

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

Acting for Others: Relational Transformations in Papua New Guinea, by Pascale Bonnemère, translated by Nora Scott, foreword by Marilyn Strathern, Chicago, Hau Books, 2018, xxi + 295 pp., illustrations, foreword, preface, glossary, references, index (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-9973675-8-4

A quote from Meyer Fortes' essay 'Totem and Taboo' (1966) is the epigraph used at the start of this stimulating and detailed study of the Ankave people of Papua New Guinea: '[w]e know that, regarded from the outside, a person can be seen as an "assemblage of statues"'. Bonnemère's ethnography demonstrates the validity of this statement for Ankave people, male and female, at different stages of their lives. However, there is another quote from this same Fortes essay which the author takes issue with in her introductory chapter; it is also a quote that is paraphrased in the first chapter of Marilyn Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift* (1988): 'the force of food taboos lay in the knowledge that a person can only eat for him or herself; it is not an activity someone can do for another'. Bonnemère's study is a vivid demonstration of how the first quote is recurrently enacted in Ankave social and ritual relations. Her material simultaneously shows that the opposite is the case with respect to the second (paraphrased) quote from Fortes. What the Ankave eat and what they do not eat is directly implicated in their relations with one another, most poignantly in what Bonnemère calls 'relational transformations' which are the focus of her volume. And hence the title of her book: *Acting for Others*. As such, the book critically engages with the substantial number of ethnographic studies that have been produced on neighbouring Anga peoples (the language group to which the Ankave belong) as well with much of the Melanesian-related work of Strathern, who wrote a forward to the volume. Bonnemère's study can be read both as an elaboration of the relational view of personhood and gender developed in *The Gender of the Gift* and a critique of some of its ideas.

The book is organised into 13 chapters as well as an introduction and conclusion. Chapters 1–8 deal with various aspects of male initiation rituals. Here attention is given to the changes in conduct and patterns of food consumption of both the initiate and his female kin that are necessary for the initiations, that is the particular relational transformations, to be deemed successful. For example, Chapter 2 is titled 'Your wife is pregnant, cover your head'. When a man learns his wife is pregnant with their first child, he must immediately make three bark capes. These will be worn for the duration of the pregnancy on the crown of the head by him, his wife and his sister (preferably a real, elder sister). Among the various food taboos he must follow is avoiding red pandanus sauce, a vegetal substitute for human blood. By contrast, his wife consumes this food in large quantities. Bonnemère explicates the logic of the myriad behaviour and food taboos in significant detail. In particular, she describes how the initiations prior to this moment require a boy to act on the undifferentiated relations with his mother and eldest sister. It is only through such transformations that a young man can become both a spouse and a father, and also a maternal uncle. The Ankave see this as a process creating an effective male person with mothers and sisters implicated at every stage of the male life cycle.

Chapters 9–11, then, focus on women's lives, for which large-scale organised ceremonies are absent. The only significant time a woman is the object of another person's action (aside from the magical procedures performed on both female and male infants) is when a

woman changes her residence at marriage. In contrast to a boy, there is no need for a girl to transform her relationship with her mother in order to grow up: ‘in the world of the Ankave, to be the object of someone else’s action is decidedly not a relational position befitting adults of the female sex’ (213).

Chapter 12 underscores the importance the Ankave place on the relational dimension in their conception of personhood. This has been revealed in impressive detail through analysis of the rituals and exchanges associated with the transformations performed over the Ankave life-course covered in the preceding chapters. Bonnemère then briefly discusses Leenhardt’s influential study *Do Kamo* (1979 [1947]) which pioneered consideration of what has come to be known as relational personhood. She does this in order to highlight the prevalence of dual forms—such as dual pronouns, for example ‘both of us’—used in the New Caledonian languages Leenhardt wrote about. For Leenhardt this illustrates the relational aspect of Melanesian personhood, because such a linguistic form prioritises a symmetrical relation between persons instead of a single standpoint of the person. Bonnemère finds similar examples in Ankave kinship terms with distinct dual and plural forms for a range of relations, for example between a man and his younger brother or between cross-cousins. Personal names are also analogously marked by a relational conception of the person.

Chapter 13 addresses the extent to which Bonnemère’s analysis of Ankave personhood and its associated life cycle rituals fit with the existing anthropological literature on the ‘Melanesian person’. Again, she returns to Leenhardt’s study as the starting point for such discussions. She briefly mentions Kenneth Read’s classic paper on the Gahuka-Gama ideas of morality and the person where he contrasts their ideas with Western notions. This is a strategy also adopted in distinctive ways in Strathern’s *The Gender of the Gift* that provides an explicit model of the Melanesian person.

A key portion of Strathern’s text is devoted to a critique of initiation rituals among Anga speakers described by Herdt (Sambia) and Godelier (Baruya). Strathern contests the analysis of these studies which argue the purpose of such rituals is for ‘making men’. By contrast, Strathern re-analyses such rituals according to her model of gender and sociality. Bonnemère subscribes to the broad thrust of this critique, noting ‘gender is not a personal attribute but is determined by the kind of relations established within a specific action’ (242). However, there is a corollary to Strathern’s model that Bonnemère suggests does not apply to the Ankave ethnography. According to the model, persons are a ‘microcosm of relations’ and in this way, relations are contained in persons. This means that persons can be divided and it is possible to extract or detach parts whereby relations can be ‘substantialised’, transforming them into ‘material entities’ such as semen. Bonnemère argues that this does not work for the Ankave during their lives. Only at death are there transactions of objects that represent a detachable part of the person. It is only then that a person is no longer able to act for himself or herself or for close kin. At this point, a man or woman becomes what is known as a ‘dividual’ and their relational parts can be substituted for objects. Bonnemère’s productive critique of a key tenet in *The Gender of the Gift* highlights both the continuing significance of this landmark text and its limitations.


Bonnemère’s study is not only an ethnographically rich and theoretically astute examination of initiation in Melanesia. Her analysis also has relevance beyond this region, highlighting the importance of investigating the intrinsic relations between male and female in any form of social process. Becoming a man or woman may be the outcome of acting for others, where relations are transformed and persons assume the statuses deemed appropriate for their particular time and place.

References

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