

Introduction

*We know that, regarded from the outside,
a person can be seen as an “assemblage of statuses”*
—Meyer Fortes, “Totem and taboo”

Fatherhood is important in all cultures, but the way it is approached differs from one society to the next. Some consider it a private matter, while others place it within a broader social framework and, sometimes, accompany accession to this relational position with a sophisticated dramaturgy. This is the case of the Ankave of Papua New Guinea, for whom becoming a father is not self-evident; they accompany the long construction of the male person with a series of rituals ending with the birth of a man's first child.

Among these inhabitants of a remote valley at the heart of the country, the whole community takes part in these rites, as though the paternity of each man concerned everyone. This small population is surrounded by larger neighboring groups, and over the course of their history was periodically obliged to move to the lowlands when defeated in intertribal warfare. Given this historical context, the Ankave often express the sentiment that having a large number of offspring is vital to their survival. Being a parent, then, is not only an individual matter, as it has become in the West; it is also a duty each person owes all others in order to perpetuate the group.

In the present book, I try to understand the practices and thinking surrounding access to fatherhood. None of the ethnographic material presented

and analyzed here (essentially ideas about the relative roles of men and women in producing and raising a new human being, the rituals that mark the men's lives and the exchanges of goods between families allied through marriage) will be familiar to readers who have grown up in the West, nor will it remind them of the world of ideas and social conventions in which they live. And yet, even if the asymmetry between fatherhood and motherhood tends to shrink when technical reproductive procedures come into the picture, it seems to me that the ethnographic material presented here, which reveals just such an asymmetry, cannot fail to touch the reader. For he or she knows full well that men and women the world over have a special relationship with their children, and that this specificity may be linked in some way with the physiological realities and emotional experiences of gestation and birth.

As everywhere, Ankave children come out of women's bodies. But the members of this society have developed a system of representations according to which children grow in the womb through the action of the mother's blood alone. Furthermore, since there are no substitutes, mother's milk is the only food available to babies, and therefore for the first two years of their life, children owe their growth to their mother's milk, together with a few other foods (banana, sugarcane, sweet potato) gradually introduced into their diet. The father's role in the reproduction of human beings is thus diminished, and consequently participating in this human adventure of perpetuating the group as well as themselves becomes something of a wager.

Passage from the position of son to that of father, in this context where the mother is believed to be at the origin of the child's body and where the maternal kin are credited with a power of life and death over their nephews and nieces (see chapter 7), requires an elaborate ritualistic work that is often termed *initiator*. It is the aim of the present book to analyze the different steps in this process. Comparison, if only through the reading of other representations, allows us to show just how deeply culture is imbedded in what would appear to be physiological facts characteristic of the species. I take the view, therefore, that in both Western and non-Western societies, every human group constructs its own view of how each gender is involved in making children. And even though we all reproduce in the same way, we do not do it with the same ideas in mind or with the same views of gender, of gendered functions and practices. As Esther Goody showed in 1982, based on her West African fieldwork (see also Godelier [2004] 2011), child-raising can be split into several roles, which can in turn be performed by different individuals. This way of thinking, which seeks to divide

up the reality of the accompaniment of children by adults into a multiplicity of functions and agents bearing educational messages and practices, sometimes comes into effect even before the birth, particularly outside the West.

Were someone to take the most recent publications on Oceania as an indication of the present state of the anthropology of this vast region, they would immediately realize that studies on male rituals are not as common and plentiful as they used to be. In the immense majority of the populations anthropologists encounter here, Christian religious ceremonies are now a regular feature of daily life, the schools educate the children, and the AIDS epidemic has arrived. In those populations where male rituals existed, today they are organized only occasionally or, significantly, when they have not been completely abandoned in the wake of the concrete changes that have transformed people's ways of living and thinking (Bonnemère forthcoming). These upheavals occurred at very different points in time, depending on whether the population lives on an island in the Tongan archipelago, where the London Missionary Society first sent pastors in the nineteenth century, or in a remote valley in the New Guinea Highlands. But on the whole, places where globalization has not made itself felt, if only in minor ways, are extremely rare. In other words, there is no society in Oceania whose members live as their precolonial ancestors did and where their conceptions of the world have not been altered, if only very superficially.

Before New Guinea won its independence from Australia, on September 16, 1975, it was not unusual for labor recruiters to travel to remote areas looking for sturdy men to work on the country's coastal plantations. In the 1960s, several Ankave men thus came to know the outside world. They returned to their villages with a little money, machetes, a cigarette lighter, and some items of clothing their families would be seeing for the first time. It was only through these few utilitarian objects brought back by their husbands or brothers, sometimes after several years of labor on distant plantations, that the women learned about life outside their valley. The experiences of this handful of men did not revolutionize either the Ankave's way of living or the ideas about the world they had developed over the centuries; it was for this reason that, in 1994 at the time of my fourth stay there, the Ankave were organizing what is known among specialists as male initiations. Because the emphasis in these rituals is not so much on acquiring knowledge as on graduating to a new status, the term *initiation* may not be the most apt for designating Anga male rituals (see p. 21), but insofar as it is the term chosen by the specialists, I will keep it, even though

I believe the expression “collective male rites of passage” would better suit the reality of these large-scale events involving an entire local community.

What I observed at that time did not fit the descriptions I had read, and the existing analyses of such collective events did not interpret them in an altogether satisfactory manner. Yet they are still held to be the authoritative version. In this context, it seemed necessary to revisit this apparently closed subject and to show that a complementary analysis of certain male rituals in New Guinea is possible, essentially by taking into consideration new ethnographic material.

