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The Materiality of Relational Transformations: Propositions for renewed analyses of life-cycle rituals in Melanesia and Australia

Pascale Bonnemère

Aix Marseille Université, CNRS, EHESS, CREDO, Marseille, France

Abstract: This paper introduces this special issue and analyses Papua New Guinea and Australian initiation and death rituals as moments of relational transformations. Although the general argument is not completely new, it has often remained an undemonstrated statement. The paper hence focuses on the specific ways people make these changes effective and express them in their rituals. It is suggested that an invariant *modus operandi* is in play in which, for a relation to be transformed, its previous state must first be ritually enacted. Towards the end of the ritual, the new state of the relationship is itself publicly enacted through a manifestation of the form the relation takes after the ritual. The paper suggests that a relationship cannot be transformed in the absence of the persons concerned. The relational components need to be either directly present, such as in initiations, or mediated through objects, such as in death rituals.

Keywords: Initiations, Mortuary Rituals, Re-enactment, Repetition, Relational Transformations

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While Amazonia is considered a favoured area for theorising relations between humans and non-humans, and Africa for understanding lineage systems and sacred kingdoms, the Pacific has been seen as a privileged region for anthropological research on gender and personhood. Many ethnographic descriptions, analyses, and powerful theories have emerged from and for the area, that defend the idea of a ‘relational personhood’, which is, following the phrasing of Rachel Morgain and John Taylor, ‘mutually constituted, and transmuting over the life-cycle’ (2015, 1). In a not-so-distant past and in many places still today, the course of life is marked by rituals performed at various and specific moments: when boys and girls reach their teens, when they accomplish an important deed for the first time, when, for boys, their betrothed becomes fertile, when they become fathers, and at death.¹

The argument that life-cycle rituals affect relations is well-established for Melanesia. Most scholars versed in male initiations have stressed that becoming adult men entails the necessity of separation from the female world, thus requiring the transformation of the novices’ relationship with their mothers. Specialists in mortuary rituals underline that, by respecting taboos and organising large-scale exchanges, the living appease the spirits of the dead and recompose relationships, allowing life to go on.

However, more often than not, the statement that life-cycle rituals transform relations lacks a demonstration of the actual processes at stake. This observation prompted Sandra Revolon and myself to organise a workshop on the *specific ways* people in the region make these changes effective and express them in rituals. We had both collected detailed ethnographic information on *how* relational transformations take place; respectively, during mortuary rituals of the Owa in the south-east Solomon Islands, and male initiations among the Ankave of Papua New Guinea. We were thus able to document transformations affecting relations not only between persons (as in initiations) but also between persons and spirits (as in mortuary rituals). Our aim was to investigate what we called ‘the materiality of relational transformations’: who is involved, what are the gestures performed, what objects and substances are manipulated, and what is the order of ritual actions?

¹ Rituals performed for boys usually demand the engagement of more people and resources and are more complex and numerous than those for girls (Lutkehaus and Roscoe 1985, Telban 1998, 196-207, and Moisseff, this issue). It has also been reported that while the first are said to trigger reproductive maturity, the rituals performed on the occasion of first menstruation celebrate an event that has already occurred. Often, people say that girls spontaneously mature while boys need to be assisted by ritual means. The same reason is provided for places where female initiations are not organised.

The idea that life-cycle rituals transform relations was so common in anthropology that it was considered a given by the participants in the two workshops that preceded this publication. The first was held in Marseille in 2014, the second at the ESfO conference in 2015 in Brussels.² We sought to identify regularities in the ways relations are transformed during life-cycle rituals in different Australian and Melanesian locations, and to suggest a general schema for these transformations.

Apart from the main proposition shared by our colleagues (life-cycle rituals are moments of relational transformations), our perspective entailed several secondary hypotheses to be tested, as it were, in other contexts. We posit that a relationship cannot be transformed if the terms – the persons – that are party to it are not present, either directly, as in initiations, or mediated through objects (Revolon 2007, 64-65), as in mortuary rituals.³ Moreover, underlying the necessity of this presence is the idea that, for a relation to be transformed, its previous state must first be ritually enacted (Bonnemère 2014b). I added that in Melanesia the course of life was conceptualised as relational transformations organised in an ordered series. This implied viewing the rituals that mark out life as moments that cannot be analysed independently of each other. Although this apparently obvious statement was probably in the minds of earlier ethnographers, the different stages of a life-cycle ritual have not always been considered as a sequence of actions that are linked in an ordered and consistent way.

