the tensions that attend Nkoya marital relations.

In the hunt for lovers, Nkoya women are obviously each other's rivals. But even so it is matter of course that sisters and women friends freely exchange news about their sexual exploits. In order to enhance their own amorous fortune, they may ask each other for a drop of sperm from their lovers. They also agree to substitute for each other's sexual tasks in their absence.

Especially in the frequent case of several women sharing one husband, they are competitors as far as his sexual and material favours are concerned. The built-in tension that exists in such relationships, again, have a mythical expression: the relationship between co-wives is supposed to be rife with sorcery. Any misfortune happening to a co-wife is likely to trigger a chain reaction of sorcery rumours; divination sessions suggesting sorcery as a cause of misfortune; explicit sorcery accusations; and a dramatic crisis in which personal relations appear a deeply disrupted, after which trust can only be restored by ritual means. However, co-wives are habitually called each other's 'sisters', and in many cases the bond between them is closer and more positive than that between each of them and their husband.

Forms of female solidarity can thus have a focus in shared interests in the same man or men, but they are especially created by the initiation process and the coming-out ceremony. These bring about a strong potential identification between female agemates who were initiated in the same year – they are automatically best friends; also between the novice and her mentrix, who (once her strict role during the training period has found its culmination in the coming-out ceremony) remains her lifelong counsellor and *confidante*. Such mistrust and hate as often exists between younger and older Nkoya women, does not seem to originate during the initiation training, but mainly in daily productive activities, whereby young women have to work hard under the tyrannical directions of an older woman (a senior co-wife or a mother-in-law) who, in the younger women's opinion, is trying to dodge the heavy work herself.

The economic tasks of the Nkoya woman naturally have a great influence on her relationship with men. At a very young age she learns to provide for her own food and that of her children. The Nkoya consider themselves primarily as a people of hunters, and, for a man, agriculture is not a source of great honour. In the past, agriculture was primarily associated with slaves, tribute-paying commoner villages, and women. Nowadays this association is changing as men, more than women, have come to explore the possibilities of cash crop production.¹ Besides the hard labour (the partial clearing of the fields, and burning the fields in preparation of the next

¹ Here as elsewhere in this essay, reference is primarily made to the Nkoya under the chieftainship of Mwene Kahare — the group also known as Mashasha, in the eastern part of Kaoma district, Western Province, Zambia. In the central and western parts of that district, cash crop production and the attending changes in attitudes towards agriculture goes back to the late colonial period (the 1940s-1950s). Among the Mashasha, this change came a few decades later.

agricultural season) the men leave the cultivation of food crops to women. Until very recently this society had no, or hardly any, land shortage. Women who can mobilise the necessary manpower to clear an agricultural plot acquire personal ownership rights to that plot and its harvest. Also crop storage and crop processing towards digestible food is women's work. Women manage the daily cooking-fire (if they are not in a state of reproduction-related impurity) and fetch water. They know their way about in the forests and continuously supplement the diet by gathering wild fruits and roots, especially in the annual famine period around the beginning of the rainy season. All this is a great source of pride and security to them. Meat is a much coveted article, and a man who can supply meat (as a hunter, a butcher, or as earner of a cash income) is the ideal lover. While meat is thus a pre-eminently male contribution, it is only women who are able to produce a complete meal without intervention from the other gender – even though meat relish will then be lacking. This independent dealing with nature is of enormous economic importance, but goes much further. It forms the practical side of a complete world view that informs women's lives and renders their activities and experiences meaningful. The forests, the fields, the river, where (in shallow wells and sandy banks) drinking water is found, are all filled with mythical representations, symbols, prescriptions and prohibitions. The competent dealing with these elements, with food as the result, gives women's work a tranquil self-fulfilment that is fundamental to the identity of Nkoya women. They are at home in their world and never needed to squander their birthright to men for a plate of food. Whatever cultivation and trade of market crops exists is mostly in the hands of men. In western Zambia, markets are a recent phenomenon confined to larger settlements. In most rural settings, Nkoya women are hardly active in market trade. In the villages, the women have no other socially approved ways of making money than beer-brewing, practicing as healer or diviner, and being mentrix to a girl to be initiated. The need for money is, however, limited here. In the towns, where a considerable money income is necessary for survival and little opportunity for agriculture exists, the Nkoya woman becomes actually dependent on a man or men. Here, deprived of a productive basis, and with practically no access to paid jobs in the formal or informal sector, women are liable to economic blackmail on the part of men. Under such modern conditions, the built-in contradiction between symbolic submission and cosmological equality inherent in Nkoya gender relations may easily be tilted in the direction of consistent male domination.

