

Foreword

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Acting for others is a book to stir the anthropological imagination. It breathes new life into debates over relationality and agency, both through a vivacious and lucid style and through the considerable assistance of the Ankave-Anga of Papua New Guinea. These people furnish Pascale Bonnemère with a beautifully orchestrated demonstration of just what is lost in overlooking women's participation in social processes, here specifically and pointedly in the stages through which men achieve fatherhood. She opens out their demonstration/her observation into a splendid critique of ritual action, and beyond that to the significance of Ankave ideas about agency. In their eyes, it is the exercise of a specific capacity that divides men from women: for the former it takes a ritual sequence to gain the vantage point from which the latter already and inevitably are actors, namely the capacity to act on behalf of—on and for—others. At the end, the author suggests just why she is writing on these matters for a broad readership, and why there are debates still to be renewed here.

This close focus on some of the major preoccupations of Ankave people, and the anthropological controversies concerning gender and personhood to which it leads, will bring to an English-reading audience a much broader sense of Bonnemère's extensive and to some extent audacious—at once daring and courageous—exploration of ethnographic purpose than her articles already in English can convey. More than that, the present work transforms some of her

own earlier emphases, as her experiences in Ankave over time were also transformative. As to the courage, the conclusion here holds a little surprise.

CAPACITY

The rewards are manifold. I am torn between wanting to engage with the intriguing perspective that Ankave have afforded Bonnemère (alongside the analytical vocabulary they have inspired) and not wishing to give too much away. For the argument unfolds rather like a drama, and although she states her central problematic clearly at the outset, the course of ethnographic description builds up in a revelatory manner. It would be a shame, for example, to anticipate the outcome of the considerable analytical finesse by which she shows how the presence of women is crucial to the capacities a man acquires.

Ankave say their rites make men, but what are men? They are not only fathers but also mother's brothers, the principal roles in which they act for others. This in turn has consequences for the identity of other participants in "the construction of the male person." As the reader will find, Ankave women's presence in these rites is not the suspended presence of absence; on the contrary, they appear as active participants in what is going on. Boys are not transformed by men's actions alone, and ritual efficacy depends on the comportment of both sexes. Indeed, women are at once crucial to registering the transformations entailed and the recipients of men's capacity to act.

Participation does not imply symmetry, and this is not a book concerned with adjudications about social equality. Bonnemère had to make several actual returns to the Anga area before being in an ethnographic position to write this account; at the same time, she is also reexamining and thus conceptually returning to a much older stratum of theorizing about gender relations in Papua New Guinea, which took literally the exclusion of women from men's rites, and which dominated early accounts of other Anga societies in particular. With as much diplomacy as determination she shows that exclusion from certain rites is not the same as exclusion from the whole sequence of events by which men find their destinies. While always being careful to note what is specific to Ankave—and there is much variation among Anga peoples, as Pierre Lemonnier (2004) underlines—she inevitably raises a question about the systematic "invisibility" of women from other anthropological visions. The process by which she pursues this question is a model of what can be gained by opening up the scope of

material to be drawn into analysis; she repeatedly comes back to the need to see practices in relation to one another. If this seems an obvious anthropological strategy, the capacity of the analysis depends on just where and how that scope is defined. Bonnemère consistently draws attention to the relation between what men and what women are doing. And if I stress the analytical work, and it is superb, that is precisely to draw attention to the fact that ethnographic insight is not just there for the looking.

Many of the issues that the author raises resonate with preoccupations found across the anthropological spectrum. Women's invisibility has of course been treated from many perspectives; from being attributed to the bias of the anthropologist or being taken as a psychic insight into a fundamental human predicament, to being understood as a record of power relations. Each produces its own delineation of just what is invisible, of what it is imperative to hide and from and by whom. It is therefore important to note that, as with her edited collection on *Women as unseen characters: Male ritual in Papua New Guinea* (2004), in this book Bonnemère's principal material arises from ritual action and its mythic counterparts. So, we are dealing above all with statements about efficacy, and with actions to encourage or prevent other things coming about. We may say that such preoccupations pervade social life, but we can also say that such preoccupations are likely to emphasize aspects of it. Then again, perhaps her focus points to a pervasive ritualization of relations, where efficacy is like an ever-elusive goal; in the men's case, in particular, they have to find the "others" who will show them how efficacious they are.

While fatherhood—realized at the birth of a man's first child—is a prime stage in the making of men, Bonnemère aligns that procreative capacity with the nurturing of sister's children. The significance of the brother-sister relationship has struck Melanesian ethnographers time and again. However, the situating of the relationship—and the details the author affords us—leads to a fresh perspective on an old issue in the interpretation of cults and rites in Papua New Guinea. This is their seeming preoccupation with fertility. Consider the answer to the question of what a man is. If an anthropologist is first inclined to give it in kinship terms (a man is at once a father and a mother's brother), then it is to point to him as procreator-nurturer (of children and sister's children). The author's exegesis invites the further thought—and here I borrow from her criticism of substance-focused interpretations—that *fertility* is too literal a metaphor for Ankave, and ties their actions too closely to birth as though that were the beginning and not also the end of processes of growth. Rather, reproductive

states and processes, including procreation and nurture, appear bracketed together as examples of a more general phenomenon, namely men's and women's capacity to act on and for others. The author refers to it as a positively held value. The orientation here is toward what one does (being the one who has to do the doing, so to speak) when it is on behalf of other persons' growth and well-being. A footnote: at least in English, *on behalf of* gives an unintended distance to the effects of acting, and the author and her as ever punctilious translator tend to capture the immediacy in the preposition *for* or *on and for*.