The hypotheses stem from the analysis I made of Ankave male rituals, grounded on observations of female and male activities during collective initiations in 1994, as well as on that of several rituals organised at the birth of a man's first child between 1998 and 2002.⁴ During collective initiations, while my co-ethnographer Pierre Lemonnier was in the forest accompanying men and boys, I spent the days with their mothers, for whom a large shelter had been built on the village outskirts. By undertaking a comparison of what was asked of them (in terms of behavioural constraints and food taboos) with what the boys had to do – or rather not to do – I was provided with the confirmation that collective initiations operated a transformation of the mother-son relationship. In addition, the *modus operandi* of this transformation was the enactment of, first, the mother-son relation as it was before the ritual, and secondly, at the end of the three-weeks seclusion period, of the form this relation had subsequently taken.⁵ In-between, the period of seclusion made the behaviours of both mother and son progressively divergent. This model does not vary and is repeated throughout the three initiation stages, which correspond to the successive relational transformations taking

² In the 2014 workshop, P. Bonnemère, F. Brunois, L. Coupaye, J. De Larcy Healy, J. Leach, D. Monnerie, S. Revolon, and B. Telban participated. In 2015, besides the convenors and the authors of this issue, the participants were S. Chave-Dartoen, L. Coupaye, S. Galliot, P. Lemonnier, D. Monnerie, M. Mosko, and A. Pickles.

³ Venbrux's article in this issue reveals another type of 'materialisation' we did not think of, namely a singer who speaks in place of the dead.

⁴ Since then, several such initiations have been organised, but I was not in the field at the time. Thus, Ankave initiation rituals are not obsolete, and Christianity, which is poorly established in their valley, has had no observable influence on them.

⁵ The question of making visible the outcome of an action in or on a person's body has been dealt with by several Melanesian specialists, in particular Marilyn Strathern (1988, 241) but also for example Eric Hirsch (2001, 244–245), and earlier Andrew Strathern (1975).

place between mother and son, brother and sister, and husband and wife (see Bonnemère 2014b, 2015). Another and methodological conclusion was that male rituals should be studied as part of a series, each stage being linked to the preceding one not only through chronology, but also because each takes up exactly where the preceding ended, reproducing the very gesture that terminated it.

This analysis of Ankave initiations differed from what had previously been written on male rituals in the same cultural and linguistic set of groups (the Anga), where they mostly have been interpreted as an institution for reproducing and maintaining male domination (Godelier 1986, Herdt 1987).⁶ The main shortcoming of these analyses was that they did not pay attention to the deeds of the whole set of participants and forgot the women altogether.⁷ In general, past analyses tended to take into account gender relations independently of other kinds of relations that infused them. Maleness and femaleness were considered in essentialist terms as attributes that could suffice to characterise individuals. Yet, in small populations, kinship relations are intrinsically linked to gender. More generally, people are obviously not only gendered. They have a status, they are related to others, they perform actions, etc., all of which are ‘characteristics’ that cannot be excluded when conceptualising the way people apprehend others and relations in life. The Ankave male rituals emphasise this multitude. Moreover, the fact that women participate in them counters a vision (for example G. Herdt 1987, 97 for the Sambia-Anga) of the social world as made up of two separate spheres, male and female.

It is undeniable that attempts have been made to go beyond the classical analyses of male initiations (for example Strathern 1988) or to point to the potentially androcentric perspective on male–female relations. However, although many women anthropologists went to the field in the hope of counterbalancing existing descriptions of male–female relations and gender symbolism, none worked in a society where male initiations were still performed.⁸

My analysis of Ankave male rituals is in accord with Strathern’s idea that relations are of prime importance in explaining Melanesian views of the person, but develops in a different direction from her view that persons are constituted of relations. I would rather say that relations are internal in the sense that bodily substances are constituted by –or stem from– persons to whom individuals are related, and external because they are embodied by other

⁶ The Angans, whose number is around 100 000, are divided into some fifty local groups speaking twelve different languages. According to studies by linguists, geneticists and anthropologists, they have a common origin, which could go back as far as 10,000 years BP. As demographic pressure and endemic warfare drove them from one valley to the next, their languages, social organisations, systems of representations, and modes of using the environment evolved in different ways. Several of these groups have been the subject of long-term anthropological fieldwork: Kapau (Blackwood), Baruya (Godelier), Sambia (Herdt), Iqwaye-Yagwoia (Mimica), Ankave (Lemonnier and myself), and Kamea (Bamford).

⁷ The reasons for not having looked at women’s activities during male initiations were linked to the assumptions of Western academic anthropologists, but not exclusively so, as feminist scholars tended to present it (for details on this topic, see Read 1982, 67–68 as well as Bonnemère 2004 and 2014a, 164).

⁸ Gewertz & Errington’s (1991) work is an exception but their observations of the place of women in male initiations did not really call into question previous analyses.

people than oneself, hence their necessary presence when their relations are to be transformed (see Bonnemère 2015, 201–212 for details).

