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Pascale Bonnemère

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Interpreting initiation in Melanesia: Past and present

Pascale Bonnemère
(Aix-Marseille Université–CNRS–EHESS, CREDO)

Initiations in Melanesia, where they were practiced, were once large-scale collective events that mobilized everyone in the community and sometimes beyond, and required months of preparation. The description and analysis of Melanesian initiations were significant in transforming the way gender relations and personhood were understood by anthropologists of the region. It is also the case that what are referred to as initiations by anthropologists are part and parcel of wider life-cycle rituals, including mortuary rites. Today in most regions initiations have undergone important modifications, when they have not disappeared altogether.

In this paper, I use two regions to illustrate the practices and ideologies entailed in these major rituals, the Anga and the Sepik, and explore how initiations have shaped anthropological understandings of Melanesia. However, the picture these initiations give us of Melanesian societies is clearly partial, as is apparent from the material on Island Melanesia. Finally, I consider the abandonment or modification of initiation rituals in the recent past to suggest that whatever initiation meant to anthropologists, Melanesians valued these rituals differently.

INITIATIONS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Anga initiations

The Anga groups number over 100,000 people, whose remote ancestors occupied a single territory. Today, they straddle three eastern-central provinces of Papua New Guinea (PNG). They speak twelve different languages, which form their own linguistic family (Wurm 1982:

140–142). They are highly homogeneous from the standpoint of social organization, residence and forms of power and to a certain degree cosmology (see Lemonnier 1981, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010).

Among the Anga, the major event is male initiation, which they organize at regular intervals for all the boys in an age group. There are variations between the initiations practiced by different Anga groups. Although the number of stages ranges from three to six, depending on the group, in all cases, the first stages are collective and obligatory. The following stages, which begin when the boys have grown into young men of marrying age, are more centered on an individual, for their performance is linked to a life event, in this case the first time the initiand's fiancée menstruates or the upcoming birth of a man's first child.

While the ordeals involved in the initiations are similar (nose-piercing, beatings, hazing, exposure to extreme temperatures, seclusion, sleep deprivation, food taboos, etc.), some of the major operations vary, in particular as a function of the group's representations of procreation and growth, and more generally, fertility (see Bonnemère 2001, 2004). In the northern Anga groups (Baruya, Iqwaye and Sambia), where semen was seen as ensuring the fetus' growth and where sexual relations during the pregnancy were encouraged, boys were ritually inseminated by senior men. Alternatively, among the Ankave, where it is the mother's blood that is (still) considered to ensure growth, the novices secretly consume its vegetable substitute, red pandanus juice, during the several weeks of their seclusion. In both cases, the implicit model for growing the boys is that of intra-uterine growth (see Bonnemère 1990: 111), but the substances used differ with the representations of this growth. In addition to the ritual experts, the maternal uncles are key participants in the ceremonies in that they are the novices' sponsors: they comfort them and share their ordeals; they are their 'partners of pain' and receive a special compensation, which is the last of the child payments owed to the maternal kin.

Initiations in the Sepik

The immense Sepik River basin is occupied by numerous groups that used to practice a variety of male initiation rituals collectively known as ‘cult of the Tambaran’, ‘the generic term for the spirits, individual and collective, who are venerated within the cult’ (Tuzin 1980: xiii).

In contrast to the Anga male initiations, where ritual experts discreetly placed the initiates in the presence of powerful primordial entities, those organized in the Sepik brought the initiates into direct relation with spirits embodied in carved animal or anthropomorphic representations. Here we find vast spirit houses built on stilts, whose entrance in certain groups is surmounted by a tall panel painted with ancestor figures and mythical creatures. These houses contained the sacred objects (flutes, drums, bullroarers) and lodged the novices during the rituals. Women and very young children were not allowed.

The number of stages involved in the initiations ranges from one (Banaro, see Juillerat 1993) to three (Manambu, see Harrison 1993) and even five (Ilahita Arapesh, see Tuzin 1980), where they extend from infancy to old age. In the last case, ‘the sequence is a path leading to the heights of ritually ordained knowledge, power and authority’ (Tuzin 1980: xiv), and not a simple series of rituals aimed at making young boys into adult men. The ordeals imposed vary as well: the Iatmul and the Manambu scarify the back of the young men, while the Ilahita Arapesh subincise the penis to bleed the boys and rid them of the maternal influence that has become dangerous for them. When they reach adulthood and for the rest of their life, Ilahita men will have to repeat this bleeding at regular intervals to purify themselves. All groups show the novices the bullroarers, the flutes and the drums, whose sounds the men tell the women and non-initiates are the voices of the spirits.