This material concerns the involvement of other actors in the ritual than those usually written up—women in this case—and the analysis pays attention to their gestures and to the behaviors required of them.¹ By adopting this point of view, I hope to provide some elements that will contribute to an anthropology of personhood in which gender is a central concern. Gender studies have evolved along similar lines since the 1960s in the English-speaking academic world and in France from the 1980s. Initially focused on the social dimensions of gender relations (sexual division of labor, female domestic spaces and male public spaces, forms of male domination), researchers subsequently turned to the symbolic aspects of these relations, looking at representations of what it is to be female or male.² At the same time, after having long taken gender relations expressed in the conjugal couple as an object of study—while forgetting that men and women are far from being only husbands and wives—research began to include the fact that gender comes into play in all relationships, including same-sex relations. As Catherine Alès writes, we need to “understand sex distinction outside a binary opposition of genders . . . [and] as always operating in the context of established social relations” (2001: 9). In other words, a man or a woman is never simply that; he or she cannot be entirely and only defined by belonging to a gendered group. A kinship position, a social status, a difference of generation, et cetera always inform any given relationship, of which gender can therefore never be considered as the sole feature. Such is my take on gender

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1. There are a few populations where the involvement of women in male initiations has been recognized: the Bedamini in Western Province (Sørum 1982, 2017), the Chambri in the Sepik area (Errington and Gewertz 1989: 49; Gewertz and Errington 1991: 58, 74), and the Kamea, an Anga southern group (Bamford 2007). I will come back later to this last work, which challenges the existing ones in proposing a new interpretation of an Anga male ritual.
 2. Françoise Héritier, the main French theoretician of male domination, has analyzed the symbolic foundations explaining its universality (1996, 2002).

in this book, as one dimension of social relations that can only be conceived of as intertwined with others, which are just as relevant both in daily life and in ritualized moments.

Among the Anga, gender is at the very heart of the succession of Ankave rituals that mark the male life cycle for, in order eventually to become a father, a young boy must begin by undergoing a number of ordeals little girls have no need to endure to accede to the status of mother, since it is considered that they become fertile spontaneously by the simple fact of growing up and reaching maturity. To try to understand how a boy grows up to become a father therefore means addressing the question of the fundamental asymmetry between men and women in matters of reproduction and parenthood. Our Western societies sometimes forget this, since access to birth control now enables women to avoid becoming mothers. For those who have opted for motherhood, the possibility of using infant formula has partially masked their essential role in the survival of the newborn baby. But in societies that have access to neither contraception nor formula, every woman is a potential mother.³

The question of parenthood, in other words of access to the social roles of father and mother, has hardly been touched on by the anthropologists working in other Anga groups.⁴ The Anga specialists—Beatrice Blackwood, Hans Fischer, Maurice Godelier, Gilbert Herdt, Jadran Mimica, Pierre Lemonnier, and Sandra Bamford (by chronological order of their fieldwork)—have studied essentially the collective phases of the rituals in which all boys around ten years of age are subjected to a set of physical and mental ordeals designed to separate them from their mothers and the female world in which they were, until then, immersed, and to toughen them up and prepare them to defend the group from the enemy attacks that were the daily lot of these populations until the 1960s. Even Blackwood, the first anthropologist to work in an Anga group, the Kapau-Kamea,⁵ who, despite her gender, was allowed to witness the secret activities

3. Despite the Ankave's emphasis on motherhood, barren women are not stigmatized. Some even act as midwives (see p. 67n6).

4. There are twelve groups, whose linguistic features, oral history, and genetic profile point to a common past, related languages and social organizations that share a number of features.

5. At the time of Blackwood's fieldwork, the Kapau, whose language "is the most widely distributed of all Angan languages, with speakers in both Gulf and Morobe Provinces" (Bamford 1997: 13n5), differentiated according to the tribe they belong to. In the thirties, Blackwood worked among the Nauti (Kapau-speakers living east

of men in the forest during the first stage of the rituals, was strictly prohibited from going “on top” during the second and last stage⁶ and thus from seeing the boys eating marita because that was strictly tambu for women (1978: 131). She therefore had to stay “below” with the women, and her description became the first ever of the activities of Anga women in a public phase of male initiations (1978: 129–31).⁷ Some sixty years later, Bamford faced a similar although milder situation when the Kamea men “debated whether or not [she] should remain with women during the penultimate moments of the marita ceremony” (2007: 186n12). She decided to bring the discussion to an end by saying that she preferred to stay with the women so as to focus on their particular role in the ritual. The description she offers is very similar to that given by Blackwood, to both of which may be added the narratives that were provided to them by male informants (Blackwood 1978: 132–33; Bamford 2007: 108–9).

The other Anga specialists focused solely on the ritual actions men performed in the forest and reported only the men’s discourse. This in turn led them to assert that the initiations were based on the exclusion of women and were aimed primarily at reproducing and maintaining male domination. The main goal of these rituals and an indispensable prerequisite to becoming great warriors was, it was said, “for the masculine (the men) to contain the power of the feminine, and to do so, it must first seize that power by expropriating it from the women in whom it originally resides” (Godelier [1982] 1986: 94). But while this dimension of the rituals is clearly present, it by no means exhausts their interpretation.⁸

of the Upper Watut River) and the Langimar (located between the Upper Watut and the Bulolo rivers) who spoke another Anga language. Bamford explains in the note just mentioned that Kapau-speakers are now called Kapau in the Morobe Province and Kamea in the Gulf Province.