Repetition, iteration, and similar processes

Repetition⁹ is indeed an essential operation for enacting the transformation of Ankave boys into men. The Ankave resort to it when they act on the boys' bodies, repeating actions that they consider best to epitomise what should happen and how¹⁰. They also use this *modus operandi* to bring about relational transformations. As already mentioned, for a relation to be transformed, its previous state must be first ritually enacted, and so repeated. This is done by asking both persons being related through the ritual (mothers and sons during the collective stages of initiations, and a man and his elder sister when his wife is pregnant with his first child) to act in order to manifest the nature of their former and then present relationship, demonstrating in what way it has changed. The relationship between mothers and sons is considered to be symbiotic, a state that is expressed and rendered visible during the ritual by making the two parties respect the same food taboos and behave similarly in many ways. This repeats the condition of pregnancy, a period when what the mother did had an effect on the foetus. Ankave women say that they need to be present when their sons are initiated because they carried them in their wombs. A ritual expert told them: 'You are one body with your sons.' Repetition is therefore a requisite for the transformation to occur. At the end of their seclusion, the new state of the relationship is itself publicly enacted when the boys give small game to their mothers and receive specially prepared food in return. These gestures express the separation from each other, manifesting the form the relation takes after –and because of –the ritual.

When children, Ankave siblings are considered very close to each other. This proximity stems from having dwelled in the same womb and been fed with the same maternal milk. When a boy is initiated, his elder sister is not secluded in a collective house as their mother is, but nonetheless, she has to respect the same food taboos as he does (on eating red pandanus juice, a vegetal substitute for blood, and on chewing betel). An elder sister plays her most important role when her brother's first child is to be born. Again, both respect the same taboos and wear the same piece of clothing: a bark cape on top of their head. It is so unusual for a man to wear a bark cape on his head that it is an explicit sign that he is expecting his first child and is in a state of taboo (see Bonnemère 2015, 26). He cannot remove the cape until his wife has given birth. The intended outcomes of the ritual, which involve establishing a new parental couple, necessitate the transformation of the relations a man has with his two

⁹ Repetition does not here refer to 'repetitive forms of behaviour that are carried out on socially prescribed occasions' on which most specialists base their definition of ritual (Hicks 2010, xvii), but about the re-enactment of a relational configuration which allows its transformation. It is thus a process rather than actions or simple behaviours, which links together different stages of the ritual, illustrating the ordered series that it constitutes.

¹⁰ For example, the smearing of red pandanus seeds and red clay on the head and shoulders of the boys when they emerge from a corridor of branches is no doubt an enactment of their birth, and the smearing of yellow clay by women when the boys come back from the forest, fully adorned, clearly re-enacts their mother's anointment of their bodies with the same clay when they were born.

closest female kin: his mother and his sister.

I have shown elsewhere that, in having children, a sister allows her brother to become a maternal uncle, which is a highly valued position endowed with a capacity to act for others that women are considered to have naturally (Bonnemère 2014b, 2015). The sole fact of siblings becoming parents is not enough to transform their relationship, though, and ritualised actions have to be performed for the brother to become a maternal uncle.¹¹ The nature of their link is first expressed during the collective initiations, and repeated during his wife's pregnancy. Repetition is the condition for the relationship to be changed. In this case, the transformation is a process that, although starting when the brother becomes a father, is fully realised when his sister becomes a mother herself.

Repetition¹² is thus the means to which Ankave people resort in order to enact relational transformations and render them effective. This implies the presence of both terms that compose the relation and, methodologically, makes it necessary to take into account the entire sequence of rituals even though they are separated from each other by years.

Interestingly, a similar process occurs among the Tiwi of Australia (on whose mortuary rituals Eric Venbrux offers a contribution in the present issue). The early anthropologist Baldwin Spencer witnessed rites of passage for boys and girls on Melville Island at the beginning of the twentieth century. They were organised in seven phases that took place over several years. The main phase concerned boys aged 15. At the end of the ceremony, a wooden curved band with a cord attached to both ends –forming a collar of sorts– was attached around the neck of the initiate. The same was done to his mother and it was said that if one of these two objects fell off, the person who wore its double would get sick.¹³ Venbrux (2000, 96) argues that the wearing of such a collar by both the boy and his mother represents 'the past status of their relationship' and that the rite was necessary for him to detach himself from the maternal world. In the terms of this introductory paper, we can state that the definitive removal of the collar materialises the transformation of their relationship, which first entailed re-enacting its previous state.

