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Setting Free the Son, Setting Free the Widow: Relational Transformation in Arrernte Life-Cycle Rituals (Central Australia)

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Abstract: In Australian Aboriginal society, personal identity is an evolving process whose successive mutations derive from a person's capacity to enter into new relationships. Both initiation rites and funerary practices act to mediate such relational transformations. Drawing on Spencer and Gillen's material on the Arrernte, this paper establishes a parallel between the procedures put into effect to render a son autonomous from his mother in the course of male initiation, and those undertaken to emancipate a widow from her deceased husband. Both ritual operations introduce a relational distancing within a totality. This totality is composed of two individuals whose antecedent close physical intimacy could thwart these persons' ability to become an autonomous agent. The rituals make the person capable of entering a new intimate relationship: marriage in the case of a son, and remarriage in the case of a widow.

Both procedures entail the intervention of ritual objects closely connected to an individual's personal identity: on the one hand, the churinga a man is joined with at the end of his

initiation and which allows him to exercise responsibilities in fertility rites, and on the other hand, the decaying, contaminating corpse a husband leaves behind upon his death.

Keywords: Male initiation; Widowhood; Hair; Arrernte; Intimacy

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This article examines the relational modalities and material objects mediating the transformation of relationships in the course of life-cycle rituals of the Arrernte of the central Australian desert. I will be drawing on data collected by Spencer and Gillen (1927) at the turn of the 20th century, an overall analysis of which is provided elsewhere (Moisseeff 1995, 2002); the ethnographic present refers to this material¹. As we will see, it is highly significant that these relational transformations typically intervene around episodes characterized by dramatic bodily change (birth, puberty, death). Focussing on the bodily entailments of the relational identities of those concerned, I draw a parallel between the initiatory procedures that render a son autonomous from his mother, and those undertaken to emancipate a widow from her deceased husband. Both ritual operations, by introducing a relational distance between two individuals having shared a close physical intimacy, allow one of them to enter into a new intimate relationship: marriage in the case of a son, and remarriage in the case of a widow.

Among the Arrernte, the relations that link individuals to others in distinctive ways are essential for the recognition of their personal identities. These relations consist of the kinship ties persons inherit from their parents and families, as well as other connections they later establish throughout their lives through marriage and by affiliation to other kinds of groups such as ceremonial associations. A person's identity is thus to be understood as fundamentally evolving, its successive transformations deriving from his or her ability to initiate new relationships. It is the responsibility of parents and initiators to provide the conditions that promote this ability. The body is used both as the favoured material and as the preferred instrument in ritual procedures that aim to provide these conditions, procedures in which persons are submitted to various operations held to prepare them for the development of intimate relations with others (such as spouses or ritual associates) who do not belong to their circle of primary familiars (such as parents or siblings). Thus, bodily intimacy with new partners is understood both as the privileged means whereby individuals can enhance their relational capital, and simultaneously, as a potentially dangerous source of important inner changes. This is why it is necessary that individuals, whether male or female, be initiated.

¹ For the sake of consistency, I adopt Spencer and Gillen's orthography (*churinga* instead of the Strehlows' *tjurunga* or the more contemporary *tjuringa*).

The importance attributed to bodily transformations that allow individuals to play a role in the perpetuation of different species' fertility is revealed by the physical operations they are subjected to during various initiatory stages. However, as we will see, the operations inflicted upon males are much more numerous, varied and elaborate than those applied to females. This is due to the pre-eminent role attributed to men in the process whereby humans and non-humans are differentiated and become autonomous individuals in the course of initiation and fertility rites. This responsibility is based on men's exclusive right to see and manipulate sacred objects called *churinga*, objects that are closely linked to the personal identities of male and female individuals. The role of *churinga* is complementary to that played by bodies in the constitution of personal identities, complementarity that is reinforced by the fact that, unlike corporeal bodies, these special objects do not decay (see also Strehlow 1908, 77).

The sacredness of *Churinga* rests on their recognized capacity to mediate the two-fold dynamic, both differentiating and associating, referred to in Australian anthropology as The Dreaming. This spatial movement is both the well-spring from which differentiated, social and material forms emerge (rules of social organisation, features of the landscape, living creatures, ritual objects), and the vector of their patterned interconnection and its continual renewal over time. Initiated men attribute a *churinga* linked to a totemic centre to each child, thereby providing the latter with a cultural identity founded on a distinctive connection between his or her spirit both with a totemic species and with his or her *churinga*. Although both men and women have personal *churinga*, only men who have completed their initiation are allowed to encounter theirs. Finally, note that outside of ceremonial grounds, *churinga* remain hidden in hollow places in the landscape whose surrounding area is strictly prohibited for the uninitiated.

