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► **To cite this version:**

Pascale Bonnemère. Actions, Relations and Transformations: The Cycle of Life According to the Ankave of Papua New Guinea. *Oceania*, 2018, 88 (1), pp.41-54. 10.1002/ocea.5180 . hal-01723919

HAL Id: hal-01723919

<https://hal.science/hal-01723919>

Submitted on 20 Dec 2021

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Actions, Relations and Transformations: The Cycle of Life According to the Ankave of Papua New Guinea

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ABSTRACT

Among the Ankave of Papua New Guinea, the important moments in men's and women's lives (birth, initiation, marriage and death) are marked by rituals and exchanges. Analysis of these moments reveals four major principles that organize how the Ankave think about human existence and its continuity: (1) a radical asymmetry between men and women in how they reach physical and reproductive maturity; (2) symbolic proximity between bodily substances and certain plants and minerals; (3) the power of life and death that maternal kin have over their nephews and nieces on account of their shared blood; and (4) the distance between the agent of an action and the action's beneficiary ('action for another'). This article explores the registers in which these principles operate in order to grasp the Ankave understanding of life. The register of substances predominates in Ankave discourse about good health and growth, while the register of daily activities dominates when it comes to marking gender distinctions during infancy and childhood. The register of transformations and relations is dominant during male initiations – it is during these rituals that relations between novices and specific categories of kinswomen are transformed – and in discourse about what happens to boys' bodies during these rituals. Analyses of Ankave discourse on life and on the rituals and exchanges that accompany life-cycles show how these four principles operate concretely and how the registers of substances, activities, transformations and relations are articulated to form a specific way of understanding human existence and its continuity.

Keywords: Ankave-Anga, childhood, male rituals, relations, transformations, substances, substitutes, metamorphoses, affordance, action for others than oneself.

The anthropology of New Guinea is known for the two seemingly opposite interpretations it has produced of local populations' ideas about personhood and development over the course of a person's life. The first interpretation reached its height in the 1970s and 1980s and sees the idiom of bodily substances and their substitutes as the key to understanding local systems of thought and values (see for example, Bonnemère 1990; Hinton and McCall 1983; Jorgensen 1983; Knauff 1989; Mandeville 1979; Weiner 1982). The second interpretation appeared somewhat later, and emphasizes analyses in terms of relations. The emblematic figure of this second interpretation is Marilyn Strathern (1988); it has also been defended in France by Daniel de Coppet (see Iteanu 2010). Rather than being mutually exclusive, these two approaches are in fact equally legitimate, since they account for ethnographic material manifested in different registers yet belonging to a single, specific view of the world and living in the world. Both interpretations are necessary to understand how the societies of this region socially orchestrate the various stages of human existence as they appear in vital processes (conception, birth, growth, maturation, degeneration and death) and how they conceptualize

personhood (for example, they consider men and women to be distinct in terms of bodily and physiological characteristics, and they understand gender difference as an axis around which variations in terms of capacities for action are organized). According to Perig Pitrou (2012:79; 2017:361), all these issues are part of the anthropology of life, as is the question of the causes or agents that participate in the various stages of existence.

The Ankave belong to a group of peoples known as the Anga, who share a common origin. As a result of conflicts among the primeval population, its members split into what several centuries or millennia later became 12 groups speaking related languages and living within a 130 by 140 km territory in the eastern part of Papua New Guinea. In spite of some shared cultural ‘characteristics’ between the Anga groups, they have different forms of marriage (with or without bridewealth), life-cycle rituals that use different substances (the northern Anga – including the famous Baruya and Sambia, studied by Godelier 1986 and Herdt 1981 respectively – use semen; the Ankave use a plant that is a blood substitute) and that correspond to contrasting representations of growth and physical maturation, and finally, some groups have female initiations and end-of-mourning ceremonies, while others have not.

These differences in ritual practices correspond to the Ankave’s underlying conceptions of life, which I will examine in this article by emphasizing four principles that emerge from analysis. A principle can be here defined as in dictionaries: ‘a basic generalisation that is accepted as true and that can be used as a basis for reasoning or conduct’ (Thesaurus on line) or in the Oxford one (on line as well): ‘A fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behaviour or for a chain of reasoning.’ These four principles, which structure Ankave practices in the fields that anthropologists call kinship, gender and personhood, or explain vital processes like reproduction, growth and maturation and which my analysis shows stand in symbolic contiguity with what happens in the non human living world, are expressed in three registers: the register of substances, the register of actions and the register of relations and transformations.¹ I use the term ‘register’ closely to how linguists define it: ‘A variety of a language or a level of usage, as determined by degree of formality and choice of vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax, according to the communicative purpose, social context, and standing of the user.’ Shortly stated and adapted in the present anthropological context, this would render something like: ‘A means to express a principle’. It is important to distinguish these registers, although in certain cases or on certain ‘objects’ more than one may operate simultaneously, as for example when it comes to proscribed foods.