Writing on the then so-called Murngin (now Yolngu, see De Largy Healy, this issue) of northern Australia, Warner (1958[1937]) provides information pointing in the same direction. Small children, he writes, 'are carried astride their mothers' necks and put their hands around the mother's forehead', adding in brackets: 'This method is used in the initiation ritual when the little boys are carried by the men, to indicate the age status of the neophytes' (1958[1937], 126). The boys to be initiated are thus treated as when they were small, thus repeating a previous state before transforming it.

¹¹ We would have to add 'and for the sister to be a paternal aunt', but this is not the case since her role is much less prominent than that of the maternal uncle. This asymmetry is for the most part linked to the role of the maternal kin in the child's well-being. Relations with the maternal kin are prevalent throughout life and even beyond (see Bonnemère 2015, 169–173 and Lemonnier 2006, 324–354).

¹² For a discussion of iteration and repetition (although not in ritual contexts), see M. Strathern 2013, 193–198).

¹³ I am grateful to Eric Venbrux who pointed this ethnographic example out to me and to Helena Meininger who translated the short article in Dutch that Venbrux wrote about this collar (2000, 94).

Reiteration also occurs in mortuary rituals. Robert Hertz's famous 1907 essay speaks of death as a 'true initiation' (Hertz 1960[1907], 73). For him, death is 'a step exactly analogous to that by which a youth is withdrawn from the company of women and introduced into that of adult men' (1960, 80). And there is another repetition during the second funerals performed by people who live in the island of Mabuiag in the Torres Strait, since 'in order to become a legitimate and authentic inhabitant of the land of the dead he must first be killed' (1960, 73). People disguised as spirits in the presence of the deceased's kin and close friends act out this 'killing' and 'strike the new soul on the head with a mass of stones' (1960, 73), thus separating the deceased from the world of the living. We see here again a re-enactment—that of the death—as a prerequisite for the deceased to be definitively integrated in the world of the spirits.

Another example is the mortuary rituals of the Owa of the eastern Solomon Islands studied by Sandra Revolon. These rituals are organised in two stages separated by several years. The first stage is the funerals (*manunga*) which include the burial, the mourning period and two ceremonial meals made up of pork meat and a pudding of yam and taro mixed with *Canarium* nuts. The first meal takes place 10 days after the burial, the other 100 days later. The second stage of the mortuary rituals (*farunga*) is performed several years after the death and consists of two moments, one when stones or cement are put on the grave, the other, the end-of-mourning ceremony (*muri ni muni*), when many aspects of the *manunga* are replicated. For example, the pigs to be eaten are tied to an edifice erected to host a large ceremonial bowl (*apira ni farunga*) that represents the deceased (see below), as other pigs had been to the house where the deceased had been mourned years before (Revolon 2007, 62).

Owa *farunga* re-create the previous situation when the death had just occurred and the deceased were still close to the living. This re-enactment is a condition for the mourning period to end and for the dead to become spiritual beings. Hence, for the dead to be transformed into spirits and for the survivors to be able to change their relationships to them, the dead are made present through objects. This re-enactment of a previous situation to be able to change it, in the presence of objects that represent the dead, is comparable to that which I have drawn from the analysis of Ankave male initiations. In both cases, the terms of the relations to be changed need to be present, either in person when possible, or represented through objects if not. Here, as elsewhere in Melanesia, if we are to follow Strathern, 'it is not what the object "says" or "expresses" that is the key issue (...), but what it does; what forms of action and social relations the object elicits' (Hirsch 1995, 61).

Specific modes of relational materiality in mortuary rituals

The Owa situation is also relevant for the part of our analysis that focuses on "matters of relations". It illustrates how objects materialise the presence of the dead depending on how

death occurred.¹⁴ ‘Ordinary’ deaths are distinguished from ‘violent’ ones (murder or suicide). The relations to the dead and the mortuary procedures and objects involved are accordingly partly different.

In the case of violent death, the blood spilled generates spirits of blood that contain *mena*, a quality that resides within all spirits of the dead (*ataro*). This *mena* –a local version of the concept of *mana*, defined as a ‘power of influence over people and objects’ (Revolon 2007, 60)– is located in the skull, linked to the life force, *figona*, present in the head (Revolon 2007, 60). The *mena* of the blood spirits is very powerful, and a male descendant or a brother of a man or woman who has died a violent death may want to appropriate it and honour him or her with a cult held every year. The appropriation of the *mena* consists in ‘removing the skull from the dead body some time after the burial and, for a man only, placing it in an ossuary, or immediately beginning the cult on his or her grave or on the spot where the blood was spilt’ (Revolon 2007, 63). Then a meal consisting of a pudding of taro and *Canarium* nuts, and pork meat is prepared before calling the name of the deceased, telling him that the food is for him, and finally eating part of it. This has the effect of introducing ‘the power of the *ataro* in his body in a permanent way, that is, until he himself dies and one of his descendants decides to appropriate the *mena* in turn’ (Revolon 2007, 64). Subsequently, a carver is asked to make a bowl, called *apira ni mwane* (‘men’s bowl’), similar in form to the *apira ni farunga* (‘large ceremonial bowls’, see below) but much smaller. This bowl is used at least once a year during the ceremony for the deceased whose *mena* has been appropriated. It consists of a meal of *Canarium*-nut pudding and pork, which men possessing the *mena* of *ataro* in their own bodies eat for the dead, ‘thereby renewing the powers inside them’ (Revolon 2007, 64).