Among the Chambri, who live on the banks of the eponymous lake, the novices are scarified after having been stretched out on the back of the man who is their *tsambunwuro*[1] and with whom they are in a relationship of strictly identical exchanges of goods and services (Gewertz

1982: 289). A novice's *tsambunwuro* was scarified while he was stretched out on the back of the novice's father. Later, the former novice will in turn receive the son of his *tsambunwuro* on his own back. The relation of reciprocity between the two thus extends over more than a generation. The maternal uncle makes the first cut, before hurrying out of the enclosure, as he would be unable to stand the sight of his nephew's blood without weeping and he is the one to dress his nephew's wounds with oil or tree sap (Gewertz 1982: 291–292). The scarifications are conceptualized as the result of the action of the initiate-eating crocodile spirits. When this ordeal is over, the initiands are led to the spirit house, where they are shown the sacred flutes and taught to play them (Harrison 1993: 78) and where, at night, their paternal and maternal uncles tell them stories of the ancestors (Gewertz 1982: 293).

Unlike the Anga initiations, Sepik male rituals are fertility rites as well. Among the Manambu of Avatip, the sixteen subclans are organized in three exogamous groups, each of which has specific ritual functions and hereditary powers over the environment (Harrison 1993: 77). One of these groups is in charge of the second-stage initiation, which takes place at the time of the yam harvest; another is in charge of the third and final stage, performed for men in early middle age (some 30 years old), which is meant to promote the fertility of the fish. The land rights of each of the subclans are grounded in possession of the spirits inhabiting the given territory. Some of these are water spirits, which appear as crocodiles – or more rarely as pigs – when they come to feed on dry land; others are tree-dwelling forest spirits (Harrison 1993: 79–80). Ritual life is entirely organized around relations with these spirits, who are said to be the cause of the wounds on the initiates' bodies and whose positive action on the yam harvest and fishing is celebrated.

Female initiations: contrasting situations

Both Sepik and Anga people performed initiations for girls as well. Unlike the male initiations, these rituals are individual rather than collective, and therefore were often designated by anthropologists as 'puberty rites'.

If we again take the example of the Angans, only some of the groups that make up this set of peoples have such rites. Among the Baruya, girls who have just begun to menstruate are secluded for several days in a thatched hut at the bottom of the village. One evening, the women of their family come for them and lead them up to a big bonfire. Throughout the night, an old woman lectures them on how to behave, which is aimed at preparing them for their future role as wives, while the other women present dance and sing around the fire. The following day, the girls are led to the river where, accompanied by the girls who have undergone the same ritual previously, they are dunked in an icy stream before donning a new fiber skirt and a new barkcloth cape. When they get back to the village, they are beaten and rubbed with nettles by the mature women, then smeared with red ochre to take out the sting. The ritual ends with the lifting of the taboo on chewing betel, and then all the women eat together.

Among the Abelam, as elsewhere in the Sepik, female puberty rites and male initiations have to do with reproduction and the power to engender life (Hauser-Schaüblin 1995: 33). When a girl has her first period, she is scarified by an older woman on her breasts, stomach and forearms. The scarification is done with a stone that is also used to mark the length of the yams presented at feasts and to incise the penis of young married men to liberate the blood built up by their sexual activity (Hauser-Schaüblin 1995: 40). For Hauser-Schaüblin, the male yam cult and the female puberty rites must be seen together, for both have to do with reproduction: yams are considered in this society as quasi-human beings produced by the men, and menstruation as a sign of the woman's fertility. Following the girl's seclusion, secret rites are performed, which include the women dressing up as men and exchanges of food (Hauser-Schaüblin 1995: 36).