6. It should be noted that the two phases of the initiation described by Blackwood took place in different villages and that the second was organized before the first. Even if her interpreter said, “the Manki people [Langimar] would have let me come, but that these ‘bush kanakas’ [Nauti, thus Kapau] were different,” the negative answer she received might have been due to this specific situation as well.
7. This should be checked more closely, but I think we could go so far as to say that her description is the first ever on women’s activities in Melanesian male initiations.
8. Other New Guinea specialists have challenged the idea that the initiations reproduce men’s general domination of women. Orokaiva boys and girls are initiated during the same ritual, and the “initiation secret, for there is a secret involved, does not stand between two genders but between initiates and non-initiates of both genders”

The Ankave ethnographic material shows that the women are not excluded from the male ceremonies. To be sure they are absent from spaces⁹ where the men learn what they are meant to do in their adult life: control their fear, defend the community, follow the moral rules of the society; but they are by no means sidelined from the process by which their sons become men. Systematically taking into consideration the women's involvement in the male rituals has serious consequences for the anthropological analysis of these large-scale, collective events. First of all, the idea that the men grow the boys far away from the women is compromised; second, we can no longer consider that the boys are transformed solely by the men's action. On the contrary, analysis of the gestures performed by certain categories of women (essentially the novices' mothers and sisters) and the prohibitions imposed on them shows that only acting on the relations that connect them to these women can bring about the boys' transformation. It is therefore not only by acting directly on the individual that a transformation to his status, to his person even, is brought about but also by acting at the same time on his relationship with certain close female relatives, in their presence, whatever form this presence may take.¹⁰

Such practices reveal a specific conception of the person, in which others play an essential role in the unfolding. Men and women here are placed in different positions since, as we will see, the capacity to act for someone else is "womanly" in the sense that women have it spontaneously,¹¹ whereas it takes a very long process of ritual work for men to acquire and be able to make use of it.

(Iteanu 2001: 348–49). My criticism stems from the analysis of a context similar to that on which the analysis of initiations as an institution reproducing male domination was based, where only boys undergo initiation.

9. Note that in the North Pentecost Island of Vanuatu (J. Taylor 2008: 159), "women of high rank were able to take part in the male system of grades. Such women could also take their place at the corresponding *matan gabi* [sacred fires or hearths] of the *gamali*." *Gamali*, or men's houses, should not be seen as entirely male, the author adds.
10. The word *relation* as it is used here does not designate a tie between just any two individuals but a relation between people "particularized by their respective statuses," who are complementary with one another, who depend on one another, who together form a totality (Descombes [1996] 2014: 306).
11. As will be seen throughout the book, using the word *spontaneously* does not mean that this capacity is a given that would be encountered everywhere in women. As Roy Wagner wrote 40 years ago, "all kin relations and all kinds of relatives are basically alike, and it is a human responsibility to differentiate them" (1977: 623). I take the opportunity here to recall the relevance of this article to the study of kinship relationships.

The debate over whether or not there is a specifically Melanesian conception of the person was opened at the end of the 1940s by Maurice Leenhardt, and was continued by Marilyn Strathern in *The gender of the gift*, published in 1988. In this difficult book, M. Strathern details what she considers to be the characteristics of the Melanesian view, which are different from those underpinning the Western idea of personhood. Comparison is made possible by the supposedly sufficient homogeneity of the conceptions found within each region. For instance, she criticizes the notion of men's appropriation of female reproductive powers in the rituals insofar as it implies the notion of dispossession: women possess something that men appropriate for themselves; furthermore, according to the analyses of the male rituals produced between the 1960s and the 1980s (Herdt 1981; Godelier [1982] 1986), this dispossession is related in the myths. For M. Strathern, this way of talking is tantamount to considering that femaleness is a state marked by characteristics with which each woman is endowed but which someone else can appropriate. It is a construct that perceives identity, gendered identity in the event, as a set of attributes.¹² It would lead to saying, for instance, and at the risk of caricaturing, that women are physically weak, talkative, emotional, that they show a great capacity for listening, and are caring (see p. 11n17), while men have a high pain threshold and are aggressive, strong, and brave.

For M. Strathern, men and women do not differ with regard to attributes but because of distinct and culturally specific capacities for acting. A number of years before the appearance of *The gender of the gift*, she had challenged the idea that women were universally regarded as being tied to the reproduction of human beings. She began her fieldwork in the mid-sixties, in collaboration with Andrew Strathern. Their work among the Melpa (formerly Mbowamb, and now Hagen) in the Mount Hagen region of New Guinea had enabled her to show that, in this society where large-scale, competitive exchanges of pigs and shells were a regular feature of ceremonial life, the position of women was characterized by their status as producers of valuables and as intermediaries between groups vying with each other in these exchanges (1972). Men, on the other hand, were responsible for the transactions involving these goods and were therefore associated with exchange.

In adopting this perspective, M. Strathern distanced herself from an anthropological stance that asserted that women are associated with the domestic and

12. For a critical discussion of this predominant approach in gender studies, see Théry (2010).

men with the public sphere; that women are on the side of nature because they bring children into the world, while men are on the side of culture. In several articles published in the 1980s based on her fieldwork, she developed the idea that representations of women and womanliness vary, and she disagreed with the tendency to act as if women the world over are characterized primarily by their physiological attributes that enable them to bear children. Without denying that this is a fundamental fact, she showed in an article responding to an American colleague, Annette Weiner (1976: 13), that in two New Guinea groups—the Melpa and the Wiru—the representations associated with women are very different.

The Wiru emphasize women's reproductive powers, and the so-called gifts "for the skin" mark and reassert a person's maternal origins, for the mother's contribution to the production of individuals is the skin (M. Strathern 1981: 676). What they value in femaleness is a reproductive capacity that manifests itself in its own products, children (M. Strathern 1981: 680). Furthermore, women in this society reproduce only themselves, unlike women in the Trobriand Islands (studied by A. Weiner), who, equally associated with the reproduction of children, ensured, in the mortuary exchanges for which they were responsible, the reproduction of both the society and the cosmos (1976). Things are different in Hagen because femaleness is not the foundation of either society itself or of the reproduction of the cosmos, but of particular exchange networks, of domestic production and connections with the outside world. The characteristic associated with women is that of "in-between" (M. Strathern 1981: 678):¹³ what all women share is not the fact of being placed on the side of the reproduction of life but of being endowed with "in-betweenness," of being placed between their original group and the group into which they marry, which are partners in the institution of large-scale ceremonial exchanges.