The Owa thus make their dead appear to them differently depending on how death occurred. During the end-of-mourning ceremony for an ‘ordinary death’, the large ceremonial bowl (*apira ni farunga*) –carved specially for him or her and filled with food– re-presents the deceased. As Revolon writes, ‘everything happens as though the big house was not filled with food bowls but with the deceased themselves, who partake of the last meal offered to them. To some extent (...) the *apira* bowls play the role of the dead’ (2007, 64-65). When the ceremony is over, the building is destroyed and the *apira ni farunga* is left aside and forgotten or, as is often the case today, sold to art dealers (Revolon 2007, 62, 65). From this moment on, the ordinary dead are no longer interacting with the living ‘and each is free to have his own existence in his own world’ (Revolon 2007, 65).

As seen, people who died violently are also made present through food bowls, but these are smaller in size and kept by the man who decided to appropriate his or her *mena* and so to devote an annual cult to them (Revolon 2007, 65). The process of appropriating this *mena* has two consequences on the relations between the living and these violently deceased. At the individual level, a part of them comes to be located in their kinsmen who chose to honour

¹⁴ As Keane wrote in 2009, ‘it is because things in their very materiality exceed any particular concepts, times, and projects, that they persist across different concepts, times, and projects’. Here, the same bowls –which only differ in size– stand for different kinds of dead persons, thus extending their use as it were inside the concept of death, but also exceeding their single referent.

them through a regularly held cult. During such cults, the deceased are fed and worshipped, thus engendering a continuing ‘ambiguous influence, potentially positive or dangerous’ (Revolon 2007, 65). At the collective level, these particular dead are not completely banished from the world of the living. Consequently, and as Revolon notes, ‘although they share the same designs, the two types of bowls can therefore be seen as the materialisation of two different types of relationships between the living and the dead’ (2007, 65).

Understanding the process of materialising the deceased and manifesting their relations to the living in real terms thus needs to take a number of factors into account. Who are the deceased, how did they die, what moment of the mortuary rituals is concerned? The question of the relationship between persons and objects, particularly relevant for analysing mortuary rituals, has stimulated an abundant literature. Anna-Karina Hermkens’ recent article on Maisin tapa cloth, for example, is useful for our discussion because it considers tapa as personified objects not only ‘in that they share similar substances with people, but that they can “act” like people’ (2015, 20). Because, ‘like persons, Maisin tapa is composed of gendered and ancestral substances (...), when applied or removed from the body, [it] effectively conveys or embodies new social identities’ (2015, 19). When Maisin girls menstruated for the first time, they received a facial tattoo and were dressed with a red loincloth, which marked their new status as fertile and marriageable women (2015, 16).¹⁵ Upon death, ‘the body of the widow (or widower) is ritually undressed, neglected (the hair is not combed and trimmed), isolated from the rest of society’ (2015, 18). As the author makes clear, ‘during ceremonies such as mourning rituals (...), clothing and removal of clothing change the body, integrate and re-socialise it into various social settings, and mediate relations among social actors and among the living and the dead’ (2015, 18). Hermkens’ analysis offers a means of better understanding the role of objects in life-cycle rituals in general.¹⁶

The Special Issue

The rituals described and analysed in this issue allow for a dialogue in the realm of relational transformations, including also the examples presented above. Three contributions are concerned with Aboriginal Australia, one focussing exclusively on mortuary practices and the other two analysing mortuary ceremonies in conjunction with initiations. One paper deals with initiation and marriage in Papua New Guinea, and the last contribution discusses exchanges acknowledging the place of fathers in a matrilineal society of the Solomon Islands.

Jessica De Largy Healy’s contribution is an analysis of initiation ceremonies and mortuary rituals as they are performed by the Yolngu of north-eastern Arnhem Land. The author interprets the paintings applied on boys’ bodies and on corpses (nowadays coffins) as materialising various sets of relations that are transformed through the rituals. These include

¹⁵ I use the past tense here since the last female initiations were performed in the late 1990s (Hermkens 2015, 16).