In the rural areas women have greater chances of autonomy. Easy and frequent divorce; a considerable age difference between spouses, and therefore a considerable chance of becoming a widow; the relatively detached attitude of relatives regarding the marital and amorous life of a woman after her first marriage (that was usually arranged by the relatives); the relative economic independence of women in rural areas – all these factors contribute to the fact that Nkoya village women go through a typical career. After her first, arranged, marriage has shipwrecked a woman is usually free in her choice of a new partner, but in the course of years she will

gradually attempt to liberate herself from the burden of obligations as wife and daughter-in-law in general, and, relying on her capacities as a mistress and on the increasing contribution of her grown-up sons, she often succeeds in realising considerable independence. In the last analysis her freedom is threatened more by her fathers and brothers (for she cannot shed her obligations vis-à-vis these blood relatives) than by any actual or potential sexual partners.

In cases of concrete assault on her female identity, the Nkoya woman is conscious of her rights and can expect support from all sides. Realising that she has been taught in all details how to handle a man, a woman tends to take on a certain manipulative, often ironic, attitude towards men. In this respect the secret initiation training is of great support to her. She is aware of the fact that she knows a lot more about men, and can toy with them physically and psychologically much more subtly, than the other way around. To women it is often the men who appear as helpless and ridiculous. To counteract the unmistakable forms of symbolic subordination that uphold the ideal of male superiority, the Nkoya woman is taught a very strong female identity that offers her great security in practically all situations of her adult life. She can reliably fall back on this identity and can publicly appeal to it. Not the men, but the culture (*shihemuwa*, as mediated by elder women) sets the standards to which the woman directs her whole life. Objectively, the subordination may be there, but subjectively it is seldom felt as humiliating – firstly because the symbolism with which it is accompanied, is internalised, and is compensated by a great measure of independence and self-esteem; and secondly because contradictions of Nkoya gender arrangements also accord the woman a cosmological vision of complementary equality. In contrast to the male-centred status structure of many other societies, the Nkoya woman does not derive her status primarily from the power and riches, or the income, of a man with whom she is associated as wife, sister or daughter. Besides she grows up in the awareness that her grandmothers and great-grandmothers, as princesses and queens of the pre-colonial Nkoya states were peers or even superiors of men even in political aspects – and the loss of that political status has, in the course of the past hundred years, to a certain degree, been compensated for by the emergence of healing cults dominated by women, in which much of the old royal cult has been absorbed and transformed.¹

A Nkoya woman does not owe her value to a man, and a man cannot really deprive her of that value. She is not defenceless against men. The female identity that she possesses is so strong that men do not form a direct threat to it. She knows she owns at least half of the world. Hence her ability to reconcile to, and even rejoice in, symbolic forms of subordination, that for Western women (with an identity that was – until recently – much more male-derived, and therefore revocable and liable to destruction by men) would be unbearable.

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1992b.

3.5. The female puberty rite as women's self-realisation

Of all this the coming-out ceremony, the glorious public presentation of one new woman according to the standards of Nkoya culture, is the most complete expression. This is the moment when a woman is permitted to present herself to the community and to confront it, with her recently acquired skills and grace. The coming-out ceremony is the celebration of an individual, who may thus take pride in her own unique value *as a woman*. It is not primarily the celebration of a group or of the community as a whole: the group shares the celebration, creates the conditions for it, ensures its persistence as a society (in such crucial aspects as the succession of generations, and the arrangement of gender relations) via this celebration – but the individual is permitted to be the focus, the centre of attraction. The idea that African societies are just collectivist and nothing more, offering but an underdeveloped individuality to their members, is simply a myth, albeit a myth upheld by many African intellectuals including philosophers (but not by such African philosophers as Hountondji, Gyekye, and Wiredu).¹ Numerous are the instances in Nkoya society when men or women assert their individual aspirations and identities: pick a quarrel, press charges, accuse others of witchcraft, engage personally in anti-social sorcery, break away from an existing village in order to create one of their own, inherit the name of a deceased relative, etc.; and the girl's coming-out ceremony is one of these instances. The fact that in the case of initiation the individual is yet a very young woman, at the beginning of a career in which she will have to prove herself as woman and mother and in which she risks to fail in many aspects, makes the occasion even more moving. Precisely this acknowledgment of the own individual value of the girl and the potential that she carries within her, attenuates to a considerable extent, even renders somewhat irrelevant, the subordinate position she holds as a woman and as a teenager.