FOUR PRINCIPLES

Among the Ankave, individuals’ lives are organized around rituals marking important moments; there are more of these rituals for men than for women. One of the fundamental principles of the Ankave understanding of human existence and development has to do with the fact that unlike girls, who grow up and reach maturity spontaneously, boys must pass through a series of ritual ordeals to arrive at adulthood. As in other societies of the region (Read 1952, 1982), there is a fundamental and explicitly acknowledged asymmetry between men and women in terms of how they reach physical and reproductive maturity.

There is also a symbolic connection – which sometimes is strong enough to imply substitutability – between substances of the human body (blood in particular) and plant and mineral elements. This association can be seen in dietary practices (both favoured and forbidden foods), in myths explaining the origin of red plants and earths, in the vocabulary used to designate states of matter and in certain ritual actions performed during initiations.

A third principle essential to understanding Ankave material practices relating to personhood is the fact that maternal relatives are the source of the blood in their nieces' and nephews' bodies, and thus are viewed as having the power of life and death over them. Maternal uncles are the head representatives of the maternal kin group and they therefore receive gifts of nature (pork meat, game) from their nieces' and nephews' fathers and fathers' kin groups as long as their nieces and nephews are children; they then redistribute these gifts to their own brothers and sisters. If an uncle is satisfied with the gifts he has received, he will perform acts to allow his sisters' children to grow: rubbing his niece's chest with earth, for example, or acting as a ritual sponsor for his nephew during initiation. But, if an uncle considers them insufficient or too rare, he may cast a spell not only to stop his nieces and nephews from growing and maturing, but also to render them infertile, cause them to lose weight, make them fall ill or even cause them to die. The matter is thus very serious, and relationships with maternal kin are marked by a fundamental ambivalence that must constantly be negotiated. Maternal uncles' ability to do harm does not end when they die, for their spirits may continue to harass their relatives (Lemonnier 2006). Maternal kin and their spirits often figure prominently in attempts to explain illnesses. The solution is simple in principle: the maternal uncle must be placated with an extra gift of pork meat or game so that he will undo the harmful effects of the maledictions he has cast on his sister's children, with whom he shares blood, the vital substance *par excellence*.

The fourth and final pillar supporting Ankave representations of life and persons can be called the principle of 'action for another' (Bonnemère 2018). This expression captures a widespread conception within Ankave society: a person's state of health depends as much or even more on the actions of others as on his or her own. Persons and their development are dependent on the participation of certain kin, especially kinswomen, – on the positive actions they take as well as the taboos they observe – for their growth and progress through the major stages of life. The corollary to this principle is that persons, especially of male gender, have at specific moments of their life bodies that are considered permeable to others.

So, as just suggested, here too there is a fundamental asymmetry between men and women: the former only acquire this capacity to act on others at the end of a ritual cycle during which they pass from the status of boy–son to adult–maternal uncle; in other words, from a status in which they 'are the results of another's action' to one in which they have the 'capacity to act for themselves and for—and on—another': in other words, the capacity to be an agent. This capacity is gradually acquired through a series of transformations, first in boys' relations to their mothers, and second in their relations to their sisters, within a highly ritualized context requiring these women's participation (Bonnemère 2008, 2018, in particular Chapter 5).

The principle of action for others runs throughout male Ankave rituals, which can be interpreted as a set of practices aiming to transmit a capacity for action through ritually orchestrated relational transformations involving the two people in the relationship being transformed. This interpretation differs from earlier ones (Godelier 1986; Herdt 1981): I see these rituals as not – or not only – about withdrawing boys from the world of women and turning them into adult men and warriors within an exclusively masculine group. For the presence of novices' mothers and older sisters is crucial to the ritual's efficacy. On this interpretation, the ideology underlying initiations is radically different: they are not so much an institution for reproducing male domination – as Herdt and Godelier have suggested – as a series of steps toward a particular relational status, that of maternal uncle, which is connected to a specific capacity for action. Within such a conceptual universe, the men and women involved in the relationships to be transformed are necessary to the operation of transformation.

Thus, the ritual that begins the series of three initiatory stages establishes a parallel between the behaviour of mothers and their sons. The two sets of behaviour are modelled

precisely on one another and they act out the relationship that has existed between mothers and sons since birth, and even since the womb: a symbiotic relationship, one of non-differentiation, in which what the mother does affects her child directly. The ritual begins with the piercing of boys' septums, after which the boys spend several weeks secluded in the forest. While the wound is healing, the boys' mothers are also in seclusion, in a large collective shelter built for the occasion at the outskirts of the village, and they must follow certain dietary and behavioural proscriptions to help the healing process: no viscous foods and no red pandanus juice – which, we shall see, is the primary substitute for human blood. In addition, the mothers' behaviour and that of their sons in the forest are identical, and reflect the specific state of the relationship that will be transformed several weeks later, when the boys emerge from their seclusion and receive from their mothers a tuber cooked in a half-buried oven, for which they give in exchange a bird or rat they have hunted during their weeks in the forest.² This transaction marks a change in the nature of their relationship: the boy is now capable of giving something to the person who engendered him, and is no longer solely the product of another's action.³

To recapitulate: either one person respects a taboo for another, or two people respect the same taboo at the same time. The first case diverges from a common configuration of prohibition systems, in which a proscription is followed for oneself, and transgressing it affects only oneself negatively. Here, on the contrary, the person for whom the prohibition is followed is not the person who follows it; this is the case no matter what reason is given to justify the taboo and no matter whether it is permanent or temporary (as for example during mourning or pregnancy). The prohibitions I am discussing here in the life cycles of the Ankave are never respected on one's own behalf, but rather are intended for someone else: one's son, one's younger brother, one's pregnant wife. This distinction is significant because it obliges us to examine not only the justifications given for putting restrictions on a food or a particular behaviour, but also – and probably above all – the relationship between the two people involved.