Keeping this in mind, in what follows I compare initiation rituals and funerary rites by approaching them from the perspective of the gender asymmetries they bring into play.

Gender Asymmetries in Initiation and Mourning Rituals

The anthropological works dedicated to male initiation in the Pacific, as elsewhere, are more numerous than those concerned with female initiation. Although ethnocentrism and gender biases may come into play here, they are not the only factors involved. Indeed, where female puberty rites are present, most often they are undertaken for particular individuals, such that the number of participants and the degree of collective festivity they entail are not the same. They usually take the form of domestic rituals, with markedly shorter periods of seclusion, and do not necessarily entail a separation from the novices' mothers, an aspect that receives such a dramatic treatment when young boys are concerned (La Fontaine 1972; Lincoln 1981; Moisseff 1987). By contrast, male initiations tend to be more publicized, performed on larger scale and for longer periods of time (La Fontaine 1985). They often require additional sequences and a wider diversity of actors. This was certainly true for the Arrernte, and is still the case, though to a lesser extent, in Australian Aboriginal communities where initiations are still performed despite important changes.

As I have argued elsewhere (Moisseeff 1995), in the Arrernte case, the pre-eminence given to male initiation is related to how the Arrernte themselves regard the mother-son couple that is designated by the term *chua-ninga* signifying ‘mates’ or ‘a pair’ (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 53, 614), and is a connection held to stay particularly strong for all of the son’s life. The very same term applies to the pairs of *churinga* kept in totemic centres. The two *churinga* that make up a pair are tightly bound together and wrapped in a large number of long, thick hair strings that gives them the appearance of being a single object. While one of the pair of *churinga*, prototypically made of stone, is associated with the spirit (*kuruna*) of a man, the other, prototypically made of wood, a damper material, is associated with the spirit of a woman. In Arrernte representations of conception, the *kuruna* are the agents responsible for the differentiation of the shapeless and still matter resulting from the mix of female and male sexual fluids within the womb. It is the manipulation of *churinga* during rituals performed by male initiates that is supposed to incite *kuruna* to enter the womb so that its content may be differentiated into particular, male or female living beings.

In an important Arrernte myth collected by Spencer and Gillen referred to as *The Achilpa tradition* (1927, 355–72; see Moisseeff 1995, 229–39, 1998, 62–68), the two artefacts composing a pair of *churinga* both originated from a single stone object which splits into two, a first time into two stone *churinga*, and a second time into one of stone and one of wood. From the latter pair of *churinga* emerge a ritual leader and his wife who engender thousands of male and female human beings, the males having to undergo the initiation cycle for the first time. The term *chua-ninga*, which also refers to this initial heterosexual couple, is applied to each actual pair of *churinga*. It denotes the very strong and special connection that unites the two sacred objects by virtue of them having emerged from what was at first a single entity. The mother-son relationship which, unlike the mother-daughter tie, is also said to be *chua-ninga*, compose during pregnancy a single heterosexual and therefore potentially self-reproductive unit which, at birth, splits into two complementary beings: a full-fledged female individual having fulfilled her reproductive function and an as yet sterile, male child. The goal of the latter’s initiation is to introduce and progressively consolidate a measure of distance between these two parties, a process of detachment which has no equivalent for the girl who tends to stay with her mother longer than the boy, until her marriage to a fully initiated man much older than her. Indeed, her husband has undergone various initiatory stages that both progressively diminish the intimacy of his relationship with his mother, and, through a complex set of arduous operations, increasingly transform his body such that it is no longer the same as that born from her body. In order to be allowed to have sexual relations and marry he must be both circumcised and sub-incised.

In fact, a mediation between mother and son is already put into place soon after the boy’s birth by overlaying this relationship with another, far more distanced female-male tie. A baby girl is assigned to be his ceremonial mother-in-law. Although this allows the young man to marry the daughter of this woman later on, he is not obliged to do so. However, as is the rule for any other Arrernte son- and mother-in-law (*mura*) tie, this relationship implies that the parties concerned always remain at a physical distance from each other during everyday life. In view of the importance, in Arrernte male initiation, given to the progressive distancing between mother and son, the assignation of this special mother-in-law (*tualcha mura*) must

be appreciated as the precondition, if not the first step of a boy's initiation. It is in the course of this ceremony that the relationship between him and his ritual mother-in-law is sealed. She will play a major role in ceremonies that accompany his circumcision, which takes place much later, around puberty.