Having demonstrated that two New Guinea Highland societies, the Wiru and the Melpa, construct femaleness along different lines, M. Strathern showed that gender cannot be universalized and that each local context must be studied in order to reveal the particular representations associated with women and womanhood.

13. Hence the title of her first published book: *Women in-between: Female roles in a male world* (M. Strathern 1972).

MOTHERS ARE BORN, FATHERS ARE MADE

The perspective I have chosen here refuses to express the asymmetry between men and women in terms of attributes. Instead, I interpret the fact that a woman becomes a mother without the need for the community to intervene, whereas, in order to become a father, a man must undergo a long series of rituals because of their different capacity to become a parent. Initiations are not merely an institution designed to reproduce male domination and prepare men for combat in a context of intertribal feuding; as I see them, initiations are also designed to turn a young boy into a potential father. But it is not enough that a man's wife be pregnant for him to attain this status. The nature of his relationship with his mother must have changed beforehand; it must have gone from a symbiotic relationship to one in which exchange, in this case the exchange of food, has become possible. This transformation is the aim of the collective phases of the initiations and takes place in two stages: the first (*itsema'a*), when the boy is between ten and twelve years old, during which the initial state of the relationship is reiterated, or presented again; and the second (*semayi'ne*), organized a few weeks or months later, in which the new form taken by the relationship is enacted. Later, when the young man is about to become a father for the first time, it is his relationship with his sister—ideally a childless, older sister—that is transformed following the same pattern. These successive reconfigurations of relationships, orchestrated at the time of the different phases in the initiation ritual, are a prerequisite for attaining fatherhood. But it is not until he is a maternal uncle, in other words when his sister has become a mother, that he is fully endowed with the capacity to “act for others.” It is as if women were endowed with this capacity by the simple fact of being born female, while men need to acquire it in the course of a gradual process of status transformation, which comes about through ritualized action on relationships in the presence of those involved.¹⁴

At this point, I must pause for a moment and review the recent evolution in the anthropological use of the term “agency.” As Laura Ahearn writes in an article devoted to the ways social scientists conceptualize this notion, “one of the most common tendencies in discussions of agency is the treatment of it as a synonym

14. John Taylor writes for Raga (North Pentecost, Vanuatu): “[Men] become more ‘complete’ as persons by beginning to take on female qualities, themselves eventually becoming, each at the same time, ‘chiefs’ and ‘mothers,’ or *ratabigi*” (2008: 169, see also 61).

for free will [however...] such an approach ignores or only gives lip service to the social nature of agency and the pervasive influence of culture on human intentions, beliefs, and actions” (2001: 114). The Ankave situation is a good illustration of the deeply cultural character of the notion of “agency,” since what they value here is not the possibility to act as an independent individual but to act for others.¹⁵ This capacity to act for others that this culture places at the heart of its conception of social relations is reminiscent of another concept recently developed in the field of psychology, by Carol Gilligan, and which has since spread to other social sciences. This is the notion of “care.” In his recent review (on the site *nonfiction.fr*) of Marie Garrau and Alice Le Goff’s book, *Care, justice, dépendance: Introduction aux théories du care*, Florian Cova analyzes the notion of dependence, the subject of the book’s first chapter, which wavers between the two meanings, one potentially positive and the other with negative connotations, tending to identify dependence with domination.¹⁶ Cova goes on to quote the authors: “The first meaning . . . refers to the de facto solidarity between two or several elements: something is dependent when it cannot be realized without the action or intervention of another element. Dependence refers to a necessary and productive relationship that joins a passive element and an active element and through which the first is realized. . . . The paradigm of the first conception is ‘the child’s dependence,’ while the paradigm of the second would ‘be rather the dependence of the slave’” (2010).

How can we not see in the Ankave situation a culturally organized and staged manifestation of the first conception, which defines dependence as a relation in which the “passive element” is realized through the action of the “active element”? Even more remarkably, and as the analysis of the male ritual cycle will show, this culture combines the two notions of “agency” and “care” within the same system of thought and practices that places particular value on acting for others, to the extent even of making it a capacity acquired through the ritual cycle, at least when one is a man, since, as I have said, women have it spontaneously.¹⁷

15. M. Strathern defines “agent” in similar terms when she writes: “an agent is one who acts with another in mind” (1988: 272).

16. In a recent paper entirely devoted to the analysis of the changing ideas about care that the inhabitants of Daiden, a village of the Lower Sepik-Ramu divide area of Papua New Guinea, are developing, Anita von Poser takes over the words of Tronto in *Moral Boundaries* (1993: 134): “by its nature, care is concerned with conditions of vulnerability and inequality” (von Poser 2017: 215).

17. Note in passing that the association of “care” with women is an important theme in work on the care ethic; it has been criticized by certain feminists for its potentially

In any event, it is not by acting on the person of the young Ankave man but on the relations he entertains with certain close kin that he becomes first a father and then a maternal uncle. To be sure, he acquires these statuses *thanks to his relations* with others or *because he is in relation* with others, his wife, child, sister, and sister's children. But that is not what the Ankave rituals stage and present. They consider that, within a person, certain relational states are incompatible with others, which makes it necessary to effect these transformations in the content of his relationship with certain close kin. In other words, it is impossible for a man to become a father and at the same time remain the son he was before the birth of his own child.