In the second case, when two people respect the same taboo at the same time, the issue remains the same, and we must ask whether each person is following the prohibition for him- or herself, or for the other person. The simultaneity of the two people's behaviour emphasizes the relationship between them. Indeed, if each person was respecting the prohibition for him- or herself, why do so at the same time? As Meyer Fortes wrote over 40 years ago, 'sharing or abstaining from the same food means uniting in common commitment' (1966:16). We will later see what kind of relationship is in play when two people respect the same taboo together.

THREE REGISTERS OF EXPRESSION

The four principles I have just presented – asymmetry between men and women in the process of maturation; symbolic connection between certain components of the human body and elements of the environment; the power of life and death maternal kin have over their uterine nieces and nephews; and action for others – are expressed in several registers. Analysis of these registers will make it possible to discern how certain vital processes (reproduction, growth, maturation, *etc.*), as well as person and gender, are locally conceptualized.

The register of substances

The register of substances dominates Ankave discourse. One's good health and growth – *in utero* and in adult life – depend on the presence and quantity of bodily substances that originate in the substances of other people (in particular, the mother's uterine blood) or in

elements of the plant world (the fruits of certain plants such as red pandanus juice) and animal world (the blood of certain birds, for example), which are considered substitutes⁴ for human blood. Knowledge of such vital matters is not transmitted through words but rather through practices that are observed and then integrated as forms of behaviours. For example, children realize at a very early age that the flesh of cockatoos, the large, white-feathered birds that criss-cross the sky in flocks at dusk, is never a part of their meals. They also learn that the name of these birds is the name they call their grandfathers. They either hear or immediately understand the reason for this proscription against eating cockatoo meat: to break it would cause them to age prematurely.

The register of substances and their substitutes is based on resemblance. Hence, the white feathers of the cockatoo, the red juice extracted from cooked *Pandanus conoideus* fruits or sugar cane, and the viscous leaves of cooked *aibika*⁵ are all perceived to have properties that must be encouraged or counteracted through rules of consumption or prohibition imposed at particular moments or periods of existence. The recognition of resemblances goes very far in the case of red pandanus juice, because it extends not only to the relationship between this plant and blood, but also to the relationship between the different states of each. The vocabulary is illustrative here: the red pandanus juice extracted from the first squeezing of the cooked seeds by men is designated by a paronym of the word for blood (*ta'ne'* and *tange'*, respectively). The other states of the sauce extracted from this fruit have distinct names: the thin layer that covers the seeds is called *ke'ka'a*, also the word for blood clot; the juice from the second squeezing is *main'* and does not produce blood, and the term for the faintly coloured juice of the last squeezing (*inenge'*) is also used for sugar cane juice and water (Bonnemère 1994:25–6). Similarly, there is a story that the first red pandanus grew on the spot where a primordial man was put to death because he was unable to give his name, unlike the other men who emerged from the ground at the same time. It also tells that the red cordyline *oremere'* (*Cordyline fruticosa*) originated from the transformation of a clot of blood (*ke'ka'a*) from the assassinated man and that the red earth, *sewaye'*, is the very earth that was found at the spot where the criminal act took place (Bonnemère 1996b:252, 256).

To understand the relationship Ankave culture establishes between these plant elements and human blood, anthropological writings that draw on the semiotics of Peirce (Keane 2003; Munn 1986) may be of some help. Let us take the example of red pandanus again, the main substitute for blood. Webb Keane, summarizing Peirce's theory of the relation between sign and object, writes that this relation may be 'iconic (resemblance), indexical (causal or proximal linkages), or symbolic (most evident in 'arbitrary' social conventions)' (2003:413). Nancy Munn has used Peirce's concept of qualisign to produce a symbolic analysis of how inhabitants of the island of Gawa (Massim Archipelago, Papua New Guinea) create value in production, consumption, and exchange: 'Qualisigns exhibit something other than themselves in themselves' (Munn 1986:74). And Keane again: "As Munn uses it, qualisign refers to certain sensuous qualities of objects that have a privileged role within a larger system of value' (2003:414).

In the context that interests me here, the relation between red pandanus juice (the object) and blood (the sign) is iconic, since it is based on a resemblance: both fluids are red in colour. But, because red pandanus juice produces blood in the bodies of human beings, the relationship is also indexical: consuming red pandanus juice increases the volume of blood in the body and is thus a factor in and cause of good health.