This sense of capacity that Bonnemère sees in Ankave, what it is to act for others, becomes her theoretical prism. It glints on a whole other way of thinking about that classic figure, "the mother's brother." Through it, the couvade appears in fresh colors, as do food taboos, and indeed as do what we take as significant about gender relations. And for those for whom *gender* seems a restrictive rather than expansive category, we may expand that to what we take from the ethnographic record as significant about kinship, regeneration, and the states of being that people see all around themselves.

INSIGHT

The principal field observations recorded here date from the late 1980s onward. This was at a time when initial theorizing about the significance of male "initiation" among certain Angan peoples was getting underway, and would become something of a preoccupation of the anthropological research that subsequently burgeoned in the region. Bonnemère is writing in relation to a large body of existing work, including her own ethnography, and perhaps too against an excess of interpretation, of the meaning read into things, as James Weiner (1995) once put it. If at times male ritual has been the recipient of too much interpretive attention, it makes sense that one of Bonnemère's hopes is that a return to practices as they are enacted may be the starting point for reappraisal. It is at just such a juncture that a foregrounding of "ethnographic" realities can bring "theoretical" insight anew.

Bonnemère is careful to situate aspects of the material that she holds up for scrutiny within their antecedent conceptual worlds (the problems that certain explanations were intended to overcome), and she also gestures to something of the antecedent concerns in her own trajectory. An English reader needs to know that the present volume grows out of some quite intense intellectual

interchanges over the last two decades in French anthropology. Here, influential works include Cécile Barraud's *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu: De la distinction de sexe dans les sociétés* (Alès and Barraud 2001) and Irène Théry's *La distinction de sexe: Une nouvelle approche de l'égalité* (2007); Bonnemère also edited a collection of essays with Théry (*Ce que le genre fait aux personnes*) in 2008. Although not a specific focus of the present book, mention is made of diverse Anglo-American controversies in the evolution of *gender* as an organizational concept in feminist anthropology, applied as it was to early Melanesian accounts (successively) of the position of women, constructions of identity, male-female antagonism, and cross-sex and same-sex relations. Apropos the latter, one of these older works, *The gender of the gift* (M. Strathern 1988) appears at both the beginning and end of Bonnemère's exposition, which makes its author an interested party to her arguments. This is not, of course, the place to dwell on further possible lines of debate arising therefrom. However, she herself notes something of its driver in issues and arguments of the day, and I can at least endorse her surmise apropos its conceptual focus—ethnographic description to my mind demands no less—in that among its targets were contemporary conceptualizations that seemed prevalent in existing (largely Anglo-American) critiques of gender relations.

Given her own endorsement of what was subsequently seen as the “relational” tenor of that work, and in the spirit of her own interest in intellectual history, I might add that its relational vocabulary was there in part as a corrective or supplement to an entity long since eclipsed, mid-twentieth-century depictions of society (of cosmic proportions in those days), implying overarching organization and compartmentalized or individualized domains of social life (from another perspective, also relations, of course). A fresh question that the reader might well take away from Bonnemère's stimulating exegesis of Ankave practices is what these days—and the question is widely relevant to much current debate—is entailed in insisting on a relational view. From what perspective is it a significant emphasis? What other states are implied in the term (what is not relational)? One might not think to ask but for the clarity of Bonnemère's own analysis. For that builds up to a particularly clear modeling of relations in one respect, in that her account involves a formulation of personhood that rests on the roles persons play with respect to one another, concretely demonstrable through attention to interactions between people. The conceptual rewards of this approach are very evident. Anyone who equivocates should look at her stunning relational account of food taboos: it makes a lot of older material and

the arguments they generated simply fall into place. The point to stay with is that *relational* carries a specific freight here.

One of the most interesting outcomes of her relational analysis in her insistence, apropos male initiation, that ritual does not act only on the person of the novice but on the relations in which he is enmeshed. To return to her opening quotation from Meyer Fortes, something Julian Pitt-Rivers (1973: 101) observed long ago would be grist to her mill. Society, he declared, imposes its rules not on the individual (who remains the same person) but on his or her (changing) relationships. Bonnemère's advance on this position gives her insights it would be hard to match otherwise. The reader will discover this not least through the way she develops, creatively, uniquely, the concept of relation as a totality.

Bonnemère's new book is a leap forward from earlier anthropological concerns, not just with what it is that rituals make when they seem to be making gender but also with how they do so. She sidesteps much misleading (under the guise of commonsense) speculation, and I refer again to the work of analysis that informs her writing—indeed, there is almost a kind of analogue to her effort in the considerable labor Ankave undertake in making fathers/mothers' brothers. Finally, brilliantly, *Acting for others* underlines the asymmetry that Ankave posit between men's and women's capacities for action; in the way she follows their lead, the asymmetry renders her analysis more inclusive of the sexes than many efforts to find equivalences between them.

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