In both regions, the girl is not always the only one concerned, since her betrothed, among the Baruya, and her parents, among the Yangoru Boiken (Roscoe 1995: 71-72), are brought in while she is undergoing the ritual. Furthermore, and this is true more generally in Melanesia, it is a physiological event indicating the girl's fertility that decides when the ritual is

organized whereas, for the boys, the initiations are the event that is supposed to spark their maturation and make them into fertile beings.

INITIATIONS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Sexual antagonism

In contrast to male rituals, female initiations were not seen as creating the conditions for girls' maturation but as celebrating their fertility and their new status as potential mothers. Although these rituals involved ordeals, they did not involve the whole community and did not need any preparation beyond the circle of the girls' families. The difference in the way boys and girls are treated reflects the widespread idea in Melanesia that girls mature and become fertile on their own, whereas boys must go through rituals to set off their maturation and make them into strong adult men capable of procreating and engaging in intertribal warfare. Classically, this was seen in the anthropological literature as a process of forcibly purging the boys of female influence to release their male powers. The prevailing paradigm was that of male domination (Herdt 1981, Godelier 1986) or sexual antagonism (Herdt & Poole 1982).

Owing to the importance of the initiations in the life of those who perform them, their analysis has historically held a key place in the anthropology of Melanesia. For anthropologists concerned with issues of social cohesion and reproduction, initiations seemed to be centrally important to Melanesian social life. Resulting from large-scale events, the consequences of initiations are at once personal, since every boy goes from the status of novice to that of initiate, and broad, since a cohesive set of young men is constructed over the course of the days they spend together and the ordeals they undergo. Following van Gennep (1960 [1909]), anthropologists have espoused the idea that the men put the boys to a symbolic death and then cause them to be reborn as adult men.

Societies where initiations have been observed were sexually segregated. Women were subordinated and prevented from realising social value. These oppositions were compounded, since Angan and Sepik societies typically maintained a strict separation between men and

women in social life, often enforced with extreme violence. Women were thought to be polluting to men; men often slept and lived much of the time in separate all-male houses; and ritual objects, especially flutes and bullroarers, were not only forbidden to women, who might be killed simply for seeing them, but were said to have been forcibly taken from them in mythic time as men appropriated the self-reproducing powers of women for their own rituals. According to the ideas of male domination or sexual antagonism, initiations were thus interpreted as reproducing and maintaining male domination, by ritually removing female influence from boys so that they could become adult and warriors.

These patterns, evident in groups that practiced elaborate forms of initiation, led anthropologists to propose that Melanesian societies often exhibited ‘sexual antagonism’, and the concomitant production of an exclusively male social sphere. The model of sexual antagonism was more widely applied, including to groups that had never practiced elaborate initiations, especially in the Highlands of PNG.

Big Men and Great Men

In addition to contrasting the various ways of bringing the boys to male adulthood (initiations and bachelor cults, see below), anthropologists have compared more generally the social organisation of those societies that practice complex initiation cycles with Big Men societies (see Martin, this volume), where we instead find large-scale ceremonial exchanges of pigs and wealth (Godelier & Strathern 1991).

In the PNG Highlands, ritual systems differ markedly. In the western part, male and female spirit cults are aimed at obtaining the fertility of all things; Melpa – now called Hagen – people are a well-known example. The cult was performed in the event of hard times: ‘poor crops, sickness, and a declining population’ (Strathern & Stewart 2004: 224), which distinguishes it from most initiation rituals in the area, which are instead focused essentially on human reproduction and have no effect on overall fertility. In the Hagen case, group ancestors were called upon for assistance, as was the cult spirit itself.

Western Highlands societies also practice bachelor cults, in which the young men contact a spirit-woman, a sort of spiritual pre-wife, who will prepare them for marriage with a real woman. Each boy has his own way of relating to her, for example, by going to the forest where she lives and performing gestures with a bamboo tube filled with water whose state is supposed to reflect that of the spirit-woman (Biersack 2004). Initiations differ from this type of rituals in that they are obligatory for a set of boys, are orchestrated collectively and are divided into different stages whose order never varies.

Male and female spirit cults as well as bachelor cults are found essentially among the Western Highlands peoples, where great orators (Big Men) officiate at the large-scale competitive ceremonial exchanges between groups. These Big Men assert their authority by demonstrating their capacity to find partners willing to produce wealth for them, particularly pigs, in order to elevate their names and thereby acquire prestige (A. Strathern 1971). Big Men first manoeuvre to amass all the pigs they can, then they manipulate their affinal network within which the exchanges take place, and finally they organize the distribution of the wealth collected. The emphasis on marriage as the basis of these relations between groups is reflected in bachelor cult rituals designed to produce men capable of finding numerous wives who will open the way to diversified alliances.