It is significant that, by contrast, for a girl, the parent-child tie is not qualified in the same way as it is for a boy, nor does her initiation entail the introduction of such an additional, distancing relationship. A girl's early assigned son-in-law, for example, plays no role whatsoever in her initiation, the first step of which will take place when her breasts begin to appear and is aimed at promoting their growth. In her case, this first initiatory stage involves her consanguineous (maternal, male) relations, and not affinal ones. Whereas for a boy, the first step of his physical initiation entails the introduction of an affinal relationship, for a girl, it consists in a reinforcement of her body's feminine quality and of her maternal, consanguineous ties. The affinal figure who can be construed as equivalent to the boy's ritual mother-in-law in the girl's case is her husband. She is united with him directly after the 'opening of vulva' or introcision (*atna-arilta-kuma*, from *atna* 'vulva' and *kuma* 'cut', the locution *arilta-kuma* stressing the equivalence with the male subincision) which closely follows a second, very brief and discreet initiatory stage at her first menstruation (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 472-473, 480-482), and marks the end of her initiation at puberty.

I wish to relate this first gender asymmetry pertaining to initiation rites at puberty to what Van Gennep took to be a major characteristic of funerary practices. In 1909 [1981], he rightly observed that during periods of mourning, 'the living and the dead person constitute a special society, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead, from which the living leave more or less quickly according to how closely they are related to the deceased' (211). He further remarked that, in all cases, '*as it should be*, the widow or the widower belongs longest to this special world' (211-212, emphasis mine). For Van Gennep, the distinctive nature of the deceased's spouse's status in the funerary process is taken for granted. What is the basis of this special proximity between spouses? I suggest we distinguish between two types of 'closeness'. One is of a classificatory nature and refers essentially to categories of kinship. Persons belonging to a same kinship category may be considered to be "close". In this sense, children and siblings remain 'close' regardless of age, social situation, physical distance, and so forth. Another kind of closeness, however, which does not strictly coincide with categorical distinctions, although it is surely linked to them, is grounded in actual, prolonged physical intimacy involving the sharing or exchange of substances, sexual or other body fluids, food, intimate thoughts or knowledge. The 'closest' relationships, in this second understanding of the term, are typically those between parents and children, between siblings, and between spouses. Usually, as individuals grow up, such relations of shared intimacy between parents and children, and between siblings, are destined to become more distant, and thus profoundly altered, in order for them to enter into other types of intimate relationships, namely with their sexual and marital partners. The only persons who, barring separation or divorce, are supposed to maintain a relationship of deep physical intimacy until death are spouses. Now, the latter occupy a somewhat ambiguous position insofar as kinship categories are concerned. Spouses are never designated as truly consanguineous. Indeed, a condition for their marital tie is that they be deemed to belong to different kinship categories

– as potential or actual affines. At the same time, to reduce the conjugal relationship to one of affinity is to ignore most of its characteristic features. Prescribed ritual practices suggest that, by virtue of their unique familiarity, spouses inhabit an intermediate situation usually not explicitly defined terminologically.

Taken together, Van Gennep's two related remarks might be rephrased as follows: in times of mourning, the surviving and deceased members of a conjugal couple are the foremost members of a transitional society situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead. From this standpoint, a parallel can be drawn between, on the one hand, this transitional society centred on the living spouse and his or her partner's corpse, and on the other, the intermediate community to which spouses belong when both are alive, the so-called domestic sphere, characterised by the distinctive intimacy of the married couple. This intimacy, as has been mentioned previously, is acquired after both spouses have distanced themselves from the members of their original family units, in some societies through puberty rites. Thus, wedlock can be construed as a singular social space within which spouses, acting upon each other in specific ways, are transformed such that for each other they are no longer affines but neither are they consanguines. It becomes thus appropriate to consider that the body modifications that are part of puberty rites preceding marriage not only act to distance young persons from their parents, but also prepare them for the alterations their bodies will undergo by virtue of their shared intimacy with their future husbands and wives.

I suggest that if, in the course of mourning, the surviving spouse, as the longest-lasting member of the 'special society' mentioned by Van Gennep, is subjected to more stringent prescriptions than others, this is due to the physical transformation he or she has undergone by virtue of a long-term shared physical intimacy with his or her partner. This may explain why the prescriptions that apply specifically to spouses in many societies are organized around the obligation to decontaminate, physically and relationally, those whose identities have been transformed by a prolonged intimacy with the deceased. The period of seclusion imposed upon the widow in the Arrernte case – she is obliged, for example, to remain silent and stay in the women's camp (*lukwurra*) – should be considered a prime example of this (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 433-434). In this sense, a parallel may be drawn with the requirement that a son, having developed a prolonged physical intimacy with the full-fledged woman who is his mother during the latter's pregnancy and afterwards, has also to be physically and relationally decontaminated from her in order to become an adult man.