It would be tempting to talk here of "kinship positions" with reference to these relational states. Yet this expression is not appropriate because it adopts a categorizing and fixist perspective that backgrounds the behaviors, experiences, and emotions that constitute what can be described as the experienced content of a relationship. Nor does this viewpoint sufficiently take into account the temporal dimension inevitably contained in these relationships owing to their multiplication over the individual's lifetime, and in particular when they become parents (see also Wagner 1977: 638). Furthermore, even a ritualized transformation of relations clearly does not change each person's respective kinship position. It simply modifies its content by making certain formerly common practices unwelcome, such as a mother giving her son food once he has become a father or the two of them taking a meal together. Vice versa, certain practices that were not until then part of the mother-son relationship now become possible: for instance, the mother can eat an animal caught by her son.

A question inevitably arises then in the context of Melanesian anthropology: Is the fact of asserting that individuals go through life and become parents while undergoing rituals that modify the content of their relations with certain close kin equivalent to M. Strathern's idea that the Melanesian person is a "microcosm of relations" (1988: 131), in other words is a composite of paternal and maternal contributions? Or, is her proposition that persons are subjected to modifications in their internal relational state or composition over time, in particular so as to engage in a reproductive relationship, similar to the proposition defended here? For this major New Guinea specialist, the person can be said to be "relational," or as she terms it "dividual," from two standpoints: insofar as

essentialist view of gender. For a discussion of these criticisms, see Sandra Laugier (2010) and Emmanuelle Lenel (2009). Similar discussions have been raised around the notion of empathy (Strauss 2004, von Poser 2017: 219).

they are a condensation of the relations that led to their birth, first and second, because these relations are constantly elaborated, reduced, or amplified in order to inscribe the person in the temporality of their existence and the social events that punctuate it. In his book *Beyond nature and culture*, Philippe Descola offers a minimum version of this position that everyone could probably subscribe to: “Marilyn Strathern has suggested that, in this region of the world, we should describe a person not as an individuality but as a ‘dividuality,’ that is to say, a being primarily defined by his or her position and relations within some network” ([2005] 2013: 117). But M. Strathern’s theory goes much further.

If we follow her propositions, children who have been conceived by a man and a woman are “cross-sex” (her term). But when they reach adulthood, they must become reproductive persons, which supposes, in order to accede to the procreative function, becoming persons whose “internal parts are in a *same-sex* relation with one another” (M. Strathern 1988: 183; original emphasis). Rituals thus help symbolically to extract from a person those parts that do not correspond to their anatomic sex. Forced ritualized bleeding (from the nose, tongue, or penis), found in certain groups in the New Guinea Highlands, and those practices, found in other groups, that were for a time called ritualized homosexuality before being renamed “boy-inseminating practices” (Herd 1993: ix) fulfill this role.¹⁸ At given times in a person’s life, these ritually orchestrated practices make it possible, according to M. Strathern, to detach substances from or to add substances to the body and thereby temporarily change a person’s internal composition, transforming their “cross-sex,” infertile state into a “same-sex,” fertile one.

The present book addresses such questions concerning these rituals and the accession to parenthood, but proposes a version of Melanesian personhood that is somewhat different from M. Strathern’s. My reflection is part of the ongoing debate within the community of researchers about whether it is legitimate to contrast two conceptions of the person. To put it very succinctly, it is customary to oppose an individualist conception, supposedly found in Western societies, which emphasizes personal autonomy and independence, to a socio-centric or relational view, which is purportedly characteristic of non-Western societies and values social relations over the individual.

18. As I showed in a comparative article, the groups that practiced ritualized bleeding were not on the whole the same as those that induced boys to ingest semen, for reasons linked to ideas on the characteristics of the bodily substances concerned as well as on pollution (Bonnemère 1990).