We may also turn to the concept of 'affordance' developed by James J. Gibson (1979) to illustrate the choice of red pandanus juice as the substance with the necessary qualities to be associated with blood. Here, affordance makes it possible to understand that red pandanus juice is not chosen randomly from among the fruits (even the red fruits) available in the

Ankave's environment – as would be the case in a symbolic relation – but rather that this substance is to someone lacking blood as a chair is to someone who wants to sit (to use the example Gibson gives). It is the chair's 'sit-on-ability' that makes it a candidate: affordances are 'opportunities for perception and action offered by an environment to an organism whether human or not, such as graspability, sit-on ability, and so on' (Kaufmann and Clément 2007:227).

Analogical reasoning⁶ is at work in the secret phases of male initiation rites, because the substances that are brought into play during ritual actions imitate a strictly female physiological process (gestation and childbirth). In the forest, far from the view of women, after adult men have pierced the novices' septums (a symbolic death), they put them through a corridor of branches and rub them with red pandanus seeds and *sewaye*' earth as they exit. Prior to this, the boys consume red pandanus juice in secret,⁷ as if to take on one of the major functions of gestation: to cause the child's body to grow by contributing blood. Indeed, pregnant women consume more red pandanus juice than normal because of their bodies' increased needs in order to guarantee the growth of the foetus they carry within them.

All these analogies in the visible qualities of substances (colour, liquidity), in vocabulary and in secret ritual operations contribute to the register of bodily substances and physiology. The vision and thought of the Ankave is clearly focussed on substances when it comes to elaborating relationships between the environment and the human body. Thus, vital processes are expressed in terms of the mixing of female blood and semen (reproduction), an increase in blood (growth), a loss of blood (illness), *etc.*

The register of actions

When Ankave women speak of how children are conceived – this is a topic Ankave men do not like to discuss – they speak of the necessary mixing of semen and maternal blood. As we have just seen, this blood plays a central role. Once conception has occurred, the blood remains blocked in the uterus – *nie'wa a'a*, the 'baby bag' – and nourishes the foetus instead of flowing every month. The baby's growth is entirely dependent on this substance, and sexual relations must be halted because the semen could endanger it.⁸ There is no discourse among the Ankave regarding sexual differentiation before the child's birth, unlike in other societies of the region, where we find interpretations of why children are born boys or girls in terms of the differential strength of paternal and maternal substances (see for example, Rohatynskyj 1990:439). However, beginning at birth, ritual actions to establish a difference between girls and boys are performed. These consist in a series of individual – though culturally homogenous – ritual gestures aiming to connect the newborn and child with gender-specific domains of activities. These ritual gestures pertain to the second register through which the various principles used to conceptualize sexual differentiation and the transmission of life are expressed.

The instrument used to cut the umbilical cord differs depending on the sex of the newborn: women who have just given birth use a piece of cane for boys⁹ and a simple bamboo blade for girls. Immediately afterwards, the cord and placenta are placed in different trees: the fruit of one tree is said – and often joked – to resemble the tip of the penis, while the fruit of the other is sometimes consumed after being cooked with leafy vegetables in a bamboo tube.

The mother also places the skin of a palmgrass (*pitpit* in Tok Pisin; *Setaria palmifolia*) that was forbidden to her during pregnancy, at the base of one of two varieties of the same plant, depending on the sex of her child. These plants are related to the child's future activities: for boys, the plant is either an *a'ki ore*', the leaves of which are used to make the

wrappings in which *Pangium edule* kernels are macerated in order to make them edible (Bonnemère 1996b), or an *a'ki kura'te'*, the red leaves of which are placed on the roof of the shelters built in the forest for novices. For girls, the palmgrass is placed at the foot of an *a'ki pungwen* shrub, the large leaves of which are used exclusively to make the roofs of childbirth shelters.

Several weeks later, when the child is washed for the first time in the large, cold river, the mother brings either a *wiamongen* nut (*Mucuna albertisii*) if the child is a boy or a banana tree stem or cowry if the child is a girl. The *wiamongen* nut is used in all hunting magic, prefiguring one of the important tasks in an adult masculine life, while the banana tree evokes a girl's future horticultural activities and the cowry refers to what the bride-wealth was constituted of in the recent past. Boy or girl, the mother rubs the baby vigorously with one hand, and with the other holds the object that symbolizes the child's future obligatory activities.

These practices marking gender difference refer to situations that will arise over the course of an individual's life and which are linked to his or her future activities – and also, in the case of boys, to their development, which requires an important ritual. They indicate something about how gender is understood: as a given, but a given that is largely insufficient for making an Ankave boy or girl, even less an Ankave man or woman.

All the other individual ritual actions performed during childhood are done for both boys and girls indiscriminately; their objective is growth. This is the case, for example, with the following rituals: anointing the child with yellow *omore'* earth shortly after birth; recuperating the remains of the child's first solid meal, which are scattered by his or her parents in front of a house filled with villagers; and placing his or her first baby tooth in a variety of cordyline (the variety is the same for boys and girls). Later on, it is the maternal uncle who is in charge of growth and fertility rites when his nieces and nephews reach puberty – but these rites belong to the register of relations and transformations.

Thus, with the exceptions of the first washing of babies in the great river, in which two operations are simultaneously performed – one to bring growth, the other to orient the child's future activities on the basis of sex – the register of actions is mostly dedicated to establishing – or more accurately, to socially confirming – gender.