At this juncture, however, it is important to remark, as Bloch and Parry (1982) have noted, the degree to which the role of women, who are distinctively associated with biological processes such as pregnancy and birth, is often predominant in funerary rituals. As Bloch writes, 'both sorrow and pollution are, in Madagascar as in so many cultures, principally focused on women. It is women who should weep both individually and as a group. It is women who take on mourning for death ... It is they who weep with the female visitors. It is women also who are associated with the pollution of death' (1982, 215). This is indeed the case among the Arrernte. The proscriptions forced upon a widow, the ceremonial lifting of which allows her to remarry, are far more important, prolonged and publicized than is the case for widowers (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 433-442). Indeed, there is no equivalent

seclusion for widowers, and the prohibitions imposed on the latter are comparably minor. Moreover, women's performances in the ceremonies that mark the end of the mourning period, for both male and female deceased, are far more elaborate and striking than those performed by men. In the widow's case the goal of this ultimate ceremony is to announce publicly the dissolution of the conjugal bond with her deceased husband allowing her to remarry (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 439). It is no accident that men are forbidden from attending the ceremony that marks the end of the mourning period for a deceased woman: they do not need to free themselves from their relationship with their deceased wives in the same way. Indeed, it would seem that for a man, the profound modification of his wife's putrefying body does not influence his own physical nature to the same degree.

These two gender asymmetries suggest that among the Arrernte, and perhaps more generally, the prototype of initiation is male initiation, whereas the prototype of widowhood is female widowhood.

The *Inapatua* Myth, or The Importance of Being Differentiated

Among the Arrernte, in both male initiation and female widowhood, an individual (a son in one case, a wife in the other) is extricated from a pre-existing, potentially harmful relationship of physical intimacy with an actual or potential sexual alter ego (see below). This allows them to gain or regain autonomy and to develop a new relationship of physical intimacy with others – with a wife in the case of the son, with a new husband in the case of the widow. The Arrernte creation myth, summarised below (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 307-9; Strehlow 1964, 727-8; for more detailed analyses, see Morton 1993; Moisseff 1995, 43-50), provides the archetypal instance of the process of autonomisation this operation entails:

In the beginning the earth was as a featureless plain covered in eternal darkness; the sun, the moon and the evening star, too, were still slumbering under the earth's cold crust.

On the earth's surface, a vague form of life existed in the form of masses of half-developed infants, resulting from the unfinished transformation of various animals and plants into human beings, all joined together in their hundreds. These creatures, called *inapatua* – meaning 'rudimentary human beings' or 'incomplete men' – were bound together and unable to move, see or breathe. They could not develop into individual men and women. But neither could they grow old, decay or die. For if life was unknown on the surface of the world, so was death.

However, below the surface of the earth, life already existed in its fullness, in the form of thousands of uncreated supernatural beings, still slumbering, which had always existed, like the sky and the earth.

Then came the time when creatures designated as *numbakulla* – meaning 'out of nothing', 'self-existing' – awoke. They broke through to the surface of the earth, allowing the sun to escape. The earth was flooded with light for the first time, and the earth was covered with sheets of water and watering places.

From the sky where they lived, two *numbakulla* could see the *inapatua* on earth, all mixed together on the edges of salted lakes. Those shapeless creatures with no separate limbs or sense organs did not eat or move. The *numbakulla*, descending from their celestial dwelling place with stone knives, cut the *inapatua* apart and shaped them, one by one. First they freed their limbs, then they opened their mouth, their nose, their eyes, and last, they separated them into men and women. The animal or plant with which individuals were initially joined became their totem whose ongoing fertility became their responsibility.

On one level, this story is an obvious metaphor of conception, or more accurately, from the traditional Arrernte standpoint, of the first phase of gestation: just as the shapeless mass of embryonic material resulting from the mix of men's and women's sexual fluids in the latter's wombs must be penetrated by 'spirit-children' (*kuruna*) emanating from the landscape, the inanimate and formless *inapatua* are transformed into individual humans and other beings through the outside intervention of spiritual entities, the *numbakulla*, who have emerged from the earth.

On a more basic level, however, this myth is about the importance of differentiation. The *numbakullas'* interventions lead to the emergence of life as it is known: the partitioning of various species, the separation of the latter into individuals capable of movement, and of individual humans into two sexes. It should be noted that these differentiations take place within the framework of an association between these spiritual entities; together they operate on the shapeless mass of *inapatua*. Also, let me stress that the entities differentiated in this fashion are themselves destined to become associated in at least two ways, both linked with reproduction. One is through sexual relations between men and women that are instrumental in the incarnation of new (differentiated) individuals. The other pertains to the responsibility bestowed on initiated persons having the same totemic identity attached to a particular place; they undertake rituals together to promote the multiplication of the totemic species to which they are associated.