In this respect it is of great importance that girls are not initiated group-wise (for example per age group, per clan, or per village), but separately. Only in exceptional cases do two girls of the same village have their coming-out ceremony together. Also the moment of initiation emphasises individuality. It is not determined by any impersonal cycle of years (such as the succession of male age classes in many cultures of West and East Africa, with steady cycles up to several decades), but exclusively by the physical maturing of the girl: every coming-out ceremony takes place in the first dry season (April to July) after the girl in question has begun to menstruate and her breasts have taken on fairly adult shape. The second, herself being before menarche and with a real child's figure, emphasises contrastively the individual bodily development of the *kankanga*.

Anthropology has often dealt with kinship rituals or state rituals in which the social and political order as a whole is supposed to be expressed and glorified. The coming-out dance of the Nkoya girl is however more a ritual of individuality (as

¹ Wiredu & Gyekye 1992; Hountondji 1996.

embodiment of a cosmological category: that of woman) than it is one of community. This applies not only to the coming-out ceremony; within Nkoya culture there are other, comparable ceremonies in which one individual is celebrated in a special way – even if partly as a realisation and culmination of group interests. Thus in healing cults scores of bystanders witness how one patient is brought to ecstatic acceptance of the special bond with a spirit whose presence (as manifested by the disease) is thus publicly acknowledged for the first time; in this case the explicit reference to social groups who determine the non-ritual life is even nearly absent – the cultic group does not coincide with everyday kinship or residential groups.¹ In name-inheritance rituals an even larger audience witnesses how the village elders appoint one member of the village community to be the unique heir of one recently deceased, whose reincarnation thus confirms the integrity of the village; for the village, as a historic entity, possesses and transmits to later generations a limited number of set names and historic noble titles on which its identity depends. Succession to a position as village headman, chief or cult leader are special applications of the pattern that informs the name inheritance ritual. Healing cults are based on the same pattern, and their structure may be summarised as follows:

- (1) diagnosis through music, singing and dance;
- (2) identification of the possessing spirit;
- (3) worship of that spirit;
- (4) initiation into the group of adepts of that spirit.

The coming-out ceremony is also a specific application of this pattern. For the uninitiated *kankanga* is considered to be the carrier of, or to be possessed by, the harmful blood spirit Kanga. Another special case is the glorification of a hunter after he has killed an elephant. Also in this ceremony the focus is on the individual hunter's greatness – albeit that he is also considered the incarnation of past great hunters of the kin group. The most elaborate and important ritual of individuality is the funerary festival where hundreds of people from urban and rural areas gather for ten days in order to make up the balance-sheet of the deceased's human life – also literally, through extemporised mourning songs summarising the biography of the deceased.

In classic anthropology there is the inveterate stereotypical image of the African as one with, and submerged in, his or her social group, as carrier of a status acquired by birth rather than personal effort, and as slavishly subjected to standards and rules that barely foster the development of an explicit individuality. In the light of this image these rituals of individual glorification are unexpected. At the same time they readily invite the personal projections of a member of our Western culture – a culture in which assertion of individuality has been of such central value that one of its central archetypes was to be found in the character of Prometheus: the demiurge

¹ Cf. van Binsbergen 1981a.

who, to his own destruction, defied the gods, procured fire for the benefit of humans, and thus created the condition for culture.

On second thoughts, more seems to be involved here than a simple parallelism in thought scheme between the celebration of individualism in the Nkoya (Bantu-speaking, i.e. Niger-Congo-speaking) context, and the Prometheus figure in the Greek (Indo-European, ultimately Nostratic speaking) context. Such a celebration accords with what Jung has identified as the archetype of the young male hero (at the same time son and lover of the Mother). Jung's archetypes¹ are often presented as timeless and universal, but in some of his statements they are said to enshrine, not the history of the whole of mankind, but of a particular family, ethnic cluster, nation, language family etc. The above description of the young hero matches precisely the symbolic value of the leopard, *not* in Niger-Congo speaking Africa today, but in an Upper Palaeolithic substrate distributed over much of the Old World.² If this is an acceptable line of argument (its contentious methodological underpinning cannot be detailed here), then what triggers the Western anthropologist's emotions in contemplation of the Nkoya girl's coming-out ceremony also amounts, at least at one possible level of analysis, to the resonances of a historically shared common idiom articulating an existential tension that is intergenerational and inter-gender at the same time. This idiom would then be amazingly widespread yet historically confined and far from a universal component of the human condition. Nearly a century ago already, Frobenius³ implicitly hinted at this, when he saw the widespread and fundamental South Central African puberty rites as one aspect (along with the kingship, the sexual independence of female royalty, etc.) of what he identified as the South Erythraean culture complex, to which he also reckoned Ancient Mesopotamia to belong. Although his crude diffusionism lacked the theoretical, empirical and methodological means to substantiate his views to the satisfaction of modern scholarship, there is something of lasting value in this insight.

