Research on female puberty initiation within lay women's groups of the Roman Catholic church in urban Zambia today

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1. The search for community in modern Africa

Globalisation theory stresses the paradoxical phenomenon that, in the world today, the increasing unification of the world in political, economic, cultural and communication terms does not lead to increasing uniformity but, on the contrary, goes hand in hand with a proliferation of local differences. It is as if myriad eddies of particularism (which may take the form of ethnic, linguistic and religious identities, consumerist life-styles etc.) are the inevitable accompaniment of the swelling stream of globalizing universalism. Anthropologists no longer define their research object primarily by reference to a more or less demarcated part of the global landscape assumed to be the habitat of a bounded, integrated 'culture' supposedly shared by a people, tribe or ethnic group. While the time-honoured technique of participant observation still favours their focussing on a set of people who are more or less tied together by enduring social relations and forms of organization, such a set need no longer be localized (for modern technology— not just fax machines and E-mail, but also simple telephones and rural buses — enables people to effectively maintain relationships across wide distances: as members of the same ethnic group, as employees of the same multinational corporation, as members of a cult, as traders etc.) nor do the individuals which constitute that set (as a statistical conglomerate, or a social network of dyadic ties) necessarily and as a dominant feature of their social experience construct that set as an ideal community with a name, an identity, moral codes and values. Fragmentation, heterogeneity, alienation and cultural and organizational experiment are characteristic of the global condition, not only in North Atlantic urban society but also, for much the same reasons, in the rapidly growing towns of Africa today.

In Africa, village society still forms the context in which many present-day urbanites were born, and where some will retire and die. Until recently, the dichotomy between town and village dominated Africanist anthropology. Today we have to admit that, considering the constant movement of ideas, goods and people between town and village, the dichotomy has lost much of its explanatory value. In terms of social organization, economic and productive structures, goals and evaluations town and village have become complementary, even converging options within the social experience of Africans today; their difference has become gradual, and is no longer absolute. However, while of diminishing value in the hands of us analysts, the dichotomy between town and village remains relevant in so far as it informs African actors' conceptualizations of their life-world and social experience. Here the idealized image of the village stands for an imaginary context (no longer to be found in the real villages of today) where production and reproduction are viable and meaningful, pursued by people who — organized along the lines of age and gender divisions, and historical leadership — are turned into an effective community through an un-eroded kinship system, symbolism, ritual and cosmology. Vital in this set-up is that — typically through non-verbal means — ritual manages to construct the bodies of the members of the residential group as charged or inscribed with a shared

meaning, a shared identity, and while the body moves across time and space this indelible mark is carried to new contexts yet remains.

Even in the village context the effective construction of community cannot be taken for granted. Central African villages, for instance, have been described as the scene of an uneasy truce between strangers, only temporarily constructed into community — at the expense of kinship rituals which take up an enormous part of available resources and even so barely conceal or negotiate underlying contradictions among the village population. Such rituals of kinship (those attending pregnancy, birth, adolescence, marriage, and death) not only transform biological human individuals into competent social persons with a marked identity founded in the local community (or in the case of death transform such social persons in the face of physical decomposition); such rituals thus construct, within that overall community, specific constituent identities, e.g. those of gender and age. They refer to, and to a considerable extent reproduce and perpetuate, the productive and social organization of the village society. Perhaps the central characteristic of the old (nineteenth-century) village order was that the construction of community was still so effective that in the villagers' consciousness their actual residential group self-evidently appeared as the realization of that ideal.

It is crucial to realize that in the twentieth century, even with reference to rural settings, we are no longer dealing with 'real' communities but with rural folks' increasingly problematic model of the village community. Rural ideological change in Africa during the twentieth century can be summed up as a process of people actively confronting the erosion of that model, its becoming irrelevant and impotent in the face of political economic realities. Throughout the twentieth century, rural populations in Africa have struggled, through numerous forms of organizational, ideological and productive innovation combining local practices with outside borrowings, to reconstruct a new sense of community in an attempt to revitalize, complement or replace the collapsing village community in its viable nineteenth century form. In fact the entire ideological history of twentieth century Africa could be written from this perspective. Peasants have been constantly engaged in the construction of new, alternative forms of community on the basis of rather new principles as derived from political, cultic, productive and consumerist ideas introduced from the wider world. Many of these movements have sought to re-formulate the notion of the viable, intact village community in new terms and with new outside inspiration and outside pressure. Ethnicity, healing cults, prophetic cults, anti-sorcery movements, varieties of imported world relgions and local transformations thereof e.g. in the form of Independent churches, struggles for political independence, involvement in modern national politics including the recent wave of democratization, involvement in a peripheral-capitalist cash economy with new symbols of status and distinction, — these have been some of the strategies by which villagers have sought (often against many odds) to create and bring to life the image of a new world, and a continued sense of meaning and community, when the old village order so unmistakably fell apart.

