

Female puberty rites: Global
distribution and historical
reconstruction – a first attempt
starting from the Nkoya people of
Zambia

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2022

Introduction

- In the context of finalising my recent synthetic account of *Africa Intercultural* (2022) I became aware of the fact that over the decades I have extensively discussed Female Puberty Rites (FPR) among the Nkoya people of Zambia, and their striking parallels in North American ethnography (especially among the Apache and related peoples) – but have so far never stopped to consider the wider global distribution of this highly significant and intriguing ceremonial complex. The present provisional presentation is to fill this gap.
- In the process I have accumulated far more ideas and hints for further analysis than could be accommodated in this PowerPoint presentation. I may never have the time to return to this topic in earnest.
- My analysis is situated against the background of decades of concerted efforts among archaeologists, comparative mythologists, molecular geneticists, comparative ethnographers, to reliably reconstruct the long-range cultural history of Anatomically Modern Humans (AMH) – the variety to which all humans alive today belong, and which arose in sub-Saharan Africa c. 200 ka BP.
- It is my contention (backed up repeatedly by substantial empirical arguments) that during the 120 ka when AMH were confined to the African continent, they developed and brought to perfection and integration a package of cultural traits which I prefer to refer to as 'Pandora's Box'. In several arguments I have attempted to reconstruct part of the contents of Pandora's Box, especially in the mythical field.
- The mechanism of the spread of Out-of-Africa cultural material (= Pandora's Box) up North into Asia and Europe I have argued in chapters 5 ('Mythological Archaeology') and 6 ('Further steps') of my recent book *Pandora's Box Prised Open* (2022); both are thoroughly revised versions of my papers as have circulated ever since 2004. That Middle Palaeolithic cultural material from East and Southern Africa gets transformed in the transmission process (and therefore is not always easily detected and recognised in Europe and Asia) is only as to be expected.

Glimpses of female puberty rites globally



A sacrificial tabel for female puberty rites in Sri Lanka, c. 2000 CE. As described by Chitty (1992 / 1934), the Tamil female puberty rites are very similar to those of the Nkoya of Zambia – which stands to reason, given the very considerable Sunda traits among the Nkoya (van Binsbergen, *Sunda* (2020)



A *kankanga* ('Blood Spirit – person') novice and her mentrix, among the Nkoya people, Mukunkike, Kaoma district, Zambia, 1978. The blood spirit Kanga is supposed to take possession of the girl at menarche, and the female puberty rites are to domesticate that spirit – menstrual blood is greatly feared here like throughout the Old World. Comparative mythology suggests that Kanga is a late variety of the Rainbow Serpent which appeared as a principal god in Palaeolithic times



Apache girl novice during her Sunrise or Coming-Out Dance, USA, late 20th c. CE



Not only among the Nkoya people, but throughout South Central Africa and in fact sub-Saharan Africa at large (as well as in North America, and in fact world-wide, as we shall see below), female puberty rites mark and celebrate a girl's physical maturation, the growth of her breasts and the onset of menstruation. Here in an informal residential area near Chelston, some 15 kms east of the centre of Zambia's capital Lusaka, 1978, Jane Phiri, a shy, tearful 12-year old girl of the Nsenga people (Eastern Zambia), who a few hours earlier was found to have her first menstruation, is seated on a piece of cloth in front of the house, with a white headscarf as sign of her sacred condition, flanked by her younger pre-menarche sister, and surrounded by her father, two elder sisters, and (kneeling, and clapping in salute to the ancestors) her mother. The father (not necessarily Jane's) holds ready a miniature hoe, and a pumpkin, as symbols of the future productive and reproductive tasks which have now come in reach for the girl. Tragically she did not live to bring all these promises to fruition: Jane died a few years after this photograph was taken.



Manjaco girl from Calequisse, Guinea Bissau, with her close kin at the celebration of her solemn communion, Roman Catholic church, Canchungo, Guinea-Bissau, West Africa 1983. In many societies, world religions have absorbed female puberty rites, often beyond recognition. My brilliant PhD student now Dr Thera Rasing has sought to illuminate this process by studying it in the context of urban congregation of the Roman Catholic church in Zambia.



The temple of Artemis at Brauron, Eastern Attica, Greece, where Artemis was worshipped as the Bear Mother looking after her cubs, the girl novices. The veneration of the bear has left traces (hotly contested by some specialists, e.g. Binford) in Upper Palaeolithic archaeology, e.g. in the alleged bear cemetery at Drachenloch, Switzerland, and has continued to constitute the major ritual of the strikingly archaic Ainu people in East Asia. Hat the Great Bear (*Ursus Major*) has been one of the oldest recognised constellations may not be unrelated to this bear theme in prehistory.

Cf. Binford, L.R., 1981, *Bones: Ancient men and modern myths*, New York: Academic Press.

Watson, W., n.d., 'VI. Wie zijn de oude Ainu's geweest: Neolitisch Japan en het huidige blanke ras', in: Bacon, E., ed., n.d., *Verzonken beschavingen: Het raadsel van verdwenen volkeren*, Den Haag: Gaade, 2e druk, pp. 79-104, Ned. tr. van *Vanished civilizations*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1963.

- State-of-the-art molecular biology has allowed us, since the late 1980s CE, to trace in much greater detail historic population movements. This has revealed, among many other interesting findings (which below will help us to tentatively reconstruct the world history of FPR) , that the Greeks (whom the modern North Atlantic has always considered as the founders of Western, modern North Atlantic culture and society) actually originate from sub-Saharan Africa (Arnaiz-Villena et al. 2001a)

Of course this finding is of considerable relevance to the *Black-Athena* discussion, which was conducted in the 1980s -2000s. In our present context, the sub-Saharan connotations of the Ancient Greeks create an additional background for the idea that the female puberty rites complex originated in Africa and that its attestations in the Bronze-Age and Iran Age Aegean were secondary derivations from the African source.

We are fortunate that a few authors (marked by ** in the appended bibliography) have picked up the theme of FPR in classical Graeco-Roman cultural history – a theme to which I have also personally contributed in my analysis (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011) of King Agamemnon’s alleged sacrifice of his daughter Iphigeneia, allegedly in a bid to secure favourable winds for the northeast nautical crossing of the Aegean Sea towards Troy at the outset of the war. Artemis does not control winds, but she does control girl’s puberty rites (no doubt with echoes of the Greeks’s sub-Saharan background) and probably Agamemnon’s sin (mythically codified as one of Agamemnon’s soldiers killing Artemis’s sacred stag) was to withdraw his daughter from a puberty initiatory trajectory she was involved in; also when (according to some versions) having ended up in Colchis (modern Georgia), Iphigeneia appears as priestess of Artemis

The picture shows Iphigeneia being sacrificed at Greece’s Aegean east coast; from the House of the Tragic Poet, Pompei, now at the National Museum, Naples, Italy, 1st c. CE



Rituals have been identified (Durkheim) as the stuff that makes society tick, by creating immutable / sacred items of culture that create a self-evident life-world, and that persist across incredible stretches of space and time. I wholeheartedly concur, and think that **female puberty rites** have particularly performed this function ever since remote prehistory



The world of female puberty rites is full of hidden implications and long-range associations. In the 20th c. CE, the Apache people's female puberty rites in the SW USA, North America, have been uncannily similar to those of the Nkoya of Zambia: for one girl at a time, culminating in a sunrise dance, performed on a cleared small rectangular ground, where the girl (taught and supervised by a highly respected female mentrix, and among the Nkoya seconded by a small girl at pre-puberty age) is surrounded by a chorus of kinsmen, and there she slowly awakens and comes to life in the rays of the morning sun, while small rattles or tinkling elements on her clothing produce the cherished sound of rain drops. Even the stretched-out fingers seem to contain a tell-tale symbol. I found it back in the respectful hand gestures of a shrine warden among the Bamileke people of Cameroon, West Africa (central picture) in a context that does not contain conspicuous references to female puberty rites;⁷ but such hand gestures abound in prehistoric caves (e.g. Cueva de los Manos, Spain, right-hand photograph) which seems to corroborate the widespread suggestion, among specialists, that such caves, and such hands prints, were associated with puberty rites in prehistory.