In this way, differentiation transforms a sterile hybridity, represented by the amalgamated and unmoving *inapatua*, into a fertile hybridity deriving from the conjunction of previously differentiated entities implying spatial displacements. Differentiation and association are shown to be the complementary aspects of a single, ongoing movement: acts of differentiation put into effect by entities within the context of their association bring forth individualized entities whose association allows for the emergence of newly differentiated entities. This never-ending ordering process is held to proceed from The Dreaming, an ongoing spatial dynamism that at once differentiates and associates, and is constitutive of Aboriginal culture².

The dynamic of differentiation recounted in the *inapatua* story is similar to that which initiation rituals put into effect for men and funerary ceremonies put into effect for women. On the one hand, this dynamic recalls the process whereby initiators who, like their mythical

² Morton speaks of two complementary movements, one from unity to multiplicity which he calls 'fragmentation', and the other, from multiplicity to unity, which he calls 'incorporation' or 'individuation' (1987, 1989).

counterparts, have detached themselves from the physical, maternal environment with which they were merged, intervene to extricate children, especially male children, from a prior relationship of dependency upon the maternal body born of a prolonged physical intimacy with her. By freeing them from this potentially lethal encompassment, they act to transform them into sexually differentiated, independent individuals, at once fertile themselves and capable of promoting the fertility of others. On the other hand, during the mourning process, male and female collectives orchestrate a series of operations that, in isolating the widow and submitting her to stringent prohibitions, extricate her from an encompassing, potentially lethal relationship with her deceased husband deriving from a prolonged physical intimacy with him. This allows her to become an autonomous individual once again capable of joining with living others in a fertile way.

Indeed, as we will see, on the one hand, it is necessary for a young man to be made into a distinctive agent so as to be freed from a virtually undifferentiated state deriving from his encompassment within the maternal womb. On the other hand, it is necessary that a woman be delivered from a situation in which she is under the influence of the loss of differentiation incarnated by the corpse of her dead husband. Both cases are cross-sex relationships of prolonged physical intimacy in which one party (mother, husband) assumes a nurturing responsibility towards the other (son, wife). And in both cases, this previous relationship of prolonged physical intimacy acts to determine the relational and physical identity of the person occupying the subordinate, dependent position in this relationship. As a result, operations centred on the bodies of those concerned are required for changes in their identities to take effect. With this parallel in mind, let us now consider briefly certain features of male initiation and of widowhood in funerary practices.

Arrernte Male Initiation

The Arrernte myth of the *inapatua* begins with a state of extreme dependency and ends with the attribution of adult masculinity or femininity. This final sexual differentiation goes together with the acquisition of a distinctive reproductive role for both sexes. Thus, adult masculinity or femininity reveal the transformation whereby, by virtue of some type of outside intervention, a person ceases to be the product of the reproductive process – as embodied by his/her mother – to become one of its potential agents. The feminine nature mother and daughter share can be seen as facilitating the latter's acquisition of a full-grown femininity. The fact is that daughters, by contrast with sons, stay longer in close contact with their mother, leaving them only to follow their husband. This is very different for sons for whom additional mediations are required.

On one hand, Arrernte traditions emphasise the continuity that exists between the mother's body and those of her children. On the other hand, differences in the treatment applied to boys and girls in order to free them from their mother's bodily influence relate to the sexed complementarity between a boy's body and that of his mother. This complementarity has two crucial consequences. First, the asymmetry between a demonstrably fertile adult woman and her immature, sterile son may be deemed as calling the development of the latter's masculinity into question if their intimacy is prolonged. Second, and more importantly, as a

heterosexual 'couple' (*chua-ninga*), the mother-son dyad is potentially capable of becoming a reproductively self-sufficient unit. Moreover, as a mother's procreative function takes precedence over and encompasses her children's reproductive abilities, it might also be perceived as being capable of subsuming her son's procreative function. From these different perspectives, it becomes all the more necessary that the members of this primal 'pair' enter into differentiating relationships with individuals who, as matured men having undergone male re-engendering through initiation, have, like the mythical *numbakulla*, been detached from the maternal sphere. Such men are indeed in the best position to separate those who were physically merged during pregnancy.

Thus, what is at stake in the separation of sons from their mothers is strikingly different from what is at stake when daughters are concerned. Moreover, it is the responsibility of initiated men to insure the perpetuation of this process by transmitting to younger generations of men the ability to uphold the sexual differentiation that underlies the split between child- and adulthood, and enables individuals to assume an active role in human and non-human reproduction.