The register of transformations and relations

To speak of life and the materialities associated with it leads one to evoke the register of metamorphosis – a form of transformation – which is predominantly expressed in animal metaphors. The origin myth of initiations tells that the bones of several brothers who had been assassinated and eaten by an old woman were put into the water by the youngest brother, who survived. There they become first tadpoles, then frogs – animals associated with women¹⁰ – and finally initiated young men. This growth process, which involves two intermediary steps, stages a rebirth that implies a death: the old woman's murder of young married men, followed by her consumption of their flesh. The rebirth takes place in an aquatic milieu, which allows for the slow, gradual transformation of the young men's bones into soft, unshaped matter out of which frog legs emerge, which will eventually transform into human legs and arms. May we then go so far as to say that the intermediary stage of boys' growth is conceptualized as feminine, and that a boy's development involves passing through a feminine stage? This connection is undoubtedly justified; we may also look to the comparison the Ankave make between the appearance of small boys, with their shapeless loincloths, and that of women, whose skirts lack the triangular form characteristic of men's loincloths. In a way, masculinity is considered the ultimate stage of development, which must pass through a feminine stage (see also, Bonnemère 1990).

Another series of metaphors¹¹ can be found in the vocabulary used for certain pieces of clothing specific to men. Once a boy has gone through the first two collective stages of male initiation, he receives a bark cape called an *ijiare*, which is attached to the back of his neck by a string and to his waist with a belt of braided orchid stems. This term, *ijiare*, also designates the still-unspread wings of a flying insect, and we may hypothesize that the transformation from boy to man is conceived as that from chrysalis to insect. Having passed the first two stages of his initiation, the boy is like a young flying insect that has barely emerged from its chrysalis and whose wings have just spread open. By using the same term for the cape that covers men's backs and buttocks and the wings of a chrysalis, the Ankave probably seek to express the idea that the young initiate is now in a new physical state, free of the maternal covering that enveloped him symbolically.¹² His childhood, spent in a largely female universe, had not allowed him to separate himself from the relationship that binds him to his mother – a relation the Ankave consider to be symbiotic (Bonnemère 2015:96–98). By using the image of an insect emerging from its chrysalis, the Ankave express the idea of a *radical* transformation, for nothing in the flying insect recalls its earlier state within the cocoon.¹³ From tadpole to man, from chrysalis to insect, the change is much more than mere growth. Adult men are not boys who have simply grown, for the physical and psychological ordeals they have undergone have radically transformed them; they have become other. The gap between an uninitiated boy and an adult man is of the same order of magnitude as that between a chrysalis and a flying insect – and thus the two situations can be said to be analogous to each other (see note 7).¹⁴ By establishing a parallel between the development of boys and the growth of animals marked by a radical morphological transformation, the Ankave have found what they consider an adequate way of expressing the major effects attributed to masculine initiation. These metaphors make it possible to account for the absolute transformation that boys' bodies undergo in initiations and the new physical state that results.

The last register through which the Ankave express and stage the different vital processes that can be observed during a human existence is the register of relations – which, as will be clear, also involves transformations. This register concerns the ritual context and thus is at work in the ideas and practices that accompany the construction of the male person. A man does not reach the status of father or maternal uncle without first going through a series of relational transformations, first with his mother and then with his sister (Bonnemère 2018). I should point out that this is an approach to male rituals that requires paying attention to all the actors – men and women alike – and analyzing all the phases involved in rituals as an ordered and indivisible set; something that earlier works have not systematically done (see Bonnemère 2004 and 2017).

Ankave initiation processes are made up of various forms of ordeals, the explicit goal of which is to harden boys and prepare them for male adult life, which, until the recent past (the 1970s) consisted in fighting to defend tribe members from enemy groups.¹⁵ But this initiation is also an apprenticeship in rules of conduct and a space where certain mythical foundations of local culture are expressed in a metaphoric and fragmentary manner. Such conclusions can be drawn by simply observing men's activities in the forest during these rituals. However, among the Ankave – as perhaps also elsewhere, but it is no longer possible to know – men are not the only ones to perform ritualised activities during initiations. When the ritual starts, two categories of women – the novices' older sisters (ideally childless) and their mothers – are placed in such a way as to be able to hear, without seeing, the scene of their sons'/brothers' septum piercing. The participation of these kinswomen in the ritual is solicited, though in different ways. I cannot address here all the details of the secluded lives of mothers in their large, collective shelter at the outskirts of the village, the behavioural and body/clothing rules they must respect, the food bans imposed on them, the ritual

gestures they must perform by the river at dawn, or the proscriptions on pandanus, areca nuts, *etc.* that the novices' sisters must respect for an even longer period than their mothers (see Bonnemère 2008:80–4). What I should emphasize is the near-absolute parallelism that exists between what the mothers in the first place and the sisters afterwards must do and not do and the restrictions placed on their sons in the forest and on their brothers afterwards when they are about to become fathers for the first time (Bonnemère 2008).