Traditional Nyau dancer with face mask at a Gule Wamkulu ceremony in a remote village near Ntchisi, Malawi

Photograph Dietmar Temps, derived with thanks from:
https://dietmartemps.com/photo/malawi/malawi-traditional-nyau-dancer_5920/

- Linden, I., & Schoffeleers, J. M. (1972). The Resistance of the Nyau Societies to the Roman Catholic Missions in Colonial Malawi'. *The Historical Study of African Religion*. London: Heinemann, 252-273.
- Linden, I., 1975, Chewa Initiation Rites and Nyau Societies: The Use of Religious Institutions in Local Politics at Mua. In: Ranger, T. O. and J.Weller (eds.) *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa*. London: Heinemann pp. 30-44.
- Lindgren, NE and JM Schoffeleers. 1978, *Rock Art and Nyau Symbolism in Malawi*. Malawi Government, Department of Antiquities
- von Sicard, H., 1968.-69, 'Luwe und verwandte mythische Gestalten', *Anthropos*, 63-64: 665-737

In 2003, at the request of the UNESCO's Second Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, I wrote a report in order to assess the eligibility of Nyau, a famous mask society in Malawi. While the society was politically important in the 20th century (resistance to Christian missions as studied by Schoffeleers and Linden; it also constituted a sinister pressure group in support of the first post-Independence national president Dr Banda), the unique material that I was allowed to access in preparation of my report brought out that the time-honoured Nyau complex -- fascinated as it is by reproductive powers invested in human female reproductive organs, which are both venerated and domesticated -- has distinct traits of an ancient fertility cult; I got the impression that Nyau belonged to a wide ceremonial spectrum also encompassing Female Puberty Rites in Africa and North America. In the work of the Swedish comparative religionist von Sicard the global significance of the 'girl' theme is also highlighted.



The widely recognised initiatory nature of many prehistoric sites was forcibly brought home to me when in Indonesia, as a recurrent guest to the fieldwork site of my then PhD student now Dr Stephanus Djunatan, I was privileged to visit the extensive devotional site of Nagara Padang, Rawabogo village, in the mountains south of Bandung, Java. Although today a pilgrimage site of syncretist Javanese Islam (with many Buddhist and Hindu features surviving), the site clearly is an ancient prehistoric cultic place, -- the rocks are abounding with cupmarks which have partly retained their potent sacred connotations even for pilgrims today. The site is administered by a family of shrine wardens, of which the junior scion (a man around 40; whom I saw develop, within the few years separating my two extensive visits, from reticent shyness and dependence to assertiveness, middle-class conspicuous consumption and political ambition) is particularly active in guiding pilgrims around the place, which occupies several km². Near the entrance is a cave where at the warden's direction young people can squeeze themselves through a narrow crevice - - an unmistakable emulation of birth or rebirth such as underlies much puberty and initiatory rites through space and time (van Gennep) .

Cf. van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2011c, 'The Devotional Shrine of Nagara Padang, Village of Rawabogo, Ciwidey, West Bandung, Java, Indonesia, in Comparative and Analytical Perspective: Reflections on the UNPAR (Parahyangan Catholic University) Department of Philosophy's study days 2010', in: Setiawan, Hawe', ed., *Perspektif Kebudayaan Sunda dalam Kesatuan Bangsa Indonesia: Dan Esai-esai lainnya mengenai kebudayaan sunda*, Bandung (Indonesia): Pusat Studi Sunda, Seri Sundalana, 10, pp. 25-68; fulltext at: http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/van_Binsbergen_on_Nagara_Padang_SUNDALANA_10.pdf , reprinted in: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2017, *Religion as a social construct*, Haarlem: Papers in Intercultural Philosophy / Transcontinental Comparative Studies, pp. 439-472, for URL see there.

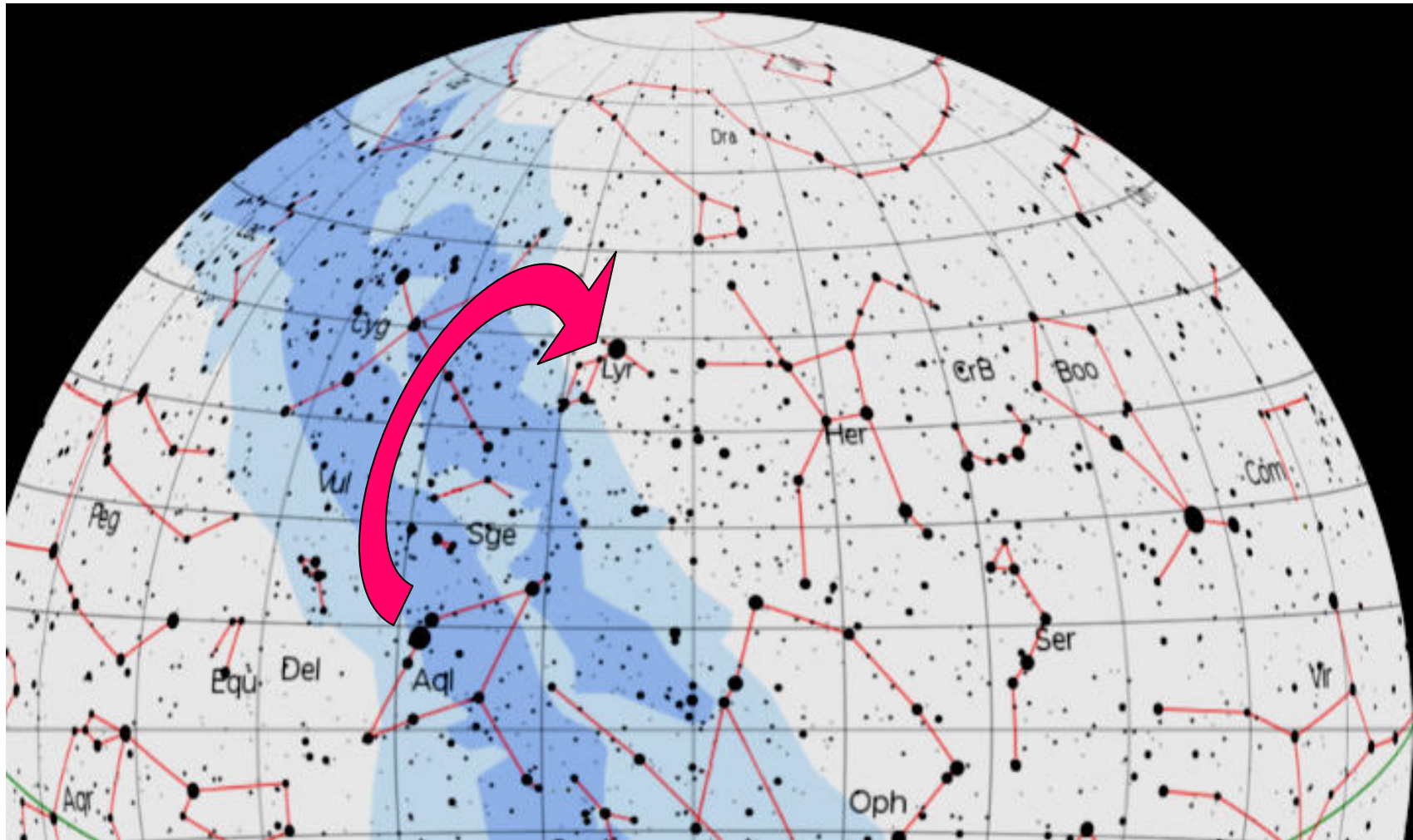
van Gennep, A., 1911, *Rites de passage*, Paris: Librairie critique, first published 1909.