By contrast, initiations are found for the most part in the eastern and central parts of the Highlands. The most powerful figures in these groups differ from Big Men. In his analysis of Baruya initiations, Godelier (1986) proposed the notion of a 'Great Man' system in contrast to Big Man systems (Godelier & Strathern 1991). Jolly sums up the differences pointed out by Godelier:

'in the first, Great Men – warriors, shamans, initiation leaders – did not rely on the strategic accumulation of wealth, but on inherited ancestral power within a ritual economy focused on male initiation: persons were exchangeable only for other persons, such that the direct exchange of women prevailed in marriage; in the second, Big Men relied on the strategic accumulation of wealth and competition in ceremonial

exchanges and persons could be exchanged for things, such as pigs and shells, in transactions of bridewalth, for example' (Jolly 2012: 113).

Each of these figures is associated with different collective events: Big Men with ceremonial exchanges and Great Men with initiations. Like the notion of sexual antagonism, these models have had a significant impact on the way anthropologists have envisaged Melanesian social life, well beyond those groups which actually practiced initiation, on the one hand, or the kinds of exchange orchestrated by Western Highlands Big Men, on the other.

FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS

The feminist movement had a considerable impact on academic anthropologists from the 1960s onwards. A very important result of this influence for Melanesian anthropology was a re-reading of work on initiation. In particular, Marilyn Strathern proposed a new interpretation of Herdt's ethnography on Sambia initiation through the lens of her own general model of Melanesian gender and personhood (1988). This implicated Godelier's work on the Baruya as well, because the male rituals of both groups are locally explicitly considered to be 'the same' (Herdt 2006: 98-99).

Her stance ran counter to the prevailing interpretation, namely that the initiations 'make men', which in her eyes entailed two closely related – and erroneous – ideas. First of all, she argued that the expression classified these rituals as rites of socialisation. She rejected this idea, since there was no question of the initiate taking on a "role" they did not already embody. In the second place, she found the socialisation model problematic because it supposes that maleness is a personal attribute, which her analyses of Melpa (now Hagen) gender relations (1972) have shown, is not the case.

Critiquing the notion of socialisation with regard to initiation, Marilyn Strathern (1988: 56–63) observes that Herdt claimed that initiation rituals 'provide a means for assigning statuses

and roles to individuals' (1981: 295–296). This emphasis on the individual is informed by a concern for boundaries and a search for a unitary identity on the part of a subject whose integrity, especially as a sexual subject, is in doubt. Thus, Herdt claims that Sambia 'need to sense themselves as unambiguously masculine' (1981: 305).

Strathern argues that Herdt's analysis contains an implicit sex-role model of the individual, in which gender is an inner attribute of the psychological *self*, a preoccupation of the Western society the analyst comes from. For her, this framework cannot be used in an unexamined way to explain gender difference. Thus, Strathern argues that "the Sambia initiate learns [in the company of other males] that what distinguishes males from females is not their appendages and orifices as such, but the social relations in whose context they are activated" (1988: 211). Like Herdt, the circulation of semen between men and the ritual use of flutes in the initiations is at the center of her argument (Strathern 1988: 208–219). But in contrast to Herdt, her proposition is that initiations are not concerned with attaining a sexual role but with transforming the relations between people and therefore their capacity to act in social life (Leach 2013).

With this relational model in mind, it becomes possible to see initiations in a new way. In the 1990s, more than twenty years after the first observations made by Godelier and Herdt, I undertook fieldwork (with Lemonnier) among the Ankave, a group located in the southwestern part of the Anga territory, five-days walk from the Baruya and Sambia. We witnessed the male and female activities carried out during Ankave initiations, and discovered that the participation of certain categories of women was required. The novice's mother and an elder sister, took part in the ceremonies performed for the collective stages, and the same sister and the wife, participated in the last stage, organized at the birth of a man's first child. A new interpretation of these rituals could therefore be advanced, which stressed not so much the reproduction of an inegalitarian order as the transformations staged in the relationships between men and their female relatives in their presence (Bonnemère 2014). We can

furthermore propose that ‘the course of life is conceptualized as relational transformations organised in an ordered series’ (Bonnemère 2017: 4).