Thus, although male and female ritual spaces are geographically separated, they are as if joined together by an invisible thread connecting the people in each space (the novices in the forest and their mothers and sisters at the edge of the village), who all participate in a single ritual process. Though previous analyses have noted that male initiation contributes to separating boys from their mothers, these analyses have only focussed on one of the terms of this relation – that is, boys – and have thus tended to minimize the relational nature of Melanesian views of personhood that scholars such as Maurice Leenhardt, Kenneth Read, and especially Marilyn Strathern, have described.¹⁶

What kinds of relations are brought to light by the prohibitions and forms of behaviour that novices and their mothers and sisters must respect?

Ankave women answer this question indirectly by constantly referring to pregnancy (Bonnemère 2008: 86), and the similarity between the actions, precautions and taboos of mothers and sons makes it possible to characterize the relationship uniting them as symbiotic.¹⁷ This situation also demonstrates that both elements of the relationship must be involved for the relation to change in nature. A second imperative is that this transformation cannot occur without prior reaffirmation of the earlier state of the relationship – here, a symbiotic relationship (Bonnemère 2017). This requires that the two sides of the relation observe the same attitudes and taboos, until the novice survives the symbolic death¹⁸ represented by the septum piercing that begins the first stage of initiations. For the mothers secluded at the edge of the village, the lifting of the prohibition on areca nuts and of the major restrictions on their movements signals the moment of this transformation, and the small game their sons offer them in accordance with a precise ritual code is the tangible sign that their relationship has changed in nature: it has gone from a symbiotic relationship to one within which exchange is possible.

During collective rituals, sisters accompany their brothers from a distance; the taboo on eating areca nuts is lifted at the same time for sisters and brothers, and sisters are the last to stop abstaining from red pandanus juice. But it is only once her young brother has gone through the first two initiation stages that a sister participates fully in the important events that mark his life, through ritualized behaviours and prohibitions. This is first and foremost the case when a brother is expecting his first child. A man who marries needs a sister because he will use the bridewealth given for her, and her participation is necessary when he is to become a father. Several acts and ritual behaviours are required from three closely linked people (the pregnant wife, the future father and his sister) as soon as the pregnancy is announced.¹⁹ All three take on the same profile by keeping a bark cape on their heads—a non-masculine way of dressing – and, for the man and his sister, by respecting a taboo on red pandanus juice in order to prevent haemorrhaging at the child's birth. Once the baby is born, various rituals take place: two secret ones performed by men and women separately, and a public one that closes the initiation cycle. The secret rites are organized in such a way that the two groups emerge at the same time, the men's group from the forest, the women's group from the tall grasses (Bonnemère 2015:82).

The ritual for a first child celebrates both a man's new status and a new parental couple. But the ritual also prepares the man to become a maternal uncle. This is why his sister must be present, for it is she who, by having children, will make it possible for him to reach this much-valued position. But, unlike in our Western societies, the simple fact of having a

sister with children is not enough to make a man a maternal uncle; he must also have acquired the capacity to act for another – an ability women have spontaneously. A maternal uncle exerts it when he pushes his nephew through the corridor of branches at the end of which the latter is rubbed with red pandanus seeds and when he applies yellow clay on his niece's chest to make her mature. The long and gradual process of initiation is the process of acquiring this capacity to act for others; to do so, a man's relations with the women to whom he is most closely connected must be transformed. To be a maternal uncle, and thus someone capable of acting on, for, and sometimes against, another person is the culmination of male life.²⁰

The relational register evident in life-cycle rituals might make it tempting to adopt the view Marilyn Strathern proposed in *The Gender of the Gift* (1988). However, the Ankave orchestration of these rituals compels us to refine this view. For Strathern, male initiations turn boys into 'incomplete' beings capable of reproducing, rather than transform them into adult men by giving them the essential attributes of their new status. Each individual is born as a composite of maternal and paternal elements – as what Strathern calls a 'complete' or 'cross-sex' individual, who is infertile. In other words, these rituals transform an androgynous, complete person – the product of the 'cross-sex' relationship between his mother and father – into an incomplete, 'single-sex' person, who has the potential to engender another being in complementarity with an equally 'single-sex' partner (Strathern 1993:47).

To summarize, for Strathern, male initiations do not – as a Western view of socialization might propose – add something to boys, completing them with some social or cultural input, but rather transform their bodies from one type of body into another (1993:44). This is how the process of growth is manifested and how the transformation from 'being the product of others' action' to 'having the capacity to act for oneself or for another' (in other words, becoming an agent) occurs. As Strathern writes, 'ritual actions make children potential parents' (Strathern 1993:46), but it is not simply a matter of changing social status and reaching the status that corresponds to this stage of life, but rather of changing one's capacity for action. This formulation corresponds to the results of my analyses of Ankave dramaturgy.

Nonetheless, relations are not here embodied in parts of people, as Strathern proposes; no material object can substitute for them, and they are not represented in any form other than relational. The modality by which the Ankave stage the passage from childhood to parenthood is a series of ritually orchestrated relational transformations in which the mother, the sister and then finally the wife of a man and mother of his first-born child, occupy a major, and indispensable place. And, in contrast with Strathern's theory of the 'partible person', I would say that for the Ankave, a person only becomes divisible as a corpse, when there is both real and metaphorical decomposition of the body, and when compensation is paid to the maternal relatives who are considered the source of the person's perishable parts. It is only at that point that objects can stand in for people – people whose activity, breath and life have disappeared from their bodies.