¹⁶ See also Lemonnier’s recent analysis of the objects used in male initiations that ‘allow important beings of the past to be present among the living’ (2012, 78).

those between the novice and the ancestors of his and related groups, and between himself and the members of his clan and other kin groups. In Aboriginal contexts, dealing with ancestral beings is not restricted to mortuary ceremonies, and the first initiation ritual, during which circumcision takes place, is the occasion to apply an ancestral clan painting on the boy's chest. The designs are clan-owned, and the colours used come from deposits linked to mythical stories of the group. Through these body paintings –which are ‘special kinds of relational artefacts’– and through sacred artefacts that materialise the presence of ancestral beings, the novice harnesses their spiritual power. The entire life-course may be understood as a process of accumulating the ancestral spiritual force that brings individuals progressively closer to the beings that embody this force, and ultimately transform them into ancestors. Initiation and mortuary rituals are thus part of an integrated process that progressively transfigures boys into men and men into ancestors.

The act (painting the body), the designs, the songs and dances that ‘instantiate the actions of particular ancestral beings across the lands of the participating clans’ (De Largy Healy, this issue) are similar at initiation and during the mortuary ritual performed for a particular individual. May we thus suggest that the situation is a re-enactment after death of what had been staged when the boy was initiated? Of course, the parallelism of the two ceremonies is a way of reinforcing both, as the author writes. But it might also indicate a process in which the mortuary ritual repeats the initiation of the now-dead person as a first step required for transforming his relations with the ancestors and becoming one of them. If this is the case, then there should be a ritual action that indicates the change of the relation. I suggest that the painting of the mortuary receptacle, ‘itself painted like the *wanjarr* [ancestral beings] and like the clan's sacred well’ (De Largy Healy, this issue), is the action that expresses the deceased's change of status. How to see the role and meaning of repetition in ritual contexts is a matter of interpretation, and De Largy Healy is clearly in the position to decide what interpretation best reflects the ethnography. Whatever the case in this particular matter, the article confirms elegantly the need to consider life-cycle rituals as an integrated sequence in order to understand their meaning.

Based on the ethnography collected by Spencer and Gillen at the turn of the 20th century on the Arrernte of central Australia, Marika Moisseeff's contribution is another illustration of the heuristic value of analysing initiation and mortuary rituals together. She argues that in these two cases, where the objectives are similar (to ‘render a son autonomous from his mother [and] emancipate a widow from her deceased husband’ (Moisseeff, this issue), the same procedures for enacting relational transformations are engaged.

As in New Guinea, the relation between a mother and her son has an aspect of a physical intimacy which is potentially harmful. To gain autonomy and engage in new intimate relations, particularly a conjugal one, he has to be ‘extracted’ from it. The process begins soon after birth when a boy is ritually assigned a baby girl who will become his mother-in-law –thus anticipating his future as a married man.¹⁷ It continues in several stages of his

¹⁷ Such an assignment does not imply he will be effectively married to this woman's daughter.

initiation –including circumcision and subincision– and ends when he is identified with his *tjurunga*, ‘a stone (or wooden) fragment of his country intimately linked with the spirit he incarnates’. This identification enables him to participate in rituals intended to promote the multiplication of his totemic species.

The same process of separation is enacted for women at widowhood. When a woman’s husband dies, she retires to a special camp, has to remain silent and coats her body with white clay. As Moisseeff explains, she is assimilated to her dead husband (to the point that she is herself contaminating when her husband’s corpse decays) and wears a string (‘chaplet’) of animal bones when he is supposed to have become a skeleton. She will be detached from him and able to remarry when, at the end of the mourning period and of the ceremony that follows, she destroys the bone chaplet and buries it in her husband’s grave.

Moisseeff sees the Arrernte life-course as ‘a succession of permutated couples’. For a man, the succession goes from (1) the mother–son pair to that formed by a man and his *tjurunga*, to (2) in between, the relation of a boy to his future mother-in-law, followed by (3) the conjugal couple. For a woman, there is no need to be separated from her mother to engage in a reproductive relationship. When her husband dies, the conjugal relationship, even though no longer present as such, becomes harmful because female bodies and corpses are less differentiated : both are characterised by their moisture. The mortuary ceremonies for widows play an equivalent role and are organised similarly to the initiations of boys. In both cases, the outcome is the acquisition of autonomy and the capacity to enter into a relation of intimacy that is potentially productive.

Eric Venbrux’s contribution presents the elaborate mortuary rituals of the Tiwi, who live in the Bathurst and Melville islands of northern Australia. His analysis argues that these ceremonies contribute to the construction of a ‘postself’, a concept originally coined by Shneidman, to which the author adds a social dimension. The Tiwi have ‘institutionalised the mechanisms for producing posthumous reputations’ (Venbrux, this issue). Death rituals create an image in the memory of the survivors that is in accordance with the dominant value of personal achievement in Tiwi culture, and ‘the size, quality and number of grave posts, for example, are an index of prestige, not only of those who organise the mortuary rites but also of the dead person’(Venbrux, this issue). Creating the deceased postself is a transformative and relational process that involves making the deceased present through an enactment of events that occurred in his life. Participants perform dances and songs referring to moments specific to the relations they had with him. The widow (or widower) evokes sexual intercourse by undressing and singing with the voice of the deceased.