If the construction of community in the rural context has been problematic, the village yet represents one of the few models of viable community among Africans today, including urbanites. It is the only model which is part of a collective idiom pervading all sections of contemporary society. Whatever alternative models of community are available, are shallowly rooted and reserved to specific sections of the society: Christians or Muslims (the local religious congregation as a community; and by extension the abstract world-wide collective of co-religionists), cult members (the cultic group as a community), members of a specific ethnic group (where the ethnic group is constructed into a

community, but typically constructed by emphatic reference to the village model as a focal point of origin and meaning), the elite (patterns of consumerism which replace the notion of community through interaction with the notion of virtual or vicarious global community through media transmission and the display of appropriate manufactured symbols — status symbols in clothing, transport, housing etc.).

The potency of the village model is also manifest in a context where it would seem least applicable, in town, as we shall presently discuss.

2. Historic ('traditional') village-derived ritual in African urban settings today, and its interpretation

When central reproductive institutions of the old village order, including rituals of kinship, are already under great pressure from new and external alternatives in the rural environment, one would hardly expect them to survive in urban contexts. For in town people's life is obviously structured, economically and in terms of social organization, in ways which would render all symbolic and ritual reference to rural-based cults reproducing the old village order, hopelessly obsolete. Who would expect ancestral cults to take place in urban settings in modern Africa? What theory of change and continuity would predict the continued, even increasing practice of ecstatic possession ritual in urban residential areas, often in the trappings of new formally organized cults posing as Christian churches or Islamic brotherhoods, but often also without such emulation of world religions. Why do people pursue apparently rural forms when socially, politically and economically their lives as urbanites are effectively divorced from the village?

Stressing the complementarity between a local community's social, political and economic organization and the attending religious forms, the Durkheimian heritage in the social science approach to religion seems to have almost paralysed the study of historical ('traditional') urban ritual, at least in Africa. For how can there be such continuity when African urbanites stage a rural ritual in the very different urban context? What would be the referent of such ritual? The relative paucity of studies on this point stands in amazing contrast with the prevalence and ubiquity of the actual practice on the ground. It is as if the absence of an adequate interpretative framework has caused anthropologists to close their eyes for the ethnographic facts staring them in the face. At the same time they have produced in abundance studies of such forms urban ritual in the context of world religions (especially studies on urban Independent and mainstream Christian churches), which of course do 'feel right' in an urban setting, where (far more directly than in the remote countryside) globalization made its impact on the African continent.

The relatively few researchers (including myself) who have documented urban 'traditional' ritual in modern Africa and sought to interpret it, have come up with answers which, while persuasive in the light of the analytical paradigms prevalent at the time, would now seem rather partial and unsatisfactory.

— The most classic argument is that in terms of *socialization and the inertia of culture*: even if urbanites pursue new forms of social and economic life especially outside their urban homes, in childhood they have been socialized into a particular rural culture which seeks continued acknowledgment in their lives, especially where the more intimate, existential dimensions are concerned; staging a rural kinship ritual in town would be held to restore or perpetuate a cultural orientation which has its focus in the distant village — by which is then

meant not in the intangible ideal model of community, but the actual rural residential group on the ground.
— Then there has been the *urban mutual aid argument*: economically insecure recent urban migrants seek to create, in the ritual sphere, a basis for solidary so that they may appeal to each other in practical crises: illness, funerals, unemployment etc.; being from home, the traditional ritual may help to engender such solidarity, but (a remarkably Durkheimian streak again, cf. Durkheim's theory of the arbitrary nature of the sacred) in fact *any* ritual might serve that function, and in fact often world religions provide adequate settings for the construction of alternative, fictive kin solidarity in town.
— A related argument derives from modes-of-production analysis, and stresses the urban migrants' continued reliance on rural relationships in the face of their urban insecurity; since rural relationships are largely reproduced through rural ritual, urbanites stage rural-derived ritual (often with rural cultic personnel coming over to town for the occasion) in order to ensure their continued benefit from rural resources: access to land, shelter, healing, historical political and ritual office; we might term this explanation the *urban-rural mutual aid argument*.
— Having thus stressed the shared economic and ideological interest between townsmen and villagers, it is only a small step to the argument of *ethnic construction*. This revolves on the active propagation of a specific ethnic identity among urban migrants, which serves to conceptualize an urban-rural community of interests, assigns specific roles to villagers and urbanites in that context (the townsmen would often feature as ethnic brokers vis-à-vis the outside world), and effectively re-defines the old localized and homogeneous village community into a de-localized ethnic field spanning both rural and urban structures, confronting ethnic strangers and organizing those of the same ethnic identity for new tasks outside the village, in confrontation with urban ethnic rivals, with the urban economy and with the central state. In this ethnic context, the urban staging of 'traditional' rural ritual would be explained as the self-evident display of ethnically distinctive symbolic production. But again, any bricolage of old and new, local and global forms of symbolic production might serve the same purpose.