the Chinese tale of The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, depicted in the Summer Palace, Beijing, China

Anonymous, The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, wiki, at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cowherd_and_the_Weaver_Girl

- Not always is the link with female puberty rites explicit. Marriage is a universal of Anatomically Modern Humans (AMH), hence can be reckoned to have been part of **Pandora's Box** (the common cultural heritage initiated and further developed inside sub-Saharan Africa with the emergence of AMH 200 ka BP, and from there transmitted to the other continents through the Out-of-Africa Exodus from 80-60 ka BP). In many cultures, marriage was combined with female puberty rites.
- Thus among the Nkoya, after her coming-out dance the newly initiated girl is seated practically naked under a blanket next to the door of her parent's house, and against a small payment any potential wooer may briefly look under the blanket and make up his mind – this turning the female puberty rites into a marriage market. Also in many other respects, Nkoya Female Puberty Rites shade over into the marriage institution, e.g. on both occasions formal, solemn instruction is mandatory
- The Nkoya also had of old the endearing institution of the *kalembo* child marriage, still idealised but no longer in practised, where two children of opposite gender (perhaps emulating the two siblings that in many Flood stories are the only survivors and therefore destined to incestuously repopulate the Earth) may be each other's special friends and sleep together from early pre-puberty age, emphatically avoiding all sexual activity; at menarche the girl would go into secluded tuition, and the boy would begin to perform all sorts of bride services for his parents-in-law, such as clearing and hoeing – and particularly he was responsible for the firewood that was needed at the girl's massive coming out celebration; after which they would begin to live as man and wife
- A similar tender link between boy and girl is also immortalised in the Chinese tale of the The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, two recognised stars (in the West called Vega and Altair) at considerable distance in the night sky, finally united by a bridge of magpies.
- There is evidence of massive Chinese impact upon South Central Africa around ca. 1000 CE (van Binsbergen, *Before the Presocratics*, 2012).
- In the next slide a celestial sphere is shown, highlighting the location of Vega (α Lyrae, Lyr) and Altair (α Aquilae, Aql) and their considerable distance across the sky; the mythical bridge of magpies is in fact the width of the Milky Way



Photograph of a celestial sphere showing part of the Northern hemisphere with the Milky Way, and constellations with their official abbreviations

- Both institutions, female puberty rites and marriage, have survived since Lower Palaeolithic times till today, but female puberty rites have lost their universality – probably because in many parts of the world they have been captured by more recent, rival institutional complexes, such as world religions (often with their own initiatory forms around puberty; or channeling selected maidens into nunhood, as the Vestals at Ancient Rome and religious orders in Buddhism and Roman Catholicism), or the state (e.g. through formal education; but in Swaziland, Southern Africa, the kingship takes a personal interest in blossoming girlhood – as is abundantly covered in the tabloids, but remarkably, photographs of the king with topless dancing female subjects appear to be withdrawn from circulation .
- In some modern American families, menarche is back as an informal ritual focus, with a family gathering and presents – like throughout Africa and Asia
- In Western Europe over half a century ago, e.g. in the popular Amsterdam neighbourhood where I grew up, menarche was euphemistically known as ‘groot meisje worden’/ ‘becoming big girl’. The girl was not particularly prepared for the event (her mother might have made allusions) and was often surprised and frightened by it. The purchase of sanitary towels (in itself a prudish euphemism; and such purchase was scarcely an errant one could ask from a member of the male gender to run) took place with a flustering voice (self-service shops were still an exception, or non existent) and the article was carried home in an unmarked gray paper bag and hidden from sight. Even a girl’s first bra was a cause of embarrassment.
- Given the general and unmistakable male mysogyny build into Pelasgian cultures including that of the Ancient Israelites, into Judaism, and even into the world religions Christianity and Islam that have descended from Judaism, there was little resistance to the religiously-enforced idea that the ordeal (...?) of menstruation had been inflicted (as ‘The Curse’; *Genesis* 3:16), and by Eve’s alleged transgression, upon all her female descendants – feminism was not yet sufficiently vocal. In the Christian tradition, Eve’s ‘eating from the forbidden fruit’ has often been interpreted as the original couple’s discovery of sexuality, but that thought seems to have scarcely a basis in the Thora and Talmud.