The detailed description of the different rites that constitute death rituals helps us in thinking about the notion of presence in the mortuary rituals. While the Owa make their dead present through objects, the Tiwi mobilise kin who either make the dead speak or recall their relationship. The deceased’s life-course is remembered, with particular emphasis on the first years of his life, with his ‘grandparents’ and his ‘mothers’ and matrilineal ‘children’ acting in concert.

Venbrux's Tiwi ethnography reveals another way of making the dead present in that, similar to what has been observed in Ankave initiation rituals, people reiterate their relations, including, in Tiwi mortuary rituals, the part of the deceased. These processes support the idea that, for a relational transformation to be effected, both persons constituting the relation must be present.

The three contributions dealing with Aboriginal Australia reveal connections between initiations and mortuary rituals. Moisseeff considers them as analogues of each other, while De Lary Healy and Venbrux observe that initiations may be interwoven with death ceremonies. Their interpretations are similar in that they consider these rituals to be reinforcing each other. I may suggest that, in accord with the idea of life-course rituals being ordered in a chronological and logical series, these ritual operations are organised in such a way that a new phase starts by repeating or re-enacting the preceding one. Among the Ankave, as already explained, this is the prerequisite for a relational transformation to take place.

Arve Sørum takes us away from Australia and from mortuary rituals. His contribution focuses on the acts, gestures, dances, gifts, distributions of food, etc. that take place during male initiations and bride-capture (marriage) ceremonies among the Bedamini of Papua New Guinea. The ritual dramaturgy creates, emphasises, or gives a new content, to specific relations. At initiation, the giving of a palm spathe belt (*pulu*) by the father's brother to the novice permanently transforms their relation into one of mutual assistance. The wearing of a special necklace (*gisegisu*) given and tied by a woman classified as a 'mother' creates a close relationship between them. 'By tying a *gisegisu* around the neck of her initiand, the mother's brother's daughter takes the responsibilities of a true mother towards him, and he takes on the duties of a son towards her'. Co-initiates (*sama*) develop a marked relationship as well. This is the only one to be 'modelled on a genuine sharing on equal terms, replicating a personal friendship'. A special object (a bone-tipped arrow) is involved in the establishment of the relation.

At marriage, the relations established are not so much of support as they are of sharing. A special relationship (*gahia*) is defined between men (or women) who have married sisters (or brothers), which 'will replace any pre-existing relationship among the parties' and is extended to all men of different clans who have conjugal relations with women of the same clan. Bedamini people say: 'We are brothers because we marry the "same" women' (Sørum, this issue), meaning that affinal relations with the same group create siblingship. Sørum goes as far as to propose that 'a shared agnatic identity may thus be positively claimed by making co-marriage an essential part of being a kinsman or kinswoman'. Moreover, the children of people linked as *gahia* are in a *gawia* relationship between themselves, that is defined as 'a relation codified as matrilateral siblingship formulated in the idiom of "having one mother"'. It emerges through the fact of two (or more) persons being children of women of the same other clan. In opposition to *gahia*, the *gawia* relationship [has an] associated idiom of physically sharing an identical female substance' (Sørum, this issue).

These examples show that the main objective of Bedamini life-cycle rituals is to reconfigure, if not create, the relational network of any male person from initiation to marriage and beyond. The author writes that ‘his initiation signals an incipient transformation of the relational field into which he has been thrown, creating the seeds for a more personalised network’ (Sørum, this issue). By placing emphasis on the role of the different agents and in considering that they ‘have effects on the processes through which relations are given their form’, Sørum’s analysis follows our objective of looking at *how* relationships are transformed in the course of ritual.

Johanna Whiteley’s contribution also looks at the concrete ways through which relations are transformed in a ceremonial context. It is a presentation of a particular bereavement, and of how rituals transforming relations with fathers affect the position of in-married wives, children, and land. This discussion differs from the preceding Australian and Papua New Guinean examples in interesting ways. The West Gao people of island Melanesia follow a rule of matrilineal exogamy, and ‘land, as elsewhere in the Solomons, is the most highly valued resource’ (Whiteley, this issue). These two distinctive features make the *fangamu taego* ceremony a place where an apparent contradiction between ‘the interplay between relationships that are given and those that are constructed’ (Whiteley, this issue) is addressed, if not resolved. The paper details the material transactions that transform relationships, and the connection between the rituals that make sense of each one. It therefore offers a good sample for evaluating the validity of considering life-cycle rituals as an interdependent sequence and hopefully provide a basis for refining the hypotheses.