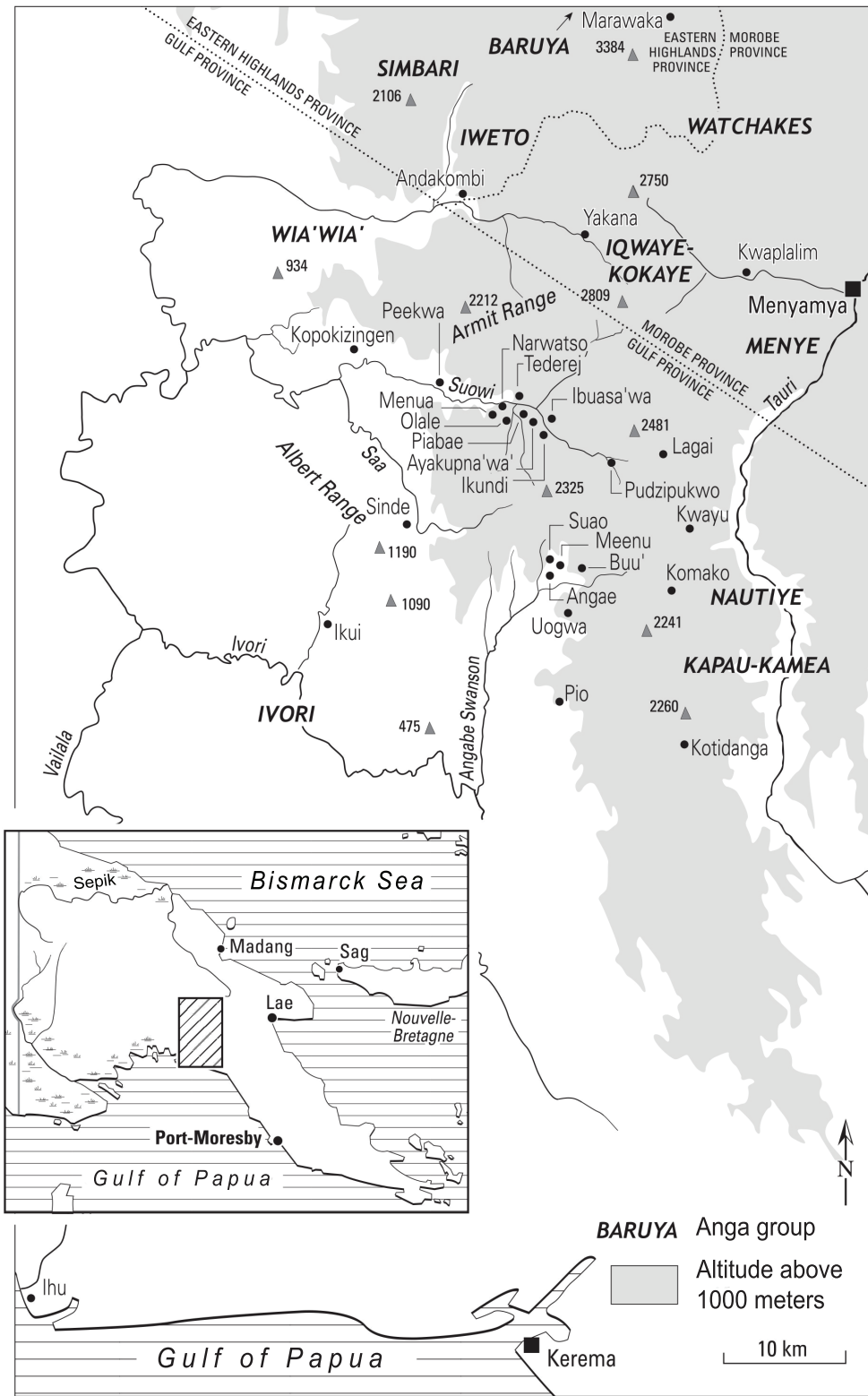
At the heart of the debate are the implications of these two different conceptions for persons' perception of themselves as individuals. For despite Marcel Mauss' caveats in his article on the notion of the person, in which he writes that "there has never existed a human being who has not been aware, not only of his body, but also at the same time of his individuality, both spiritual and physical" ([1938] 1985: 3), the ideal normative construction found in each society has often been confused with the concrete individual, "the agent of human acts, the one who says I/me" (Théry 2007: 448), which one encounters everywhere and in all periods of history. Descola expresses the same idea when he writes: "it is safe to accept as a universal fact the form of individuation that an indexical consciousness of the self renders manifest and that is reinforced by the intersubjective differentiation that stems from the use of 'you'" (2014: 118). But, as Irène Théry reminds us, the "concept of personhood has . . . *two very different meanings*. On the one hand it designates the individual as the agent of the specifically human act, which is universal; and on the other, a certain normative, moral and legal ideality, which varies with the society" (2007: 416).

An anthropology of the person obviously seeks to clarify these variable but a priori mutually intelligible constructions independently of whether the investigation is conducted by Africanists who, at the instigation of Geneviève Dieterlen, began reflecting in 1971 on the notion of the person, considering it from the standpoint of an organized accumulation of different components each with their own specific properties (*La notion de personne en Afrique noire* [1973] 1993); or, as it was approached more recently, in the context of a comparative study resulting in the identification of roughly two sets of societies. M. Strathern thus came to contrast a Melanesian view, which she strongly formalized, with our own Western view, which she presented in an equally conceptual manner. I would submit that the fairly abstract nature of this author's model stems from the fact that her aim was not so much to identify a Melanesian view of sociality and the person, as is generally believed, as to challenge the existing anthropological approaches to Melanesian thinking. As she indicated at the beginning of her book, she wanted to show that the presuppositions with which anthropologists set out to understand the Melanesian peoples were conditioned by a Western mind set and were valid only for Western societies. The model of Melanesian "sociality" she proposed (M. Strathern 1988: 357n20) might therefore have been developed in reaction to these concepts as much as constructed from concrete social situations.

Whereas her first studies were based on the analysis of material she had gathered among either the Melpa or the Wiru, in *The gender of the gift*, the identification of ethnographic differences in representations of femaleness, for

instance, took a back seat to a theory of Melanesian social action. As she writes: “I am concerned . . . not to elucidate specific local contexts for events or behavior, but to elucidate a general context for those contexts themselves: the distinctive nature of Melanesian sociality” (1988: 10). And so, rather than picking up on cultural microdifferences between Melanesian groups the better to reveal the ethno-centric and nonuniversal character of Western representations, as she did for instance in her 1981 article already mentioned, this time M. Strathern produced a theory that systematically opposes the feminist, or “prefeminist,” anthropological conceptualizations (1988: 58) of her colleagues, the result of which may then appear as the lowest common denominator of all Melanesian representations. *The gender of the gift* therefore provides not so much a description of Melanesian sociality as an image of what is produced by the systematic, abstract questioning of the foundations on which the analyses of this sociality rest. In other words, M. Strathern’s Melanesian world may essentially be a world of ideas, as suggested by Alfred Gell when, at the end of his “Strathernograms” article devoted to presenting the model of the author of *The gender of the gift*, he called the system “M” and added: “which you can take to stand for Melanesian or Marilyn, as you wish” (1999: 34).

I hope to show that the analysis of ethnographic material gathered among the Ankave of the Suowi Valley will contribute to the debate on the relational conceptions of the person that, since the publication of *The gender of the gift* in 1988, have been regarded as characteristic of Melanesian peoples, even if some authors have pointed out that elements of individuality always exist side-by-side with such conceptions. Among such voices is that of Descola, for whom “without denying the existence of a theory of a ‘dividual’ person in Melanesia, we should bear in mind, along with Maurice Leenhardt years ago and Edward LiPuma more recently, that that theory co-exists alongside—or is in some situations supplanted by—a more egocentric conception of a subject; and there is no evidence to suggest that this theory is a product solely of European colonization” ([2005] 2013: 117). In the same vein, Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart have proposed the concept of “relational-individual” to designate a “form of personhood in which elements of relationality and elements of individuality coexist” (2000: 63). According to these two authors, we can expect to find relational conceptions of the person the world over, and that goes as much for Melanesia and the South Pacific as elsewhere. It would therefore be other notions, also discovered by M. Strathern, such as “permeability” and even “partibility,” that would be specific to a vision encountered in this part of the world.