We are now able to better understand why, in order to extract sons from the maternal environment in which they originate, men must separate them from their mothers in a much more radical way than is necessary for daughters. The very first step of this separation takes place shortly after birth, and consists in supplementing the primary male-female tie between mother and son by another, infinitely more distanced relationship. A ceremonial mother-in-law is assigned to the boy, thereby emphasising his destiny to marry outside the maternal bosom, to have his own children, and to add to his position of son, those of father, brother-in-law, and later grandfather, and so forth. It is strictly forbidden for son- and mother-in-law to be in physical proximity with each other. The relationship between these two parties is established by two initiated men, like the *numbakulla* in the creation myth, namely, the fathers of a boy and of a girl of approximately the same age. The ceremony, which is undertaken in the women's camp by the children's mothers, consists in cutting a lock of the girl's hair and presenting it to the boy (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 469-471). This marks the ritual mother-in-law's later obligation to give her hair regularly to her assigned son-in-law. With this hair he makes belts that, by exchanging them with others, allow him to enter into new relationships. Thus, while a mother continues for a while to play a role in the nurturing of her son and hence in the development of his body, his mother-in-law will provide him with the means to build up his network of relations.

The second stage of initiation consists in separating a son from his mother in a more concrete manner: after having been thrown in the air, beaten and covered with body paintings held to promote the development of his masculinity³, he is now forbidden to sleep in the women's camp and has to provide, in part, for his own livelihood by hunting with men and with his peers with whom he shares a camp (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 176-178).

During the third initiatory stage (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 179-222), his penis is successively circumcised and subincised. His chin and scalp are then bitten until they bleed so as to

³ Regarding the use of body painting to promote young men's masculinity in a contemporary Aboriginal community, see De Largy Healy, this volume.

encourage the growth of his beard and of his hair (which he will use to make belts to enter into new relations). At the end of this set of ordeals, followed by a seclusion period, the young man is at last permitted to have sexual relations and to marry. However, in order to become a fully-fledged initiated man, capable of assuming responsibility for promoting the incarnation of spirit entities through the performance of fertility rites, he has to undergo additional ordeals. In particular, his body is dried out by being repeatedly placed over a fire covered with leafy branches (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 223-303). This serves to distinguish his body even further from those of women, and to make him as similar as possible to the parched earth of the Central Australian desert, whose fertility is held to derive from its desiccated state.

In the final stage of his initiation he is presented with his *churinga*, a stone (or wooden) fragment of his country intimately linked with the spirit he incarnates (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 112-116; Strehlow 1968, 112-119). The markings on his *churinga*'s surface are engraved upon his forehead. Having been made physically comparable to the enduring 'body' from which he originates, he is thereafter allowed to handle this type of sacred object to promote the incarnation of both human spirit-children and those of his totemic species. He is able to participate fully in the spiritual dimension of reproduction relegating its carnal aspects - pregnancy and childbirth as taken on by mothers - to a secondary position.

The association of the perfectly differentiated beings that men have become through initiation allows them not only to bring about the emergence of new human and totemic individuals, but also, through the initiatory proceedings they undertake, to enable others to acquire this singular creative capacity. At the same time, the successive initiatory ordeals whereby the initiators both separate male individuals from their mothers and submit their bodies to increasing degrees of differentiation, go with a progressive opening, for these same individuals, of new relational possibilities, that is, new forms of social association. These are notably those mediated by the exchange of belts made from hair provided by their ceremonial mothers-in-law and their matrimonial and ritual partners.

Widowhood (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 429–442)

When a man dies, his spirit leaves his body which is immediately buried in the earth. The grave site is covered with twigs. The deceased man's camp is burnt down and his name should not be mentioned for a period of time. During the mourning period that follows, lasting from twelve to eighteen months, the widow smears her hair, face and breasts with white pipeclay and remains without speaking in the women's camp in 'deep mourning' (Spencer and Gillen 1927, 434), not being allowed to pursue women's ordinary daily activities. After a suitable length of time, she makes an offering of edible seeds to the actual and classificatory sons and younger brothers of her dead husband, thereby announcing that she is ready for the ban to speak to be lifted and for her to resume the usual occupations of a woman's life. She is now ready to participate in the final burial ritual called 'trampling the twigs on the grave' (*urpmilchimilla*).

In preparation for this ceremony, she makes a special, 'hideous and bulky' chaplet (called *chimirillia* by men and *aramurillia* by women), in which many bones of various small animals, attached to a hair head-ring with locks provided by the female relatives of her late husband dangling over her face and around her head. She is then invited by one of her husband's younger brothers to visit the grave accompanied by other men and women. She carries the chaplet made of bones in a small wooden vessel that is placed in the laps of the dead man's relatives which causes them to shed tears while the women wail. The gruesome chaplet is then placed on the widow's head, and men perform dances while shouting and beating the air with their spear-throwers, first towards the dead man's camp, and then at the grave site, to frighten the deceased's spirit and force it to take refuge at the bottom of the grave from which it watches the proceedings that follow.