These approaches have various things in common. They assume the urbanites involved in rural kinship ritual to be recent urban migrants retaining still one foot in the village. They do not make the illuminating distinction between the actual rural residential group and the ideal model of the village community, and hence cannot decide between two fundamentally different interpretation of the ritual performance in town:
— does it seek to recreate a real village and by implication to deny urbanism,
— or does it seek to create *urban* community as (in South Central Africa, at least) a radically new mode of social life open to world-wide influences and pressures, merely by *reference* to an inspiring village-centred *abstract* model of community?

And finally, these approaches ignore such alternative and rival modes of creating meaning and community, precisely in a context of heterogeneity and choice which is so typical for towns wherever in the modern world. If urbanites stage rural kinship rituals in town it is not because they have no choice; our task as analysts is to explain their choice, against the background of such other modes of constructing community as have been made available to them through the mediation of globalization processes.

What do these alternatives consist of? How could we characterize them sociologically: as expressions of an emergent culture of urbanism, as institutions, mass movements, discursive genres (Bayart), or as mere floating images trying to capture the actors' commitment in exchange for a restoration of meaning and belonging, i.e. identity? What solutions do these alternatives offer for the

construction of community? How have they been proffered locally in the context of globalization, including (a) the spread (ideologically and organizationally) of world religions, and (b) individuals' shift from agricultural production to consumption within a money economy based on wage labour? Do they retain firm boundaries vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis the rural-centred model, or is there rather a mutual interpenetration and blending? What explains that these globalizing alternatives leave ample room for what would appear to be an entrenched and obsolete local form, the kinship ritual? How do these symbolic and ideological dimensions relate to material conditions, and to power and authority: do they reflect or deny material structures of deprivation and domination; do they underpin such power as is based on privileged position in the political economy of town and state, or do they, on the contrary, empower those that otherwise would remain underprivileged; to what strategies do they give rise in the inequalities of age and gender, which are symbolically enacted in the village model of community and in the associated kinship rituals, but which also, albeit in rather different forms, structure urban social life?

3. Girls' initiation among Roman Catholic women's lay groups on the Zambian Copperbelt

A series of new towns was created in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) at the northern end of the 'line of rail' as from the late 1920s, in order to accommodate the massive influx of labourers in the copper mining industry. As 'the Copperbelt', this is the most highly urbanized part of the country, and the site of famous and seminal studies in urban ethnicity, politics and religion. While imposed on a rural area where ethnic identity was primarily constructed in terms of the Lamba identity, the Copperbelt attracted migrants from all over South Central Africa but particularly from Northern Zambia; the Bemba identity (in itself undergoing considerable transformation and expansion in the process) became dominant in these towns, and the 'town Bemba' dialect their lingua franca.

If rural kinship rituals may seem out of place in town, they would seem even more so in the context of mainstream urban churches such as the Roman Catholic church. As a major agent of globalization, this world-wide hierarchical organization has sought to vigorously impose its particular conception of cosmology, hierarchy, sanctity and salvation (through the image of a community of believers and of saints), in short its system of meaning, on the African population, and part of its project has been the attempted monopolization of the social organization of human reproduction and human life crisis ritual.

Throughout South Central Africa, female puberty ritual is one of the dominant kinship rituals (even more so than the male counterpart); its remarkably similar forms have been described in detail in many rural ethnographic contexts from Zaïre to Northern Transvaal. For almost a century, female puberty ritual has been banned as pagan and sinful in Roman Catholic circles in Zambia. However, already during my research on urban churches in Zambia's capital Lusaka in the early 1970s I found women's lay groups within the formal organization of mainstream churches to experiment with Christian alternatives to female puberty training. Therefore I was not surprised to learn that by the late 1980s, these experiments had grown into accepted practice. Nor is the phenomenon strictly confined to urban churches; for instance in the area of my main Zambian research, in Kaoma district in the western part of the country, a limited number of women now claim to have been 'matured [the standard expression for puberty

initiation in Zambian English] in church' rather than in a family-controlled rural or urban kinship ritual.