3.6. Male anthropologist : female puberty rite = North Atlantic ethnography : African societies

Women's affairs are my affairs too, for I am a son, brother, friend, colleague, student, teacher, lover, husband and father of a woman or of women. While writing this text I am continuously thinking of the women in my life and I catch myself hoping to redeem myself in their eyes.

There is a meaningful parallel between, on the one hand, my relation as a man with these women, and, on the other, my relation as an anthropologist with the culture that I study. As an anthropologist there is the confusing awareness that one originates from a certain culture (compare: woman), has a kin relation with it, and

¹ Jung 1974b, 1987.

² Van Binsbergen, forthcoming (e).

³ Frobenius 1931.

(based on a combination of positive and negative experiences with one's own culture) can be fascinated, tempted, cherished, confirmed in one's value, and also rejected, by another culture. On second thoughts, ever since my first period of fieldwork my relation to whatever culture I set out to study has been a form of *scientific eroticism*: the aesthetics of 'the Other' brings about a longing that both strengthens the researcher's own identity, and makes a profoundly painful yet equally gratifying delightful assault on it. The researcher goes back and forth between attitudes and forms of behaviour from which he explicitly takes his distance (a distance best brought out by the typical image of the fieldworker clutching his notebook and pen, and, as an observer, continually rendering account of what is happening around him, and to him) – and, on the other hand, attitudes and forms of behaviour in which he gives up that distance and is absorbed by the initially alien social field that extends before him – speaks, dances, sings, eats, makes offerings and so on, as if he hopes to stay there for the rest of his life. It is something one can cultivate, as I did in my fieldwork in Tunisia (mainly 1968) and particularly in Zambia (from the early 1970s onward); subsequent research, among the Manjaks of Guinea-Bissau (1983), suggest however that, as a researcher, one can also adopt a more professional attitude, by which that longing is kept in check, even dropped.¹ More important in this connection is the fact that here, under the guise of scientific research, an almost ritual relationship with the hosts and their culture is being

¹ At least, this is how it appeared when I wrote this piece, in the mid-1980s, before I had extended my field research to Botswana. Later I realised that during the Manjak fieldwork I made an essential step by submitting wholeheartedly to local therapeutic ritual. It was, incidentally, my first experience of fieldwork where I attained virtually total immersion in the sense of not having my own household, and not using an interpreter or assistant except in the first few weeks. The professional distance in my Manjak fieldwork was only apparent, and I was already preparing for the totally unprofessional transgression of 'becoming a *sangoma*' in Botswana. See Part III. Yet, as that Part III helps to bring out, the libidinisation of relations of North–South knowledge production, however much the ultimate consequence of the classic anthropological conception of fieldwork, hinges on two further contradictions. In the first place, on an almost obscene inability to resolve the contradiction (absolutely commonplace in everyday life) between intimacy and instrumentality. But secondly and more importantly, there is no way in which the objectifying gaze of the fieldworker can be humanised without giving up the stance of hegemonic appropriation, of which eroticisation appears to be merely an aestheticised and individualised variant. Two obvious ways out of this aporia are:

- trading anthropology for intercultural philosophy, where fieldwork does not exist as a professional ideal of knowledge production, or
- participatory research in which the researcher's objectifying gaze is turned into a real communicative intercultural encounter, that leaves the researched a decisive say in defining and controlling the research findings and their publication, and ensures that not, under the pretext of scientific research, a private infantile conflict is being acted out – or at least not more so than in any human interaction.

In both strategies the problem of the researcher's boundary maintenance and boundary crossing takes a fundamentally different form from that presented in the main text here. Effectively this means that the longing which this chapter still presents as an autonomous emotion of eminent validity and value, is exposed as a pathological lack of boundaries, as a falling short in personal and professional hygiene by failure to respect not only the self but also the Other. In this respect the present chapter closes in a dead-end from which it took me over a decade to extricate myself by drastic means, among which 'becoming a *sangoma*' was a decisive step but not the definitive step it appeared to be at first.

enacted: a relationship aiming at both boundary definition and boundary transgression (of self-definition and loss of self) – a relationship that is eminently characteristic of the situation of the participant fieldworker, but that finds its archetypes in widespread human spiritual projects such as eroticism and mysticism.