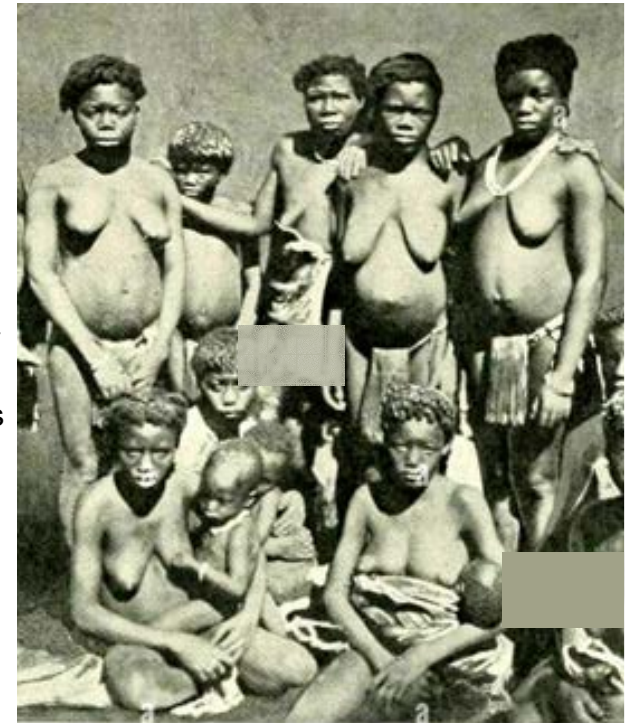
- Against this background, I cherished, in my late 20s and early 30s, my gradual admittance to the Nkoya world of female puberty rites, where (then a father of one girl, now three) I found a channel for my life-long admiration for (as a small boy, even: identification with) the female body and its physiology, Upon my return from a first long spell in Zambia, my mother, a proud crypto-feminist, would also take great pleasure in my accounts on Nkoya sexual and puberty training.
- I found Nkoya women to be well aware of the power their menstruation gave them over males, who always feared to be polluted, rendered impotent, even be killed, by its mythical powers.
- On closer analysis, in the Nkoya perception the destructive element seems to reside not in women *per se* but in the blood demon Kanga, which has taken possession of them at menarche and is to be domesticated through FPR, but which continues to cling to all subsequent menstruation blood.
- Hence the gruesome Nkoya custom attending babies born without their mother's prior menstruation (the apt Dutch expression 'blind opgezet', lit. 'blindly established' in the sense of 'conceived', does not seem to have a literal equivalent in English) – as may be the case with pregnancy of very young girls still before socially acknowledged menarche; or when a mother rapidly conceives of the next child without first having menstruated after the previous childbirth. Such a child is considered a freak, threatening to human society, and must be killed immediately after birth. I have no evidence that this custom was ever enacted in living memory, but the belief certainly still exists
- The Nkoya recognise other such freaks likewise to be killed in early infancy, notably a child that cuts the first (central) upper incisor teeth before the lower ones. In *Homo Sapiens sapiens*, the lower central incisors usually precede the upper ones by about two months; *cf.* Anonymous, Teething, wiki, at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teething>. The Nkoya's own explanation of this custom has not been disclosed to me.
- In the South Central African, I found female breasts to be merely regarded as practical sources of baby food and not particularly eroticised like in the modern North Atlantic region. Among the Nkoya, sexual joking was the standard way of *warding off* (! rather than *inviting*) unwelcome male attention; and if that was not enough, especially towards non-Nkoya strangers who could not join in the Nkoya game of joking relations (a standard way to express clan relations), a conspicuous menstrual pad in the underpants, particularly when not needed, would work wonders!

Aspects of Nkoya genital practices and related topics as taught in female puberty training

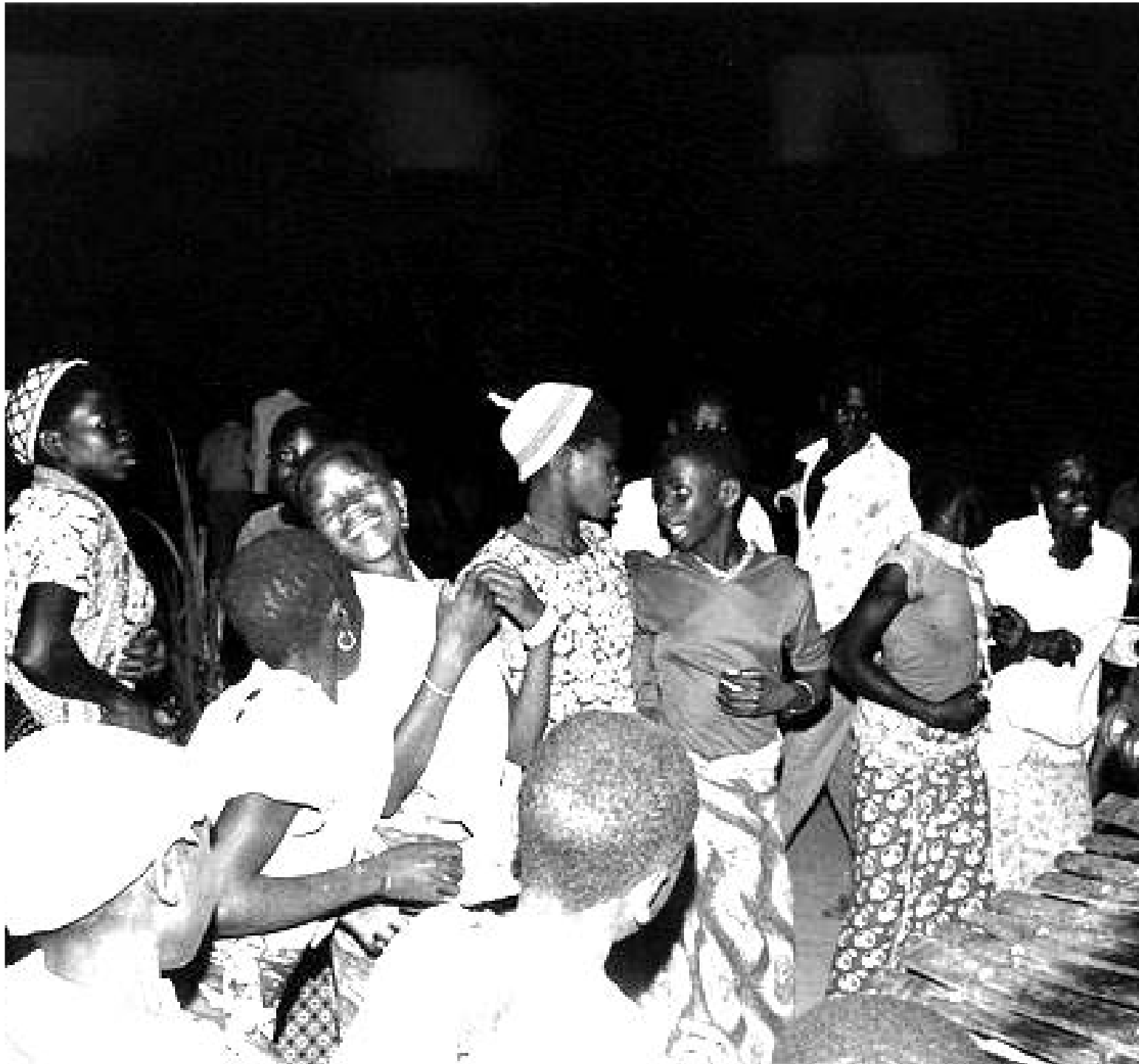
To appreciate the extent and contents of Nkoya female puberty training, an intimate discussion is called for. This requires a higher level of intercultural respect than most Europeans have shown to be inclined to, across the centuries. In Nkoya female puberty training, aspects of human corporality and sexuality are addressed which in the modern North Atlantic region (even with all its excessive display of genitals and sex in the widely accessible porn industry and its products) are scarcely recognised to exist, and anyway are unspeakable. Not Africans but embarrassed Europeans have a lesson to learn here, towards which I humbly make my contribution here. The standard African comment in such matters of the body is: 'This is what God made'.

Among the Nkoya, women wearing modern cosmopolitan underpants / drawers is a development of the 20 c. CE. Before that time, local bark cloth (scantily applied anyway) was women's preferred attire, for the extensive use of trade cloth / calico was reserved for ancestral sacrifices at shrines, for royals and for men in general. The standard pubic adornment / protection consisted (like elsewhere in South Central Africa) of several strings of small beads, inevitably derived from long-distance trade. One of the (otherwise unspeakable and legally actionable) liberties a male joking partner is allowed to take is to reach under his female joking partner's clothes (if any; traditional female attire was minimal) and touch her pubic beads. (For modern Europeans this may appear a bizarre or offensive invasion of personal bodily integrity. Yet, given the very extensive Hindu / Buddhist traits among the Nkoya (see my 2000 book *Sunda*), it may be relevant that in some Hindu groups, South Asia, it is customary for a woman to touch the genitals of a man who is not her lover – when sealing a solemn promise or declaration. In Graeco-Roman Antiquity a similar custom must have existed, hence the word 'testis' was used for both testicle, and witness – and both words have survived till today, also in frequent expressions such as testimony, testing, test. We may simply be dealing with a widespread Pelasgian trait here.)