A dance by men and by women is performed on the grave and the twigs that cover it are stamped down. When the dancing stops, the men separate from the women and the women strike and cut their heads with fighting clubs, inflicting themselves severe wounds, from which blood flows onto the grave. When this performance is over, the widow, kneeling over the grave, removes her funerary chaplet. While the women cry loudly, she tears it into pieces, depositing its remnants in a hole she has dug. The earth is then heaped up. The men prostrate themselves for a few minutes on the grave, and when they get up, their place is taken by the widow and other female relatives. The widow, standing by the grave, then rubs off the white pipeclay from her body, and places brightly coloured feathers in her hair, in striking contrast to the chaplet she wore just before. This way, she shows that her mourning has come to an end. She can either remarry soon thereafter, or, by painting a narrow white band on her forehead, show that she has decided to remain in mourning, but to a lesser degree, for a while longer.

Following his death, the deceased is unmoving, incapable of performing any action, silent and invisible. Similarly, during the mourning period, his widow, covered with ashes (she is called 'the whitened one', *inperta*, Spencer and Gillen 1927, 433 and 617), remains silent, idle and in seclusion. The close physical intimacy she shared with her husband is an important factor in her likeness with his corpse. By virtue of this intimacy and bodily fluids they shared in their marital union, a wife's identification with the deceased is prolonged beyond the grave, so that his bodily degradation may be seen as being able to contaminate his widow. It is therefore all the more necessary that she submits to a particularly strict seclusion preventing her from contaminating the rest of the community in turn. This seclusion lasts as long as the desiccation of her husband's corpse is not complete, through a drying out process that nevertheless begins with a period of liquefaction. As Bloch has emphasized (1982, 215; see also Moisseff 2016), the horror triggered by decomposition is particularly linked to the idea of wetness. It is thus highly significant that it is precisely at the moment when her late husband's flesh is supposed to be fully disintegrated in the heat of the scorching sun of central Australia, his cadaver reduced to a pile of dried-out bones buried in the earth, that his widow gathers the bones of dead animals to make herself the 'hideous' chaplet that, in covering her face and head, turns her into a walking skeleton, thereby symbolizing the intimate tie that continues to bind her to her dead husband's body. It is only when she completely undoes and destroys this macabre chaplet, burying the pieces in the earth of her

husband's tomb, that she is able to detach herself from him once and for all. Only then is she able to return to the community of the living, and possibly remarry so as to participate once more in the renewal of animate forms by having children with a new, alive partner whose physical nature fully complements her own.

One might ask why a widow is more affected than a widower in this way. As mentioned, the ritual mourning process undergone by a man for his dead wife is not comparable to that of a woman for her deceased husband. In the case of the Arrernte, this relates to the complementary character of the couple's bodies. The fertile association of marriage partners derives from the complementarity of their bodily natures, the encounter of feminine humidity and male aridity (recall that men's *churinga* are prototypically stone, whereas those of women are prototypically wood, a damper substance). However, following his death, the husband's liquefying corpse loses this complementarity with respect to his widow's body, thereby calling into question her own differentiated identity. In contrast, the dissolution of a man's wife's body remains in keeping with its humid nature, such that the couple's bodily complementarity is preserved. Funerary precautions are thus much less stringent for a widower, whose own differentiated identity is not endangered by his spouse's putrefying body to the same extent.

Finally, it should be noted that the ritually mediated process put into effect following a man's death appears differently according to whether one adopts the point of view of the dead man or that of the surviving woman. The male initiation process, like the *inapatua* myth, begins with an undifferentiated state grounded in a sterile, bodily hybridity, and leads to a state of bodily differentiation that allows for the possibility of new, fertile associations, both of a totemic nature with other initiates, and between men and women. At a man's death, this process is inverted, moving from an initial, exemplary differentiated state to one of a potentially contaminating lack of differentiation. His spirit is permanently separated from his body, reducing the latter to pure bodily matter whose deterioration leads to an amorphous physical state. The corpse liquefies, thereby reversing and annulling the drying out that resulted from the final stages of male initiation in which a man becomes akin to the *churinga* object associated with his spirit. However, from the perspective of those who undergo the mourning process, notably the dead man's widow, the situation is not the same. The funerary rituals she undergoes correspond to a process that begins with a potentially dangerous lack of differentiation between her and the deceased, and ends up with her attaining a state of bodily differentiation and personal autonomy of a new order. Whereas her first marriage was decided upon by her husband, she is now able to choose her matrimonial future herself. If she so wishes, she can enter into a new fertile association by remarrying – in all likelihood, according to Spencer and Gillen (1927, 435), with one of her departed husband's younger brothers. It is to the latter that the widow offers edible seeds to announce that she is ready to end her seclusion, and it is a man of the same category who invites her to the grave site ending her mourning period⁴.