Map 1. The Ankave territory and the location of the Anga groups in Papua New Guinea.

As we will see in the course of the present study, the Ankave ethnography enables us to take part in the discussion of all these questions, in particular thanks to the analysis of the life cycle rituals that are the occasion in this society to accompany individuals at these stages, which involve them in ever-more numerous relations and gradually place them in new relational positions. As André Iteanu writes of the Orokaiva, another New Guinea society, “a person’s relational sexual identity is essentially constructed through rituals” (2001: 333).

WE ARRIVE IN THE SUOWI VALLEY

The three hundred and fifty people who occupied the Suowi Valley at the time of our arrival in May 1987 (see map 1) received Pierre Lemonnier and me in a forest setting where villages built high on steep slopes stretch as far as the eye can see toward the Gulf of Papua. This is how the story began. During the fifth month of the year, as they would say, I first set foot on this forgotten territory in the foothills of the mountain chain that bisects the island of New Guinea from east to west. Our plane landed on the only airstrip in the region, located in another Ankave valley, occupied by the Angae village, along the floor of which runs the Ankave-Swanson River. We then spent a long day walking. The tiny Angae airstrip had been cleared a few years earlier by Richard Speece, an American missionary and linguist who had been living there since 1978. He had built a wooden house, introducing materials and objects hitherto unknown in the valley (saws, corrugated metal sheets, nails). Richard had quickly organized his linguistic work, for the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), of which he was a member, knowing that conversion to the Lutheran Church is effective only on condition of fluency in the native language. He painstakingly inquired into local beliefs about the supernatural in order to translate the New Testament as accurately as possible. To everyone’s delight, he even built a school and then attracted the young (and less young) people from the surrounding hamlets. Actively aided by Peter,¹⁹ a young Ankave man who had become his friend, he soon began designing six textbooks for learning to read and write the

19. Some, the men in particular, received a Christian name during the passing visit or temporary stay of a church representative, usually Lutheran but sometimes Seventh Day Adventist (SDA). Used by few people when we first visited, their use has become increasingly frequent.

vernacular, which turned out to be very useful to the young anthropologist that I was at the time.

But on this day in May, Richard, his wife, and their three small children were not there to greet us as we descended from the familiar Missionary Aviation Fellowship's (MAF) little Cessna. They had gone to spend two months in their house in Ukarumpa, a modest American-style village where the some 300 current members of the "Papua New Guinea branch" of the organization had each bought a wooden house surrounded by a small garden. This allowed them to advance the development of the textbooks for learning the various languages of New Guinea by working in the purpose-built laboratories and sharing what they knew of these very ancient languages, which predate the famous Austronesian migration by several tens of thousands of years.²⁰ No fewer than eight hundred languages are still spoken in Papua New Guinea and, since 1956 when the Summer Institute of Linguistics began working in the country, nearly 50 percent of them have been described and two hundred are being studied by these fervent specialists who regularly congregate in this little town in the east.

Peter was the only one to meet us that day, with the energy and cheekiness that we would subsequently come to appreciate. Each time he came to the Suowi Valley, he would stop by to chat about insignificant things as well as others that mattered to him: survival in the valley during the 1997 drought, his desire to stand as a local counselor, his first—frightening—encounter with white people or his distress when the American missionary-linguist family with whom he had long worked decided to leave the country definitively, in 1992. He became great friends with Pierre, my partner in life and work.

Always ready to pitch in and to share his knowledge and feelings, Peter offered us a bed and a meal, then woke us after a short night. The following day he conducted us to the valley we had overflowed the day before without realizing it, obscured as it had been by thick clouds and rain. Because he was familiar with the area, having spent the early 1980s there, Pierre had spotted from the window of the Cessna the powerful river that wends its way from east to west through this vast portion of the Ankave territory. Ill prepared for a difficult hike over steep muddy trails, I had struggled until we came within view of an inhabited space: first of all the gardens, which looked chaotic to eyes accustomed to

20. At least most of them, since certain languages spoken along the coasts are of Austronesian origin.

neat European rural plots with their straight rows, and then a zone of savannah, indicating a longstanding human presence.

I learned from an in-depth study of first contacts I did fifteen years later that, on this fine day in 1987, a woman from Ayakupna'wa had taken fright upon seeing this white woman with Pierre. She laughed when she told me she had jumped off the trail and tried to hide. For my part, I only remember a young boy, Michael, who popped up proudly in front of us with that expression of delight and willingness we would see on the faces of all of our hosts each time we arrived.

The Ankave of the Suowi Valley had been contacted for the first time in 1938, which is to say yesterday on the scale of great discoveries in the South Pacific, but in the same period as the wide valleys in the western part of the country. These highlands contain several regional capitals served by “the Highland Highway,” the country’s only highway. Early in the year 1938, an Australian geologist, together with Patrol Officer A. Timperley and nine policemen, walked from the Upper Vailala River to the Tauri (along the Mbwei River that flows between the Staniforth and Armit ranges; see map 1) on an exploratory patrol for Oil Search Limited Company. Timperley departed from Kerema on the southern coast on October 27, 1937, and came back on January 14, 1938, after having gone through the Mbwei Valley between December 8 and 21, 1937. This was a long and very difficult trip during which it is reported that first contact was made.²¹ Next, Australian administrators accompanied by policemen and carriers visited the region, first in 1951 and then twice in the mid- and late 1960s. The first trip, led by Patrol Officer K. G. O’Brien, is well remembered because its arrival in Ayakupna'wa in October 1965 was followed by the circling of a plane that dropped a few patrol boxes and big bags of rice, small cowrie shells (*girigiri*), tins, sugar, et cetera (Bonnemère and Lemonnier 2009: 309–10).