During their lifetimes, people's actions for others are necessary for transforming their mutual relational statuses over the course of existence. Thus, I cast some doubt on the hypothesis that for Melanesians a person's body is made of 'relational pieces' whose composition varies throughout life as the result of practices of extraction. In this region of the world, 'penis-bleeding', 'nose-bleeding', and 'tongue-bleeding' are practised. How are we to interpret these practices? As gestures aiming to effectively extract a bodily component from someone? Or as imitations of a physiological process – here, menstruation? Strathern rejects the latter possibility because it implies that there is a ritually orchestrated re-appropriation by men of female capacities they judge to be superior to their own. But local discourses explicitly refer to this regular event of women's life when they touch on the

origin of female fertility. As Gibson's concept of affordance suggests, it is through perception of this connection that menstruation becomes the model men use to create fertility in themselves.

Female physiology – here, visible in the form of regular bleeding – is thus the environment that 'affords' the fact of being fertile. Reed writes that 'in seeing our surroundings we see not abstract geometrical surfaces, colours or physical objects, but the affordance of things – what they are good for, whether they are dangerous, and so on' (1989:293). By making themselves bleed – in several societies of Papua New Guinea, men bleed their noses when their wives menstruate – men illustrate a cultural application of this notion of affordance.

CONCLUSION

Oral literature and ritual practices both express, within a register where the notion of transformation is central, what is at stake at a key moment in boys' lives: both a relational transformation that takes place and is staged during initiations associated with a change in mental state as boys learn to control their emotions in the face of unforeseen situations, and a physical transformation that is expressed in their clothing and body decorations.

By using animal metaphors to illustrate corporal change in novices and by having the people whose relationships with the novices must fundamentally change participate directly in the ritual, the Ankave clearly express the idea that the maturation of male children takes place in several registers at once: a relational and mental register, for which ritual is the theatre, and a bodily register, which oral literature reveals through references to the non-human world and which initiates' ordeals during rituals and the clothing and body decorations they wear after them express.

When the Ankave wish to establish and mark gender, they do so differently: through individual ritual gestures that seek not so much to reveal differences between boys and girls in terms of differential heat, distinct reproductive organs, or other contrasting bodily aspects, but rather to institute a cultural difference in terms of future activities or destinies. Just as Strathern located the male/female dividing line in Hagen between a sphere of exchange and a sphere of production, the Ankave emphasize activities rather than attributes when they endeavour to integrate their children of both sexes into society (Bonnemère 2014).

There remains the register of substances, a major reality in Melanesia. Discourse on bodily substances and their substitutes govern food taboos, representations of procreation and growth in childhood, relations with maternal parents, and the secret modalities of male rebirth, and their significance could easily lead us to forget that behind substances lies the universe of relational transformations.

What may we conclude here from the point of view of an anthropology of life? Perig Pitrou writes that in the work of certain authors 'speculation about life...makes apparent a kind of gap between, on the one hand, exploration of the systems of relations and functionalities proper to living beings and, on the other hand, discovery of the causes that produce these phenomena' (Pitrou 2014: 174). It must be determined which beings are characterized by each local culture as living. Animals that in our Western system of thought are very distant from humans by virtue of their modes of reproduction or morphology (frogs, insects) are for the Ankave, as we have seen, the best candidates for expressing the radical transformation that boys undergo over the course of their lives. Here we have an analogy, as defined by psychologists of cognition: 'two situations are analogous if they share a common pattern of relationships among their constituent elements' (Holyoak 2005:117; see note 6). Here, the model for the relation between elements is the incommensurability of two states

of a living being (animal or male human). The gap between these two states is of the same order. We are used to speaking of the source or base analogue – here, the animal – and of the ‘target’ analogue – here, the man. Certain plants are also very important, in that they act as substitutes for major bodily substances, such as blood, which gives them ‘life-giving properties’ (Hocart 1935:349). This is the case of red pandanus juice, which is extracted through a long technical process performed by adult men (see above and Bonnemère 1994). As I discussed earlier, the myth goes that the first pandanus tree grew where a primordial man was assassinated, at the moment when one man from each clan had emerged from the ground. The assassinated man was the only one incapable of giving his name, leading the others to kill him. Where his blood fell, several things grew or appeared: red pandanus, cordylines with red or purple leaves, and *sewaye*’ earth. This myth makes it possible to attribute agency to these various objects; their origin is the cause of or reason for their ritual use and efficacy. Finally, other human beings intervene at key moments in men’s lives: mothers and sisters act or forbid themselves from acting in order to produce effects on their sons and brothers. Here, Alfred Gell’s statement that ‘all living things are agents with respect to themselves in that their growth and form may be attributed to their own agency’ (1998, 41) does not resonate, because one owes one’s growth and transformation to others. The Ankave principle of action on others calls into question the notion that one’s body is impermeable to the actions of others. Life proceeds through the interventions of others and of plant-substitutes created from a primordial being. We may thus suggest that these are the causes of life and the agents that make it develop over the course of each person’s existence. Out of the four principles drawn from the local ethnography, acting for and on others may thus be the one characterizing the Ankave-specific way of understanding human existence and continuity. The one where the registers of substances, of actions and of relational transformations are concretely articulated.