The situation in the urban church congregations is of inspiring complexity. On the one hand there is a proliferation of lay groups, each with their own uniforms and paraphernalia, formal authority structure within the overall church hierarchy, routine of meetings and prayers, and specialized topics of attention: caring for the sick, the battle against alcoholism, etc. Already in these groups the organizational form and routine, and the social embeddedness this offers to its socially uprooted members, would appear to be an attempt at the construction of community, and might be of greater interpretative relevance than the specific contents of the religious ideas and practices circulating there; they are, to use a standard expression in African religious studies, 'a place to feel at home' — but they are also a place to engage in formal organization almost as an aim and a source of satisfaction and meaning in itself. Some of these lay groups particularly specialize in girl's initiation. However, contrary to what might be expected on the basis of comparative evidence (Lusaka early 1970s, Kaoma 1980s), the lay group's symbolic and cultic repertoire for puberty initiation has incorporated far more than a minimal selection of the rural ritual, a mere token appendage of isolated traditional elements to a predominantly Christian and alien rite of passage. On the contrary, the women lay leaders have used the church and their authority as a context within which to perform puberty ritual that, despite inevitable practical adaptations and frequent lapses of ritual knowledge and competence, emulates the historic, well-described Bemba kinship ritual to remarkable detail, and with open support from the church clergy.

Some of the analytical and theoretical questions to which this state of affairs gives rise have been outlined above by way of introduction. Meanwhile the complexity of the situation calls for extensive ethnographic research, not only on the Copperbelt but also in present-day rural communities in Northern Zambia; in addition, a thorough study must be made of the ideological position and the exercise of religious authority of the clergy involved, as mediators between a world-wide hierarchically organized world religion (which has been very articulate in the field of human reproduction and gender relations) and the ritual and organizational activities of urban Christian lay women. A secondary research question revolves around the reasons for the senior representatives of the Roman Catholic church to accept, even welcome, a ritual and symbolic repertoire which would appear to challenge the globalizing universalism of this world religion, and which for close to a century has been condemned for doing just that.

Meanwhile, the crucial interpretative problem lies perhaps in the fact that the Copperbelt women staging these rituals, as well as their adolescent initiands, do not in the least belong, nor consciously aspire to belong, to the ideal village world which is expounded in the ritual. Here the research would amount to an assessment of the various orders of reality, dream, ideal, phantasy and imagery that informs a modern African urban population in the construction of their life-world. For while the kinship ritual emphasizes reproductive roles within marriage, agricultural and domestic productive roles for women, and their respect for authority positions within the rural kinship structure, these urban women are no longer producers of food; have hardly any effective ties with a distant village; in their sexual and reproductive behaviour operate largely outside the constraints stipulated by the kinship ritual and the associated formal training; as female heads of households are often without effective and enduring ties with male partner; and not even all subscribe to the Bemba ethnic identity.

Very clearly this urban puberty ritual is concerned with the construction of meaningful community out of the miserable fragmentation of social life in the Copperbelt high-density residential areas, and beyond that with the social

construction of female personhood; but why, in this urban context, is the remote and clearly inapplicable dream of the village model yet so dominant and inspiring? Is the puberty ritual a way, for the women involved, to construct themselves as ethnically Bemba? That would hardly seem the case, since the church congregations are by nature multi-ethnic and no instances of ethnic juxtaposition to other groups have been noted so far in relation to this urban puberty ritual; however, specific research on this point is obviously required. Is the communal identity to be constructed through the puberty ritual rather that of a community of women? Then why hark back to a rural-based model of womanhood which, even if part of a meaningful ideal universe, no longer has any practical correspondence with the life of Copperbelt women today. Or is the social construction of womanhood, and personhood in general, perhaps such a subtle and profound process that alien symbols (as mediated through the Christian church) are in themselves insufficiently powerful to bring about the bodily inscription that produces identity? That would be a fashionable reformulation of the 'socialization and the inertia of culture' argument, and one that does deserve serious attention; one of the problems it poses is that of operationalization — anthropologists have of late spoken a lot of personhood but seem to have left the methodology involved to our colleagues in psychology and psychiatry departments.

But why should the interpretation be in terms favouring either the Christian or the historic rural part of the equation? Might we perhaps come closer to an answer if we concentrate on the striking amalgamation of fully-fledged non-Christian ritual encapsulated within a Christian church context, and could we then say that the attempted construction of community involved here is that of a viable moral community community which happens to be urban-based, and which is viable precisely because it combines the symbolic potency of a local rural tradition with the organizational power and prestige of a world religion — a veritable instance of the kind of interactions and accommodation typical of the globalization process.

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