Nearly twenty years later, people from the Suowi Valley hosted Pierre for a few weeks, having refused to allow a white missionary to settle in one of their hamlets, as their brothers and neighbors in Angae had done four years earlier. All that was before we had decided to undertake long-term fieldwork. In the space of twenty years, and since this short nine-month stay in 1987–88, we have spent a total of over two years in the Suowi Valley.

21. Several violent conflicts occurred between the population and members of the prospecting expedition, which ended with casualties on both sides as well as repeated desertions by exhausted and frightened carriers (Bonnemère and Lemonnier 2009).

The imprint of the outside world on the valley's inhabitants is rather original. It defies any generalization about the history of the colonization of the island of New Guinea, for it is more the scarcity of visits received over nearly seventy years than the exact date of first contact that explains the isolation of this population, which today numbers some five hundred and twenty persons. With the exception of the two Australian exploratory missions in 1965 and 1967, and until the 1970s, the interval between encounters has always been at least fourteen years. And since girls are married at a very young age, this lapse of time without visits from the outside often corresponds—give or take three or four years—to what here is called a generation.

The other reason for their marginalization is simply an unfortunate drawing of administrative boundaries. The Suowi Valley is located in the northernmost part of Gulf Province, the capital of which, Kerema, is the second largest town on the south coast, after Port Moresby (see map 1). Only a handful of Ankave have ever been to Kerema, but all or nearly all are familiar with the administrative center of Menyamya (Morobe Province), which is reached by a long day's walk for someone fit, or two if they are in a weakened state. Although a 2,800-meter-high mountain lies between the two places, as well as the territory of former enemies, today the men no longer hesitate to set aside their apprehensions in order to report to the police some conflict that has become unmanageable by means available on the spot. In this event, one or two agents come to Ikundi or Ayakupna'wa to settle the affair, by force if necessary. If we add that the valley is located precisely at the intersection of two other provincial boundaries, Morobe and Eastern Highlands, everything is explained. For decades, the likelihood of ever having an airstrip, an aid post, and a school was next to zero.²²

It was therefore not any sense of folklore that prompted the immense majority of Ankave men to still wear, in 1990, their pulpul, a voluminous short "apron" made of rows and rows of reeds that have been pounded and then dried and assembled. Diagonally across their chest they wore a braid to which they added a wide belt. Both were woven from the yellow stems of a wild mountain orchid. The short cape made from beaten ficus bark, attached by a neckstring passed through the belt, covered their buttocks and completed their proud allure. The

22. In January 2011 the first plane finally landed on the Ikundi strip, but in 2017 the building dedicated to an aid-post/clinic was still empty, and the few young women who had been brought to town a couple of years earlier to be trained as midwives still could not help women having difficulty giving birth.

women went bare-breasted but hid the lower part of their bodies by a skirt of pressed reeds or beaten bark. The long cape, also made of bark, which they still wear on their shoulders or their head, depending on the weather and the load they are carrying back from the garden, makes them easily recognizable.

That is why, one day in January 1988, when I saw Timiès coming toward me under the beating sun, something seemed strange about him. Why had this young man hung a long bark cape from the crown of his head? Why, above all, did he seem so idle? He was alone and carried neither bow nor arrows. Something was wrong with his male appearance. Then I learned the truth of it; a young man wearing a bark cape on his head means only one thing to all members of the valley and beyond, to each of the twelve hundred Ankave of the territory: Timiès was to become the father of his first child. This situation had a few advantages—it meant a rest, but above all it meant duties toward his wife, his in-laws, and the baby to come.

It also meant that he would soon go through the third and final stage of the initiation ritual, at the end of which his person and the nature, form, and content of his previous relations with others will have changed.

We can say that, when it is that of a man, this silhouette, created by a long bark cape the upper part of which covers the head, condenses and expresses several realities at once: a state (waiting for a first child); a position in a particular relational situation (husband of a pregnant wife); and a transitional stage in life (between not having a child and having one). As soon as his baby is born, these realities will evolve, and his silhouette will change at the same time; he will become a fully fledged man, having come to the end of the series of life cycle rituals organized for him (at least as a living person). These rituals form a mandatory sequence for every Ankave boy, at the close of which he is considered to be an adult man, but not yet someone capable of acting on others, a status that will be acquired only at the close of the final stage in the process of his personal construction and which he will be able to exercise once his sister has her own children.

Because the *suwangain* ritual celebrating the moment when a young man becomes a father for the first time ends the cycle of rituals he must undergo in his lifetime, its analysis, together with that of the collective stages experienced a few years earlier, offers a privileged position to understanding how the local population conceives the gradual process of constructing the male person. And because they foreground the role of others in the construction of the person in a particular way that I have never seen described in the literature, characterized



Photo 1. For a man, wearing a bark cape on his head is the sign he is about to become a first-time father. He will have to wear this cape for the duration of his wife's pregnancy and respect a certain number of prohibitions that will place him on the margin of the activities of other men but in relation with his sister and the future mother of his child. © Pierre Lemonnier (July 2002)

specifically by respecting food taboos for someone else, Ankave ritual practices and their underlying mental representations bring new elements to bear on this question that may help us understand how the person and their development over their lifetime are conceived in non-Western societies. The first step in such an approach implies immersing oneself in the daily life of this little population living deep in the heart of New Guinea.