Anthropology is the intellectual eroticism that exists between our own native culture and the other one that we are studying. In the game that I play as an anthropologist in the field, it is of eminent importance that I incorporate, internalise, that which is other, can imitate it to a certain degree in my bodily stances, behaviour and speech, yet am not absorbed by it. If I am too much afraid of crossing boundaries, nothing will come of my participation and I might just as well have limited myself to the mechanical and blind collection of observational data, without knowledge of language, culture, institutions, collective representations and emotions among the research population; then my fieldwork will not constitute an intercultural encounter. On the other hand, if I were to cross the boundaries definitively and shake off my native culture, then I would lose my role as an anthropologist (whose temporary participation in the stranger culture is in the final analysis only justified by the fact that he is supposed to escape and return home, in order to report back to a scientific subgroup of his own society in terms derived from the latter society and largely meaningless to members of the society under study); should I stay (and the temptation to do so has often been overwhelming), then also that would be the end of my intercultural encounter. I would become like the many other strangers who, in the course of centuries, have been incorporated in African cultures (or whatever other cultures); or, for that matter, have left one African culture for another African or non-African one.

Crucial here is the parallelism between the two situations of boundary definition and boundary transgression: that between cultures, and that between genders. The anthropologist does not (lest he ceases being an anthropologist) become a member of the culture under study, just as a man does not become a member of the group of women by whom, in all kinds of roles and capacities, he is usually surrounded in the course of his entire life. The two situations are not necessarily separate ones. The longing for nearness, for the lifting or even denial of boundaries, that is engendered by one situation, can communicate itself to the other, and either strengthen or dissolve such passion as is generated there.

The eroticism that I am speaking of here, is something very different from sexuality, although it may lead to it. When I, as a 21-year-old, was doing my first fieldwork in Tunisia, it simply did not enter my mind that the longing I had fallen prey to, by which I was torn to pieces (and which I – except at the end – felt mainly as confusion and frustration), was perhaps as much caused by what I had left behind me in Holland (I mainly missed my girlfriend, and the private seclusion of a personal space, a quiet room of my own for reading and writing) as by the new society in which I was finding my way. The thought that I could try to solve my longing through a love affair with a woman of Khumiriya was so taboo that it did not even enter my celibate dreams, as far as I can remember. My girlfriend had stayed behind

at home, and I was very much in love with her, and deeply impressed by her scientific accomplishments as an experimental physicist. She was to be my first wife, the mother of my eldest daughter, and our relationship was to last for sixteen years. The gender relationships in the Tunisian village (as far as I could get sight of then, through a haze of naïve juvenile purity on my part, imperfect language mastery and dependence on my interpreter) seemed to be so strictly standardised, and the sexuality therein so latent and suppressed,¹ that nothing suggested that I could try to translate the eroticism between cultures which was burning inside me, into the eroticism between persons, and attempt a solution in that way. I did research an aspect of Khumiri (north-west Tunisian) culture in which women played the leading role: the veneration of saints and shrines. In contrast to general stereotypes about anthropological research by men in an Islamic society, women were quantitatively and qualitatively my main informants. With one of these married women, under the kind and trusting eyes of her husband and relatives and in full observance of all the chaste codes of the local culture, such a brotherly understanding came to blossom that it became a matter of course that my wife and I named our daughter, who was born a few years later, after my first intercultural friend of the opposite gender.

That both fields of tension (man–woman; anthropologist–culture) were to be short-circuited was much more to be expected in a culture in South Central Africa, where sexuality is much more open, where all men, barring a few very close kinsmen, are potential lovers for all women, and where all men in the same age group strive to establish fleeting or more permanent brother-in-law bonds with each other via their many ‘sisters’. Here, as in North Africa, women’s topics dominated my fieldwork: healing cults in which women predominated as leaders, followers and patients; girls’ initiation; attitudes toward illness, especially young mothers’ attitudes about the diseases affecting their children; the political role of women in pre-colonial states. In a manner that was unthinkable in the publicly chaste North African culture, the unadorned human body, with full recognition of its several vital functions, was emphatically present in the context of Nkoya culture. That frankness also meant an absence of sexual repression, with the result that many situations and actions which (as an oblique response to present and past sexual repression) would be sexually charged in North Atlantic and North African cultural contexts, would be rather free from sexual connotations among the Nkoya. Men and women would touch in conversation, women would nurse their children, the doctor’s consultations of the native healers would be more or less public; one would retire when nature called but would offhandedly explain where one went and what one was going to do, etc. Here my knowledge of gender relationships could, in the biblical sense,² be derived from