⁴ Funerary practices have also become a major feature of contemporary Australian Aboriginal life (see Glaskin *et al.* 2008, and De Largy Healy, this volume), comparable in terms of time, effort and number of participants, to traditional male initiations.

A man can marry once his body has been drastically altered through various initiatory procedures that separate him from his mother. He thus becomes an independent agent with respect to women, able to choose whom he wishes to wed as long as she belongs to the proper kinship category. A girl who is allotted a spouse following her introcision, after having had her feminine qualities reinforced by staying in close proximity with her mother for a longer period, does not have the same degree of freedom in choosing her first husband. However, it would seem that through becoming his widow, she achieves a further measure of autonomy with regard to men, as she is allowed to decide for herself when and if she will remarry. From this perspective, wedlock appears as the formative grounds in which a woman acquires an additional degree of self-sufficiency by virtue of the changes she undergoes while sharing a deep intimacy with the highly differentiated alter-ego that is her husband. For this emancipation to become effective, however, he must completely disappear.

Male initiation and female widowhood may for all these reasons be thought of as analogous. They in turn also suggest a potentially far-reaching disparity between men and women in their participation in life-cycle rituals. From a man's perspective, his ability to marry after his initiation is indicative of his newly acquired autonomy. However, for a woman, especially considering the significant age difference that exists between spouses, it is her ability to *remarry* that is the sign of her personal autonomy.

From one couple to the next

In Australian Aboriginal society, personal identity is an evolving process whose successive mutations derive from an individual's aptitude to engage in new relationships. Initiation rites and funerary practices, by building on both the bodily changes they acknowledge and those they bring about, act to mediate such relational transformations. The former entail delivering a man from the maternal womb, the latter entail freeing a woman from the conjugal tomb.

Among the Arrernte, *churinga*, whose presence and manipulation is all-important in most rituals undertaken by men, are strikingly absent from mortuary practices. It is the deceased's corpse that seems to take the *churinga*'s place. The husband's liquefying remains that contaminate his widow occupy a position that is the symmetrical inverse of that held by the prototypical male *churinga*, a permanent, desiccated object that men's bodies are made to resemble. The body that is associated with the corpse, if not identified with it, is the widow's.

What this suggests is that the 'ordered series of relational transformations' (Bonnemère 2014: 728) that constitutes the course of life among the Arrernte is conceptualised as a succession of permuted couples. At the end of his initiation, a man is paired with a *churinga* with which he is held to share a same intimate nature. This newly formed couple is taken to supersede that formed by a mother and her son, relegated to the mundane, aquatic, undifferentiated content of the womb evoked in the *inapatua* myth. The pair a daughter composes with her mother is a positive one in that it favours the development of her femininity, something which is required for her to become the fertile counterpart of her physically differentiated husband in order to give birth. However, when her husband dies, his body's alteration annuls the positive complementarity they had, with the risk of

contaminating her with his putrefaction. As we have seen, as soon as a son is born, it is necessary that his relationship with his mother be mediated by a potential mother-in-law. Although he is not obliged to marry this woman's daughter, this affinal intervention provides him with the conditions for a fruitful relational future. Similarly, the possibility given to a widow that, when her husband dies she will later remarry one of his younger brothers provides her with the means to envisage a fruitful relational future of her own. In both perspectives, for a given male or female individual, the process leading from one type of couple to the next entails a period of seclusion during which their body is relationally and physically decontaminated.

Artefacts woven from human hair play a significant role in all cases. On the one hand, hair strings originating with a man's ceremonial mother-in-law provide the means of exchange whereby he becomes able to enter into new relationships. On the other hand, the widow's bone-encrusted zombie chaplet, made with hair provided by her female in-laws, which she wears and then destroys, returning it to her husband's grave, bears witness to her potential encompassment by her spouse's deliquescent state followed by her subsequent autonomisation. It would seem that hair, as an imperishable substance secreted by the body, but detachable from it, is particularly well suited for symbolizing both the bodily grounding of personal identity and its fundamentally relational nature. Indeed, a gift of hair (between in-laws or ritual partners for example) is to bestow an intimate bodily substance. However, unlike the sharing of bodily fluids such as blood or sperm between mother and child or between sexual partners that creates a form of consubstantiality, giving hair, a solid, external and separable material, forges ties while maintaining a distance between the parties concerned (Moisseff 2010).

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