PROBLEMS WITH ‘INITIATION’

Perspectives from Island Melanesia

Although the study of initiation had a considerable impact on the ways in which anthropologists understood Melanesia, it is not clear whether the conclusions they drew could be applicable to the region as a whole. While the ethnographic material available on initiations in mainland Papua New Guinea is in abundant supply, that on the rituals of Island Melanesia is scarcer. These rituals bear resemblances to initiations as they have been classically described and analysed among the Anga and in the Sepik region, but it would be difficult to see them as reproducing male dominance or effecting personal and collective transformations.

Amongst the Owa, on Aorigi (Santa Catalina) in the Solomon Islands, initiations are organized during bonito-fishing season, since these fish play a key role in them. When the men return from fishing, the fathers who have decided to have their sons initiated accompany them to the ceremonial house, where a ritual expert is waiting. One by one, the boys are laid down in the fisherman’s canoe, then raised up by the ritual expert, who presses a bonito to their face and chest after having consecrated it to the spirits of the sea. He then bleeds the fish and places some blood on the children’s tongues. The same gestures are repeated for each boy, with a new bonito. The fish are then cut up and boiled in an aluminium pot. The bouillon is distributed and then drunk by the young initiates, while the older men eat the flesh of the fish (Revolon 2003: 223). Yam, taro and nut puddings prepared by the initiates’ families are then shared out, and this meal marks the end of the ceremony.

Until the 1970s, the initiands were secluded in the ceremonial house, where they remained idle. ‘This period corresponded to the maturation of the yams and the fattening of the pigs. It

was also the occasion for the parents to arrange their son's marriage with a girl of their choice' (Revolon 2003: 224, 226). Finally, it was the opportunity to construct a platform supported by as many posts as there were boys, on which the boys would appear before the community, draped with lengths of shell money. At the end of the initiations, and whatever their age, the boys were presented to their wife-to-be, to whom they would offer a little basket filled with areca nuts and tobacco to seal their future union. Like Anga boys, Owa are prepared to become married men but in addition, and unlike the Anga, they are placed under the protection of spirits in order to become masters in an activity that requires special skills.

In Vanuatu, the grade-taking system, found in the northern and central islands of the archipelago, adds complexity to the ritual situation in Melanesia. Although they share some of the features of initiations (secrecy, exclusion of the women, seclusion, symbolism of death followed by rebirth [cf Amman 2012] and gifts to maternal kin), the grade-taking rituals differ in that they are not obligatory, involve exchanges and sacrifices of pigs, allow a man to accede to a position of authority and to acquire prestige – like the Big Men in Papua New Guinea – and elevate those of the highest grades to near-ancestor status (Jolly 1991: 50, 58, 64; Ammann 2012: 201).

Grade-taking rituals have not been described as 'initiations', and yet circumcision or penile incision rituals are sometimes included, as they are a prerequisite for admission to the grade-taking system (Speiser 1991 [1923]: 258). The penile incision ritual on Seniang, described by Deacon (1934), took place in the sea or in a river. A maternal uncle of the novice performed the operation while the boy sat between the legs of one of his older brothers. His return to the village was followed immediately by a mock fight between the father and maternal uncle of each initiate, both of whom were assisted by close kinsmen. Their blood would often flow, like that of their child during incision. The ceremony ended with a gift of several pigs to the maternal uncle, followed by a counter-gift (Deacon 1934: 246–247). The pig given to the initiate was killed and its meat distributed to the boys who had not yet been initiated. This was

followed by a period of seclusion before resuming daily life. Charpentier (1989: 17) describes similar procedures in south Malekula.

Abandonment of initiation

The analysis of initiation was important to the anthropological understanding of Melanesia at a particular time. The most influential analyses, dating from the 1970s, were conducted in historical contexts where the influence of Christianity was marginal as were the effects of colonial and post-colonial governance. At this juncture, it was reasonable to suggest that initiation was central to the reproduction of social life. Today, this claim looks increasingly implausible, as initiation practices have been abandoned or altered in many parts of the region.