NOTES

1. I have chosen to group relations and transformations in a single register because it is above all a question of relational transformations.
2. Sandra Bamford (2004:45) offered an alternative interpretation as well. For her, initiations stage an action of ‘decontainment’ between mothers and sons.
3. Bamford writes regarding the Kamea who, like the Ankave, are located in the southern part of the Anga territory, that ‘He who was once one with the mother is now free to enter into a relationship’ (2007:96).
4. We should note that, unlike in other societies (Coupaye 2013: 54–5), the identity of the person who collects or gives the food does not matter here; the intrinsic qualities of the food trump the relational context of its production, although the taboos respected at key moments in life reveal precisely the relations to close relatives that must be transformed for existence to progress.
5. Term in Tok Pisin for *Abelmoschus manihot* L. Medic. (Paofa and Kambuou 2006).
6. ‘Analogy is a special kind of similarity. Two situations are analogous if they share a common pattern of relationships among their constituent elements even though the elements themselves differ across the two situations’ (Holyoak 2005:117). Analogical reasoning is already present in the minds of very young children, beginning at around age two, and ‘the analogical mind is simply the mind of a normal human being’ (Holyoak and Thagard 1997:35).
7. Although the taboo on red pandanus is officially respected by all, boys (unbeknownst to the women) do transgress it, as if ensuring in secret their own growth (Bonnemère 2018, Chapter 5, Note 7), which I have shown elsewhere is modelled on gestation (Bonnemère 2001:24).
8. On the contrary, in other Anga groups, it is semen that causes the foetus to grow, and sexual relations are recommended almost entirely throughout pregnancy; they are only prohibited at the very end of the gestation period (Herdt 1981:217–8; Godelier 1986).
9. This is the same type of cane that will be used 10 years later when the boys’ septums are pierced; it is in fact the first small bar inserted into that orifice.
10. When people dream of frogs, the Ankave say that it means the dreamer will soon encounter and have sex with a woman. Frogs are also the bait of eels – the first of which being a transformed penis in myth – that women collect and place at the base of traps before activating the spring while uttering softly a magical formula (Lemonnier 2012:49).
11. For a discussion of metaphors in two New Guinean contexts, see Lewis (1980:112–3) and Coupaye (2013:281–2).

12. An artefact – the cape that covers men’s backs and buttocks – is here the material support for expressing the boys’ transformation into initiates as well as the detachment from their mothers. This double process is itself metaphorically linked to the hatching of a chrysalis.
13. Let us note that among the Baruya, boys’ growth is symbolized by the transformation of tadpoles into frogs – an image as radical as the one chosen by the Ankave – and the cape that covers boys’ backs is called ‘the tadpole tail’ (Lemonnier, personal communication).
14. In a chapter of the catalogue to the first anthropological exposition at the Musée du quai Branly (“Qu’est-ce qu’un corps ?”), Taylor and Viveiros de Castro contrast Western and Amazonian representations of metamorphosis: ‘Our cultural imagination, illustrated by the writings of Ovid and Kafka, thinks of metamorphosis as the involuntary transformation of an individual’s bodily shell, while the individual’s inner core – the soul, consciousness – remains human...As the Indians see it, metamorphosis refers to the inverse process: the interior transforms first, and dictates a bodily change that is more or less literally expressed...It is more a matter of undergoing a modulation in subjectivity’ (2006:192).
15. There are three phases to the Ankave ritual cycle: the first two are collective and most often organized in a disjointed manner with a period of several months to a year between them, but which may also be performed one after another. Each of these first phases is named after the main ritual action undergone by the boys: ‘piercing of the septum’ for the first, ‘anointing with red pandanus seeds’ for the second. These two rituals form a distinct set separate from the third and final ritual, which is centred on a young man whose first child has just been born, and who has spent the entire period of his wife’s pregnancy preparing for the event (by respecting food taboos, reducing his activity, wearing clothing in a way that gives him a non-habitual silhouette, etc.). This third stage of masculine initiations involves only ritual specialists, the young fathers who serve as sponsors to the novices, and the men who wish to accompany them to the sacred forest site. For more details, see Bonnemère 2018.
16. In *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). We should note that Leenhardt (1979) and Read (1955) had already discussed the specificities of the Melanesian person in comparison with Western representations.
17. Bamford writes that, among the Kamea, ‘what the initial taboo conditions mark is not a *singular* but a *conflated* identity’ (2007:94).
18. This interpretation is the result of an in-depth study of the whole cycle of the Ankave male initiations based on the analysis of locale discourse and ritual actions (for more details, see Bonnemère 1996a:275).
19. Because the future father is not the only one placed in a state of taboo, Ankave practices, which resemble a couvade, may be described as rites of co-parentality, as Laura Rival wrote about the Huaroni of Amazonia (1998:631), rather than of paternity, as anthropologists have usually taken couvade to be.
20. I will not dwell here on the deep ambiguity that characterizes relations with maternal relatives, but see Lemonnier 2006:324–33.

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