The African use of bark cloth has parallels in the Pacific and on the (Pacific-influenced) North American North-West Coast cultures; it may be a Sunda trait – or so archaic as to go back to Middle Palaeolithic Central to East Asia, when / where *Borean was spoken, and whence genes and items of culture and language travelled both to sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and the New World



Village women in Barotseland, as photographed by the missionary Coillard shortly before 1900 CE. There is every reason to assume that by that time, non-royal Nkoya women looked rather identical, although the faces shown may not entirely live up to the Nkoya ideal of feminine beauty (however, spot the parallels in the next picture (next slide), of Nkoya teenage village girls in 1977)

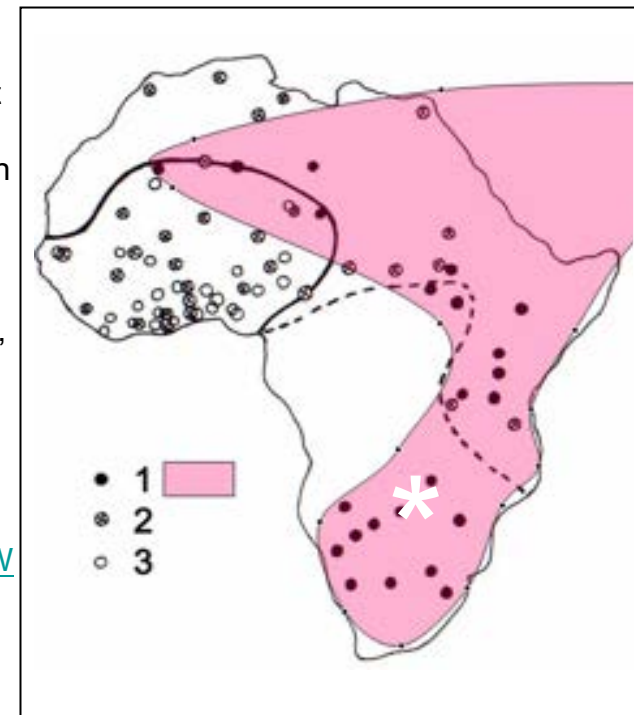


Nkoya teenage girls (most of them past menarche and FPR) dancing at night to the tune of drums and xylophone; photographed in 1977 during a festive celebration on the occasion of a name-inheritance ceremony (*Ushwana*) in Mabombola village, Njonjolo valley, Kaoma district, Zambia

van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1990, 'Oesjwana [Ushwana]: het naamverervingsritueel bij de Nkoja van westelijk Zambia', foto presentatie bij de gelegenheid van de opening van het Pieter de la Courtgebouw, Faculteit Sociale Wetenschappen, Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, mei 1990; text and photographs available at: http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/african_religion/ushwana/ushwana.htm ;! revised version forthcoming in my book in the press: Our drums are always on my mind: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., in press [2013] , 'Our drums are always on my mind': Nkoya history, culture, and society, Zambia, Haarlem: Shikanda, Papers in Intercultural Philosophy / Transcontinental Comparative Studies, 11.

van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2014b, Het dorp Mabombola: Vestiging, verwantschap en huwelijk in de sociale organisatie van de Zambiaanse Nkoya, Haarlem: Papers in Intercultural Philosophy and Transcontinental Comparative Studies, 15, also at: <http://www.quest-journal.net/PIP/Mabombola%20EXT%20lulu3%20%25ALLERBEST.pdf>

- Reaching under the pubic cover would also reveal that, like most peoples in Central Africa (e.g. Uganda and Rwanda), South Central and Southern Africa, Nkoya women engage, over their years of puberty, solitarily or with a few others, in the deliberate manual stretching of their labia – usually undertaken in secluded spots in the bush.
- Elongated labia are a site of transcontinental contention. My dear former PhD student now Professor Dr Julie Ndaya of the University of Kinshasa, DR Congo, in private conversation used to consider European anthropologists's interest in the phenomenon as proof of the hegemonic depravity and vicarious sensationalism of her prospective European colleagues.
- This did scarcely deter me, as Ndaya's PhD supervisor (defence 2009), to provisionally write on the topic and explore some of its transcontinental (Africa, China, North America) and prehistoric (Pre-Pottery Neolithic A, Turkey) manifestations and implications, possibly Pelasgian / proto-African / proto-Bantu--speaking; see: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., & Woudhuizen, Fred, C., 2011, *Ethnicity in Mediterranean Protohistory*, British Archaeological Reports (BAR) International Series No. 2256, Oxford: Archaeopress, pp. 85 f., also at: http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/Ethnicity_MeditProto_ENDVERSION%20def%20LOW%20DPI.pdf .
- There I suggest that labia-stretching by Niger-Congo- (> Bantu-) speaking women in sub-Saharan Africa may be a culture trait preserving, through pseudo-anatomical imitation, the collective memory of the Khoisan-speaking earlier population of the same regions, among whom (I assumed) elongated labia may not be a feature artificially acquired through manual stretching, but congenital – like steatopygy, another alleged trait peculiar to Khoisan-speaking populations and notorious from older, racist physical anthropology). However, at the time I did not stop to consider the possibility that also the elongated labia on record for Khoisan-speaking women may have been the result of deliberate manual stretching. I am not yet aware of state-of-the-art genetic / medical literature that settles this point unequivocally. Nor have I explicitly been told the emic rationale why African women should engage in these practices. Elongated labia are often supposed to add to a male partner's sexual pleasure. But I am not convinced. The stretching implies auto-erotic simulation of the nearby clitoris. Also, women tend to see men as helpless, slightly ridiculous creatures, and the long labia may be thought to provide the penis extra protection and comfort – by analogy with the placenta (*miyemba ya kanuke*, 'baby blanket'), which is explicitly considered by the Nkoya to perform a similar function for the foetus.



This map of Africa presents the historic distribution of three types of beads, including (marked as 1, solid black dots / pink area) beads made of ostrich shells – the tell tale signs of Khoisan presence now and over the past c. 10,000 years. The present-day Nkoya region is marked by a white *. The sub-Saharan African distribution is continuous with Ancient Egypt (where ostrich shell beads were among royal grave goods) and on to South Asia, in whose arid regions ostriches also occurred and where ostrich shell beads have also been found; greatly adapted after: Cavalli-Sforza, L.L., Piazza, A. & Menozzi, A., 1994, *The history and geography of the human genes*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, reprint 1996, Fig. 3.2.