The situation of initiation rituals today differs considerably from one part of Melanesia to another and from one people to the next according to time of contact as well as their present political status. In the Torres Strait Islands, the London Missionary Society was established in 1871 followed by the Anglicans in 1914 and Pentecostal churches from the 1930s. Haddon described elaborate ceremonies in 1898, which he identified as initiations (Haddon et al. 1901, vol 5). However, what the elders talked about when asked by the government agencies in the 2000s, were the first shave, the 21st birthday and learning to fish, all activities and events in which uncles and aunts held a key place (Cooperative Research Center for Aboriginal Health: 2006).

A well-known case of abandonment of a male cult – by the Ilahita Arapesh – was described and analyzed by Tuzin. In 1984, during a Christian worship service, a few men announced publicly that the male secrets did not exist and that the cult of the Tambaran was founded on deceit (Tuzin 1997: 1). However, Tuzin argues that it would be a mistake ‘to assume that Ilahita’s wholesale shift to Christianity and the revelation of cult secrets were engineered or forced on them by European missionaries’ (Tuzin 1997: 19). Mission Christianity did not end the cult of the Tambaran; it was rather replaced by a *local* Christian Revival. This was ‘a mass movement trampling all of tradition, chasing the Tambaran from the village, righting all the

old wrongs' (Tuzin 1997: 32). Tuzin, however, argues that the Tambaran was not simply done away with; rather, the local forms of Christianity supplanted the Tambaran as the 'Tambaran's natural, chosen, inevitable heir' (Tuzin 1997: 18–19; see also Juillerat 1993; Herdt 2006).

The abandonment of a cult is not always a sudden event. As Telban recounts, in the early 1950s, following the arrival of the Catholic Church in the region, the Sepik Ambonwari left their sacred objects to rot, stopped believing in the spirits and abandoned their initiation rituals. But twenty-five years on, they relaunched these, and the rituals continued to be performed until a Catholic Charismatic Church established itself at the end of 1994. A few years later, and for the second time in their history, they discarded the carvings they had re-made and destroyed the spirit houses they had rebuilt (Telban 2008: 229–230). Despite this renunciation, many villagers still claim that hunting and gathering used to be much more productive when the crocodile-spirits lent their help. And so, when 'sickness strikes, it happens that the names of the crocodile-spirits are still muttered with a mixture of anxiety, respect and hope' (Telban 2015: 61). This example is revealing of the ambiguous relation people still entertain with the spirits. To be sure, they have abandoned some of the large-scale rituals in which they communicated with spirits, but they nevertheless continue to invoke them secretly when a problem arises.

Sometimes rituals have not been abandoned but have instead been adapted to new situations. For instance, at the mouth of the Ramu River, in northeastern Papua New Guinea, the Kayan have abandoned those phases of the male initiations that are incompatible with Christian values, but they have kept others or replaced them with equivalents: scarification and the subsequent seclusion in the forest have been replaced by taking communion and teaching Christian values (van Poser 2016: 172). Durand (2016) reports similar accommodations between initiation ritual and Christianity in the Banks Islands of Vanuatu in the early twentieth century.

A different but parallel situation is found among the Kamoro-speaking people of West Papua. The history of the Kamoro is marked by dramatic changes, not so much due, as elsewhere, to the missionaries' work as to their particular colonial and political situation. In 1961, Kamoro constituted 96.5% of the total population of their district, whereas in 1988 they had become a minority in their own country (15%), due to the immigration of people from elsewhere in Indonesia (Pouwer 2010: 3–5). These outsiders settled in the eastern part of the district, close to the Grasberg or Freeport Mine, the world's biggest gold mine, which opened in 1967 and employed 20,000 people in the 2000s.

In the 1960s, the Kamoro male initiations included the donning, in adolescence, of a loincloth made from fronds of the sago palm, and nose-piercing. These two ritual acts were preceded by a long period during which anthropomorphic 'spirit poles' were carved and a big longhouse was constructed (Pouwer 2010: 65). When the septum had healed, the boys were initiated to adulthood. This initiation included learning how to use a bow and to spear fish, after which the adolescents were smeared with lime, ochre clay and ashes, and received the body decorations that indicated their adult male status. Despite the dramatic changes to the Kamoro social environment, field research by Harple between 1996 and 1998 (Harple 2000), 'bears ample testimony to cultural and social continuity' (Pouwer 2010: 5). In 2002, initiations by and large, followed the pattern described for the ones held in the 1950s (Pouwer 2010: 258ff).