The *fangamu taego* ceremony comprises different and well-identified successive moments, made up of exchanges involving matrilineages around a man, his wife and their children. Unlike initiations, the West Gao ceremony does not involve ordeals or secrecy and is not centred on one person’s body and relations. It is made up primarily of food exchanges of different kinds, which illustrate the way a father publicly transfers to his children use rights on the land of his matrilineage. While these processes seem to be different from what are generally called life-cycle rituals, they nevertheless interestingly evince how very specific and explicit manipulations of everyday food items enact and effect relational transformations. These items are made to serve as specific and active elements pertaining to particular matrilineages. Their appearance and exchange make present kin relations as they are transformed.

Planning a *fangamu taego* is the decision of a married woman, together with her children, but it is a public ceremony for which food is brought in great quantities by members of her own matrilineal (*kokolo*) and that of her husband. First, reciprocal and equal exchanges are made between these two matrilineages. The contribution of each is distinguished through two piles of food placed symmetrically at the centre of the ceremonial ground. During the distribution, the pile constituted by the work of the woman’s matrilineage goes to the members of the man’s clan and vice versa. Later on, more items of food are given to the husband –and father–, among them the *malahu* pudding (an ‘ancestral food’), which Whiteley (this issue) describes as ‘the

source of the most significant relational transformation to occur during *fangamu taego*. The father will ‘answer’ these gifts with a public transfer to his children of use-rights on his matrilineage’s land. Of the various acts of recognition in that process of land-rights transfer, the communal consumption of the *malahu* pudding is the most powerful in that it produces relational effects. A land-dispute case illustrates: ‘[it] effects a bodily transformation that removes a person’s ability to dispute both kinds of land–person relationships in the future’ (Whiteley, this issue). These two kinds are, first, those obtained by being born in a matrilineage and, second, those transferred by a father during the *fangamu taego*.

This final contribution analyses an ethnographic situation that is different in many ways from the preceding ones: exchange ceremony vs life-cycle rituals; matrilinearity vs patrilinearity; land as the most highly valued resource; relational transformations to land that entails a change, for one generation, in the mutual relations two related groups have rather than relational transformations between categories of people. This being said, and as the author makes clear, ‘In using landscape to extend his relationships to his children, a West Gao father achieves what his body cannot’. Whiteley’s underlying concern thus bears on the central issue entailed in initiation, marriage, and mortuary rituals: how necessary relational transformations are put into operation at specific moments in life.

A concluding note

The life-cycle rituals described and analysed in this special issue are for the most part initiations and mortuary rituals. While the former are organised to transform the relations that bind the novices to their female kin, the latter disrupt existing relationships and create the conditions for the survivors to reorganise them. As De Lary Healy did in this issue, other scholars have established links between initiation rituals and death ceremonies for Aboriginal Australia. Interpreting initiation as a ‘symbolic death’, Glowczewski for example (1983), analyses the gift of female hair strings to maternal uncles that takes place at death together with the gift of male hair strings to other men via their sisters. She concludes that, ‘the Warlpiri, Kaitish, and Aranda examples show complex symbolisms of value circulation at work, as if life reproduction and social reproduction were cycled by this image of the detached –hair cut as an analogy with the separation of the dead from the living group– to be attached once again to recirculate in an exchange that allows the forming of alliances’ (1983, 238). Sometimes, as seen, the reason for parallelism between initiation and death is not based on this idea of detachment but on the hypothesis that these ritualised moments are linked by both a temporal sequence and a structural rationale.

A recent chapter by Alexis von Poser constitutes a rare case where a systematic comparison of actual actions in male initiations and mortuary rites (both as they were performed in the past and today) is made for Papua New Guinea. His analysis would tend to indicate that identical procedures are performed at both occasions. He shows how both rituals have the same structure: the similarity between the number and organisation of the different events lead him to write that ‘the two cycles seem to mirror each other’ (2016, 166). Moreover, the last phase of initiation, which ends with a parade of the young men through the village and a

presentation of their decorated bodies, is symmetrical to the beginning of the death rites, where the corpse is decorated in the same way (2016, 167). This recalls where I began this introductory piece. In Ankave male rituals, each stage is ‘linked to the preceding one not only through chronology but also because each stage takes up exactly where the preceding ended, reproducing the same gesture that terminated it’. This parallelism alone, which has temporal as well as structural dimensions, justifies both dealing in more depth with other Aboriginal and Melanesian examples of life-cycle ceremonial activities as well as extending the comparison to other parts of the world.

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