- When in Nkoya FPR the novice girl during her coming-out dance tends to have her hips covered by thick layers of cloth, I have suggested that this again is in imitation of Khoisan-speaking women's steatopygy; however, apart from my own ponderings I have no explicit local Nkoya source for my suggestions on these points
- In Botswana I have found labia stretching a topic of intimate conversation between lovers of complementary genders; a Kalanga woman (North East District) may invite her male lover to stimulate her by going through the motions of further stretching her (already stretched, mature) labia, a to-and-fro movement that does not fail to arouse the adjacent clitoris
- Long-distance trade was the source, not only of calico, cauldrons and guns, but also of very large and valuable trade beads, as shown on the next slide; this type is still associated with Nkoya female puberty rites in the sense that one of the tests a girl must pass is to retain such a large bead for hours in her vagina during her coming-out celebration thus showing the acquired dexterity of her vaginal muscles.



Carnelian trade beads (each with a diameter of c. 3 cm maximum), a type particularly cherished in Africa during the Common Era; on display at the Afrika-Museum, Berg en Dal, Netherlands, 2014

This mineral is not mined in continental Africa, with the exception of Egypt, while Madagascar is also sometimes mentioned as a source; so usually such beads are derived from transcontinental long-distance trade, with likely origins including Arabia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, and Central Europe

From the early 1980s onward, spontaneous musical and dancing performances of the Nkoya people as performed at life-crisis events in the villages, have been transformed into the annual Kazanga Festival, on which I have repeatedly (see next slide) written scholarly analyses. Two video recordings which I made in the Kazanga connection offer, even though stylised, a glimpse of the typical movements and music of the coming-out dance of the *kankanga* girl novice:

•van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2011, *A pubescent girl's coming-out dance among the Nkoya people of Zambia*, at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMnjEI2xojM>

. van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2011, *Final, playful part of a pubescent girl's coming-out dance among the Nkoya people of Zambia*, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXZpyqPAi5Q>

The performing of culture must not be mistaken for time-honoured living village culture

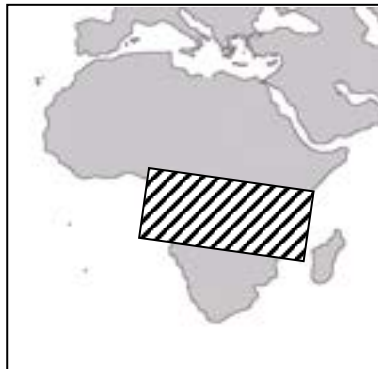
- While the links on the previous slide do allow us glimpses of the kankanga novice's coming out dance, we must realise that the performance during an orchestrated and thoroughly programmed public performance in front of hundreds of people including ethnic strangers, such as the Kazanga Cultural Ceremony is, could never be more than a mere shadow of the actual living dance in its original village environment, such as was still fully operational in the 1970s, when I conducted my first years of fieldwork among the Nkoya people
- To appreciate the dramatic format change which Nkoya traditional culture (including the kankanga's coming-out dance) undergoes when incorporated in the Kazanga Annual Festival, the following studies are illuminating:
- van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1992, *Kazanga: Etniciteit in Afrika tussen staat en traditie*, inaugural lecture, Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, also at: <http://quest-journal.net/shikanda/general/gen3/cultbest.htm> ; shortened French version: 'Kazanga: Ethnicité en Afrique entre Etat et tradition', in: Binsbergen, Wim M.J. van, & Schilder, K., ed., *Perspectives on ethnicity in Africa*, special issue, *Afrika Focus*, Gent, 1993, 1: 9-40; English version with postscript: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1994c, 'The Kazanga festival: Ethnicity as cultural mediation and transformation in central western Zambia', *African Studies*, 53, 2, 1994, pp 92-125, also at: <http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/publications/ASC-1239806-060.pdf>
- van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1997, *Virtuality as a key concept in the study of globalisation: Aspects of the symbolic transformation of contemporary Africa*, The Hague: WOTRO [Netherlands Foundation for Tropical Research, a division of the Netherlands Research Foundation NWO] , Working papers on Globalisation and the construction of communal identity, 3; second edition as web book, at: http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/general/virtuality_edit%202003.pdf ; final version incorporated in van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., *Vicarious Reflections*, Haarlem: PIP-TraCS / Shikanda, 2015 ch. 31, pp 85-168, also at: <http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/vicarious/vicariou.htm>
- van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1999, 'Nkoya royal chiefs and the Kazanga Cultural Association in western central Zambia today: Resilience, decline, or folklorisation?', in: E.A.B. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal zzz& R. van Dijk, eds., *African chieftaincy in a new socio-political landscape*, Hamburg/ Münster: LIT-Verlag, pp. 97-133, also at: <http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/ethnicity/nkoya.htm> ; French version: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2003, 'Les chefs royaux nkoya et l'Association culturelle Kazanga dans la Zambie du centre-ouest aujourd'hui: Résiliation, déclin ou folklorisation de la fonction du chef traditionnel?', in: Perrot, C.-H., et al., eds., *Le retour des rois*, Paris: Karthala. 489-512.

- van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2003, Sensus communis or sensus particularis? Immanuel Kant in Africa, in: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2003, Intercultural encounters: African and anthropological towards a philosophy of interculturality, Berlin / Boston / Münster: LIT, chapter 5, pp. 317-332; also at: http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/intercultural_encounters/index.htm .
- van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2011, The Kazanga Ceremony, Kaoma district, and the University of Zambia – Provisional report on a fieldtrip to Zambia, July 2011, with numerous photographs and video clips, at: <http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/kazanga4/kazanga4.htm> , 39 pp.
- An important operative term in these studies of mine is **virtuality**: the cultural form is retained but the original function no longer applies. One can appreciate another researcher's work, even be considerably indebted to it, yet legitimately have a different opinion. Thera Rasing, in her contribution to the festschrift I received at age 70 (Mosima 2018), contests my view that the continued practice of female puberty rites in Zambian urban and world-religion settings is a matter of virtuality.

The cultural patterning of intercourse

Given the reproductive stress under which Nkoya society is groaning, it stands to reason that FPR among this people is primarily geared to the optimisation of sexual intercourse, not so much for pleasure, but for offspring. Intercourse is explicitly taught, and socially structured.

In Nkoya female puberty training much attention is given to assuring a dry vaginal milieu, usually with the aid of stringent local herbs, containing alkaloids suspected of severely reducing fertility. In this respect the Nkoya, now to be considered as bilateral as a result of the planting of Lozi patrilineality upon an older and inveterate materilineal substrate, belong to the Central African so-called matrilineal belt with extremely low fertility perhaps due to puberty practices (see Central Statistical Office, 1975, *Inter-regional variations in fertility in Zambia*, Lusaka: Central Statistical Office). As so often in cultural analysis, we encounter a vicious cycle: the reproductive stress itself may be partly caused by FPR.



Schematic representation of the Central African matrilineal belt

As my various studies of the Nkoya kinship system have brought out (*Mabombola*, 2014; *The infancy of Edward Shelonga*, 1979/ 2022) the social dynamics of family and residential groups among this people is dominated by the competition over very scarce junior kin.

Nkoya women nonetheless pride themselves on having such a dry vagina that it is difficult for a man to penetrate.