The disappearance of initiations or their adaptation to a new context raises new questions for the anthropology of these rituals. In the two northern Anga groups already mentioned, the Baruya and the Sambia, the initiations, which were considered to be 'the same' (Herdt 2006: 98-99), were abandoned at very different rates. Among the Sambia, 'within a decade – roughly 1970 to 1980 – the great system of collective initiations known as *mokeiyu* was curtailed' and the 'incredible tradition of [...] secret initiations is now gone' (Herdt 2006 : 157, 160). For Herdt, this results from the ending of intertribal warfare and indentured labour on far-away plantations, from the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) missionaries' opposition to

initiations and shamanism, and from the arrival of co-educational schools which threw boys and girls together (Herdt 2006: 154–166).

The Baruya, on the contrary, were still performing the same ceremonies (*muka*) forty years *after* the elimination of boy-inseminating practices (Lemonnier 2013). Like the Sambia, their society had seen pacification by the state, the arrival of schools, the end of indentured labour on plantations and the arrival of missionaries in the 1960s (Godelier 2017), but the persistence of the *muka* can be explained by the historical form of the modern developments that burst upon their world. First of all, the Lutheran missionaries were less persuasive than their SDA counterparts among the Sambia (Herdt 2006: 157; Lemonnier 2013: 206–209). And secondly, unlike the Sambia, the Baruya were at war with the neighboring Yuwarrunatse from 1983 to 1987. The fighting led to closure of the schools and to organising initiations in view of making new warriors, even if recent anthropological analyses have shown that this was only one aspect of the rituals. This may explain the time lag between the disappearance of the initiations among the Sambia and the Baruya.

On the other hand, the fact that the nine *muka* ceremonies held between 1962 and 2005 did not include ritualized boy-inseminating practices nor any reference to flutes raises a serious theoretical question for anthropology in general: how does a ritual change when certain stages are eliminated or altered while others go untouched? In this particular case, what is the impact on our interpretation of present-day Anga initiations when we take into account the complete disappearance of the boy-inseminating practices on which Herdt, Godelier, and Strathern built, each in their own way, their argument?

Conclusion

‘Classic’ forms of initiation amongst the Anga and in the Sepik region were central to representations of Melanesia at a particular moment in history. There have been various approaches to their analysis. It seems now accepted that the relational dimension of the transformations the novice undergoes is widely found: rites transform a person’s relations to

other people in such a way that they must act differently towards others (Leach 2013: 643). Whereas, in the 1970s–1980s, anthropologists based their analyses of the initiations on exclusion of the women and the reproduction of male domination, thus favouring the idea that the men birthed the boys independently of the women but by imitating the female physiological process (see for example Bamford 2007: 99), today anthropologists have expanded this view with new ethnographic elements, in particular concerning the women's involvement in the rituals (Gewertz & Errington 1991, Bonnemère 2004). The earlier 'model of male exclusivity' (Stewart & Strathern 1999) has thus been refuted, and it is now clear that, although their purpose is to bring the boys to maturity, the male initiations are events that, owing to the relational reconfigurations they operate, affect the male and female collectivity as a whole.

Nonetheless, the questions raised by the contrasted evolution of Northern Anga initiations also suggest that initiations in Melanesia cannot be viewed from a single standpoint. The persistence and adaptability to change of Baruya rituals reveals the multiplicity of the phenomena at play, all of which must be included if we are to understand why these rituals continue to be organized despite the disappearance of components anthropologists thought to be essential. Initiations in Melanesia are rapidly disappearing or changing. In some places, people even open them to the sight of tourists (Gewertz & Errington 1991: 58–100; Görlich 2008), but their analysis remains central to anthropological research and reflection.

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Notes

1. Each Chambri man has only one *tsambunwuro*, but they translate the term by ‘the Neo-Melanesian word *poroman*, meaning friend, or a “partner or pair to any object”, as Bateson remarked’ (Gewertz 1982: 289).

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