¹ At least, that was my, possibly naïve, impression, also informed by general notions of male control over women, and women’s submissiveness and public aloofness, as part of what I took to be the culture of Islam. In 1970 my friend and colleague Jos van der Klei did fieldwork in a village some twenty kilometres to the south of Sidi Mhammad, and he claimed evidence of high rates of extramarital promiscuity on the part of both men and women; van der Klei 1971.

² Gen. 4: 1, etc.

the very intimacy it referred to. It is therefore that my own report on this subject among the Nkoya is partly obscured under the veil of 'domestic secrets' I myself drew around it. My reticence here is induced by Nkoya rules about intimate relationships, more than by professional codes of Western social researchers (according to which making love to, let alone loving, one's informants would be the most effective way of betraying one's scientific objectivity). At the same time my intercultural knowledge could be enriched because, once acknowledged and accepted in my role as researcher, I was occasionally let in on women's knowledge that they (at least, in my impression) would not dare to share with any man, not even a lover, from their own culture.

I have sketched a positive image of the identity of Nkoya women, and of initiation and the coming-out ceremony as the most important factors of that identity. I hope I have not betrayed my female informants' confidences. This piece was written as a result of attempting, in the course of many years, to cross boundaries – from Western anthropologist to Nkoya villager, kinsman, lover, husband; and of increasingly realising how complex and confusing these attempts at intercultural encounter inevitably had to be, how conducive to loss and destruction of self.

3.7. Boundary transgression and identity formation in ethnography

I think it has become possible now to expose the roots of my emotions about the Nkoya coming-out ceremony, whose investigation has been the line of this chapter's argument. These emotions do not revolve on the celebration of female subordination, and in this respect my enthusiasm for the female puberty rites seems, after all, above suspicion. They are primarily a celebration of boundary transgression and of acquisition of identity, and as such a dramatic and transparent metaphor of what occupies me most as a researcher and as a human being.

Witnessing the glorious boundary crossing of the *kankanga*, from child to woman, in a liberating manner coincides with my own longing for boundary crossing, from foreign researcher to fellow-Nkoya, and from man to woman; just like the *kankanga's* acquisition of an adult identity is an image of hope for someone who, as a researcher, risks his own identity, and as a lover also longs for loss of identity in the hope of gaining a higher union. In view of the powerful force of eroticism in my North Atlantic culture of origin, and in view of the low levels of repression in Nkoya culture, it stands to reason that the longing which exists between cultures, and of which intercultural knowledge production is an expression, came to focus on an attempt to penetrate into the sexual secrets of another culture, to internalise them. Admittedly, it is not unthinkable (although painstaking introspection tells me otherwise) that under this symbolism of sexual penetration and its projection onto faraway lands lies a typical imperialist and male-sexist aspiration to reduce the Other to an object, to appropriate and to overpower the Other – an additional reason why the boundary crossing had better not succeed after all.

Nevertheless the *kankanga* helps me, for one single moment, to step across the very shadow that she herself, as has been imprinted upon her, must not step on. As long as her dancing lasts, she seems to be dancing only for me; she sucks up all the longing of my fieldwork and love life, and she allays the impossibilities built into that longing. For eye-to-eye with her (and even if during her coming-out dance she does not and cannot acknowledge my gaze) I am no longer just a Western man, nor does she remain just a Nkoya girl. For an instant, the cosmic complementarity of the Nkoya world view is ours, even though the *hieros gamos* thus hinted at will never be consummated, not between us. The web of imagery and the promise of release and redemption are only of short duration, dramatic, moving, but (once her dance is over and the feasters scatter quickly, much the worse for lack of sleep and abundant use of liquor) the web is instantly torn and we are relentlessly referred back, she to her own primary identities as a woman and as Nkoya, I to my own primary identities as a man and as a Western researcher.

Anthropology is the science of what would happen if you should take the step into the other culture. Intercultural philosophy, as I was to discover long after the *kankanga*'s coming-out dance ceased to be the main focus of my intercultural longing, is the science of what that step would amount to, and why you should not take it.