Intercourse is regulated (and a subject of explicit puberty instruction) among the Nkoya to a surprising extent, especially for married couples (unmarried lovers have far greater freedom; the conduct of spouses, however, is supposed to be under constant scrutiny of the ancestors, who through the wedding ceremony have sanctioned and sacralised their union). Whatever has taken place in the bed, the woman needs her partner's formal permission to get up from it to go to the toilet; and when she does get up she must be very careful not to step on her partner's shadow. After intercourse she must carefully cleanse and dry her partner's penis with her handkerchief, which she has received for that purpose during puberty training. However much she may be carried away by sexual excitement, she may never openly show so, not even in the bedroom – a woman who visibly orgasms risks to be beaten on the spot by her male sexual partner, who will scream: *'What do you think you are? Are you a male, that you may show such excitement?'*

Such details make us reflect on the important question whether FPR among the Nkoya, and other such traditional means of culturally shaping human gender relations, are not primarily a means to suppress women and beat them into submission, to subjugate them to male superiority? There is an anachronistic and Eurocentric, narrowly feminist thrust in some modern writings on female institutions, which certainly claims that such institutions are oppressive to women, an infringement of their human rights. Let us admit that mature women educating the teenage girl after menarche may sometimes be harsh and often use violence upon their charges. These mature women sing:

*Ronge kankanka ketu, ronge, eheh
Etu na longere*

*Be taught, our woman novice, be taught, eheh
For we have also been taught.*

But do they teach as marionets of a dominante male population segment? This is not how Nkoya women used to see the matter. FPRs create great identification and solidarity, not only between the novice and her mentrix (who must be non-kin so as to enhance the objectivity of the teaching) but also between women who go through FPR in the same year, and in fact between all women as distinct from men. From the perspective of the rites, men are irresponsible and immature, culture-less creatures who can easily be manipulated, especially if women keep up appearances and ostentatiously play along with the male delusions of grandeur. When explicit consent is required from the female partner for any sexual intercourse lest it be considered actionable rape, this suggests a gender balance of power that may be different from that of the modern North Atlantic, but that is not necessarily less respectful of women and their (from a male point of view) amazing and enviable powers of reproduction and nurturation – to the contrary. The gender truce to which the modern North Atlantic position appears to amount, is based not so much on the respectful affirmation of these female powers, but on their denial, debarring them from formal institutional expression, accommodation, and both symbolic and material reward. We can truly learn from the Nkoya, to the benefit of our wives, daughters, and granddaughters, and greater respect for our mothers and grandmothers.

However, if the transcontinental look we cast at reproductive practices worldwide, primarily and complacently reflects the parochial concerns (i.e. apparent autonomy, extreme individualisation, and myopic self-realisation) of the modern North Atlantic region (and especially its middle and upper classes...), it would look as if Nkoya women are mere comfort girls, even denied orgasmic enjoyment, as part of a male strategy of domination. Nkoya women would have a good laugh over such simplification.

The dancing learned during female puberty training does not only serve an aesthetic or expressive purpose. The gestures suggestive of generous offering represent an adult woman's culinary care for her husband and his kin. The deep pelvic thrusts, girations and throbbings are explicitly taught in preparation of sexual intercourse – although in South Central Africa, it is not ²²Nkoya women, but Nsenga ones from Eastern Province (whom we already met in an earlier slide) , who are most famous for this skill.

Until the onset of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the early 1980s CE, the Nkoya people were strikingly promiscuous, and infidelity in relationships including marriages was not exceptional. Princesses, i.e. female royals, were supposed to be totally free in their sexual choices, which tended to be ephemeral. Like in the modern North Atlantic region, sexual relations may now begin long before any eventual solemnisation of the relationship through the wedding ceremony and bridal payments; many nubile girls now live in a dwelling of their own where they can receive a nocturnal visitor without much ado. Pregnancy is welcomed (also by such a girl's senior kin) because of the general scarcity of offspring. Usually, however, guardians (fathers, uncles, brothers) closely guard sexual access to any nubile girl in their care, and any male offender would risk a stiff fine to be imposed by the Local Court to be paid to the guardians

Intra-kin promiscuity was to some extent regulated, although designated by the same term as used for incest (*ku-luyana*; the same root is, significantly, used to designate the pre-Kololo Barotse dynasty, and its court language, which are both very close to Nkoya): fathers-in-law, brothers-in-law (given the principle of sibling equivalence) were predictable though illicit partners – as the Nkoya saying has it: 'She is your sister / sister-in-law in front of the house, but behind the house she is your wife'.

Whenever a woman has had to leave her husband for some considerable time (e.g. to attend to her parents, or their funeral), she would leave her husband in the care of a trusted sister or woman friend, and sexual services were part of the latter's role as a matter of course.

Sexual license does not mean total anomia. In 50 years of association with the Nkoya, I have not come across a single case of sexual child abuse (if child is defined as under age 13), nor of father-daughter rape. Would I have noticed? I should certainly think so -- my personal biography has regrettably and painfully predestined me to be preoccupied with such transgressions.

Especially the Eastern Nkoya, known as Mashasha, are rather close to their eastern neighbours the Ila. Although different in language, mythology, religion, and dominant modes of production (the Nkoya identify as hunters, the Ila as cattle-keepers) the two groups have so many other traits in common (e.g. in the clan system and chieftainship) that to some extent they overlap. Cf. Smith & Dale 1920. The Ila used to have a festive institution revolving on socially sanctioned, more or less public promiscuity – reported in the context of the Northern Rhodesian (Zambia's colonial predecessor) government's Ila VD (Venereal Disease) campaign of the 1940s; cf. Evans 1950. I have no evidence that this institution ever had a formal Nkoya counterpart. Yet it is clear to the keenly observing fieldworker that all public celebrations, especially those of *female puberty rites which are effectively fertility rites* (male puberty rites among the Nkoya were abolished c. 1900 CE; see van Binsbergen *Tears of Rain* 1992, *Mukanda* 1993) and – of all occasions! – *funerals* (and, since the early 1980s CE, the Kazanga Cultural Festival) have been welcome occasions to enter into contact, and engage sexually (in the never distant bush) with casual sexual partners – often against the expectation of gifts in the form of cash, a scarf, a wrapper (*chitenge*).

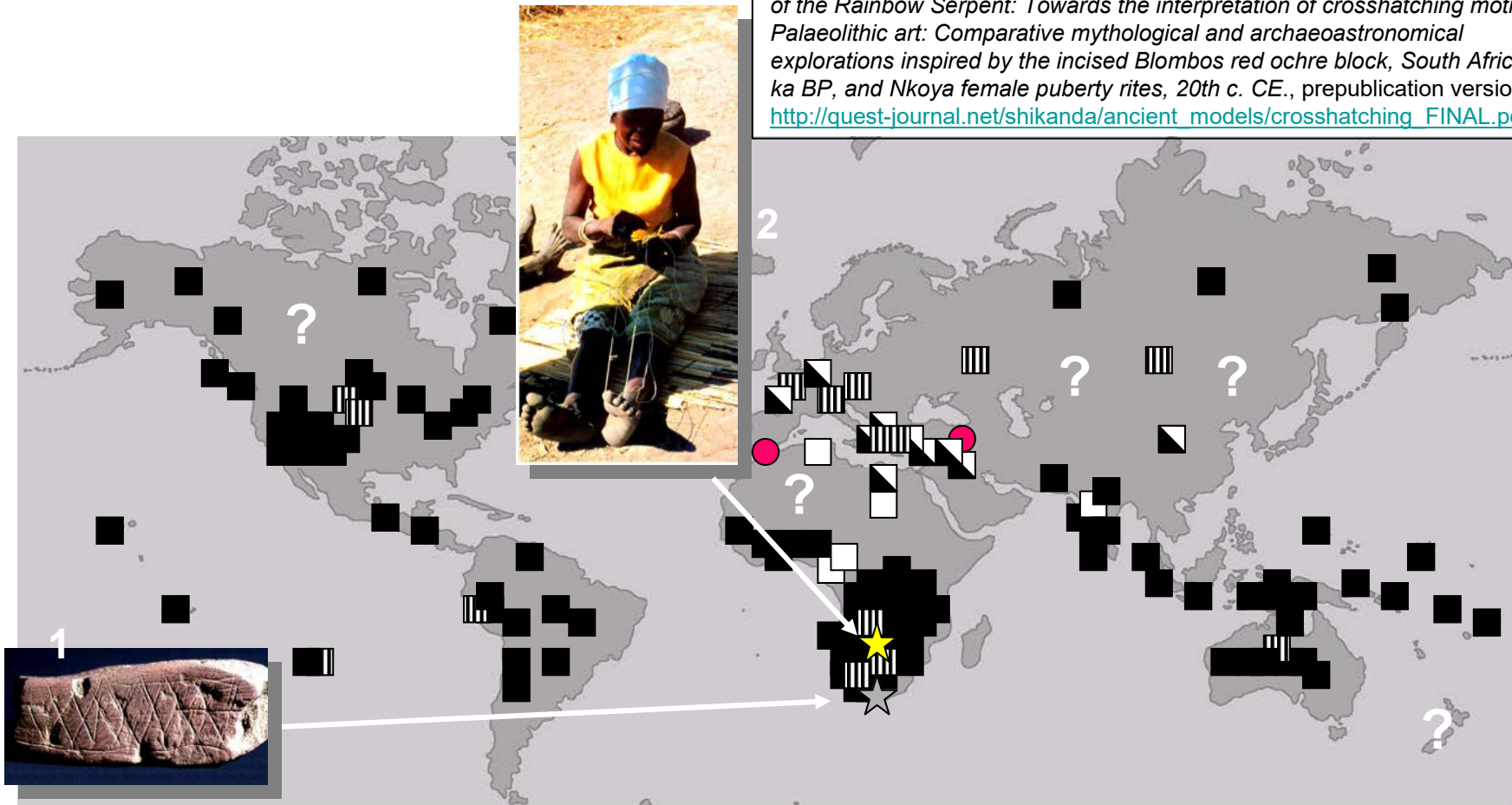
Strikingly, it has been customary for males to broadcast, as expression of their friendship with male friends, the availability of their (actual or classificatory) sisters, and to actively further such casual unions. Sibling relations evoke subtle suggestions of incest – standard endearing terms among lovers are the kinship terms for sibling! As if the brother is inviting his friend to share a male sibling's unique sexual right to a sister...?

My wider field experience in South Central and Southern Africa, meanwhile, suggests that these traits are rather widely distributed and can scarcely be considered as typically Nkoya

- Although a mere male, still not accomplished at Nkoya clan joking, still without having a clan identity assigned to me (that was to occur only in Botswana, 1989, when I received the Sibanda / Clawed Animal clan name, which has no Nkoya equivalent), and scarcely inclined to physically respond to the inviting Nkoya ladies, I yet found research access to Nkoya puberty rites
- Meanwhile I learned, theoretically, that an explicit male verbal request and ditto female consent is to precede any sexual action among the Nkoya; the alternative is actionable in court, even between a married couple – which makes Nkoya ideas of individual bodily integrity more equitable, and more advanced, than those commonly held in the modern North Atlantic region
- I found access to Nkoya female puberty rites as a trusted kinsman (paying my way for the last, secret bit of knowledge – as is perfectly standard as a legitimate access to secret knowledge in South Central Africa). Hence my admiring, extensive account (dedicated to my eldest daughter, Nezmá, whose first language had been Nkoya; with her mother's – my first wife's -- consent she was named after my dearest, chaste female informant during fieldwork in North Africa, 1968) of Nkoya female puberty rites, after many earlier versions finally published in my book *Intercultural Encounters* (2003); hence also my insistence that one of my most promising female students, Thera Rasing, should build her entire research career around this topic.
- van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2011, 'Human rights in the traditional legal system of the Nkoya people of Zambia', in: Jan Abbink & Mirjam de Bruijn, eds, *Land, law and politics in Africa: Mediating conflict and reshaping the state*, African Dynamics no. 10, Leiden / Boston: Brill, pp. 49-79, also at: http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/Nkoya_human_rights_2011.pdf
- van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 1987a / 2003b, 'De schaduw waar je niet overheen mag stappen: Een westers onderzoeker op het Nkoja meisjesfeest', in: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., zzz& Doornbos, M.R., eds, *Afrika in spiegelbeeld*, Haarlem: In de Knipscheer, pp. 139-182; English version: 'The shadow you are not supposed to tread upon': Female initiation and field-work in central western Zambia', paper presented at the Third Satterthwaite Colloquium on African Religion and Ritual, University of Manchester/ Satterthwaite (Cumbria), 21-24 April, 1987; revised version in: van Binsbergen 2003b: ch.3, pp. 93-124, also at: http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/intercultural_encounters/Intercultural_encounters_FINALDEFDEF9.pdf ; final version in press in my book *Our drums are always on my mind*, 2023.
- After I had practically exchanged my main identity as intellectual producer from being a poet for being an Africanist anthropologist, my literary work has yet continued to develop in close association with my scholarly work; often the topics with which I struggled found their first, and sometimes most felicitous, expression in my poems and literary prose while being threshed out in tedious scholarly analyses. This was e.g. the case with my work on the Zambian prophetess Lenshina. It also happened with Nkoya female puberty rites, on which I wrote a poem [KANK'ANGA over a decade before my scholarly approaches \(click here for the PDF](#) – with rare exceptions, all my poetry is in my native Dutch)
- But enough beating about the bush. Let us consider the world map of attestations of female puberty rites; the sources for the data points are the references in the extensive attached bibliography

Female puberty rites: Global distribution map

On the two images shown: cf. van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2011f, *Shimmerings of the Rainbow Serpent: Towards the interpretation of crosshatching motifs in Palaeolithic art: Comparative mythological and archaeoastronomical explorations inspired by the incised Blombos red ochre block, South Africa, 70 ka BP, and Nkoya female puberty rites, 20th c. CE.*, prepublication version at: http://quest-journal.net/shikanda/ancient_models/crosshatching_FINAL.pdf



- Female puberty rites attested in modern times
- Female puberty rites doubtful in modern times
- |||| Female puberty rites attested in ancient times
- ▤ Female puberty rites doubtful in ancient times

1. The Blombos block, whose pattern returns in 2. cat cradles sacred to female puberty rites of the Nkoya people, South Central Africa, today

● Neanderthal extinction 40 ka BP; ☆ Blombos 70 ka BP; ★ Nkoya today ? no attestations?

Discussion

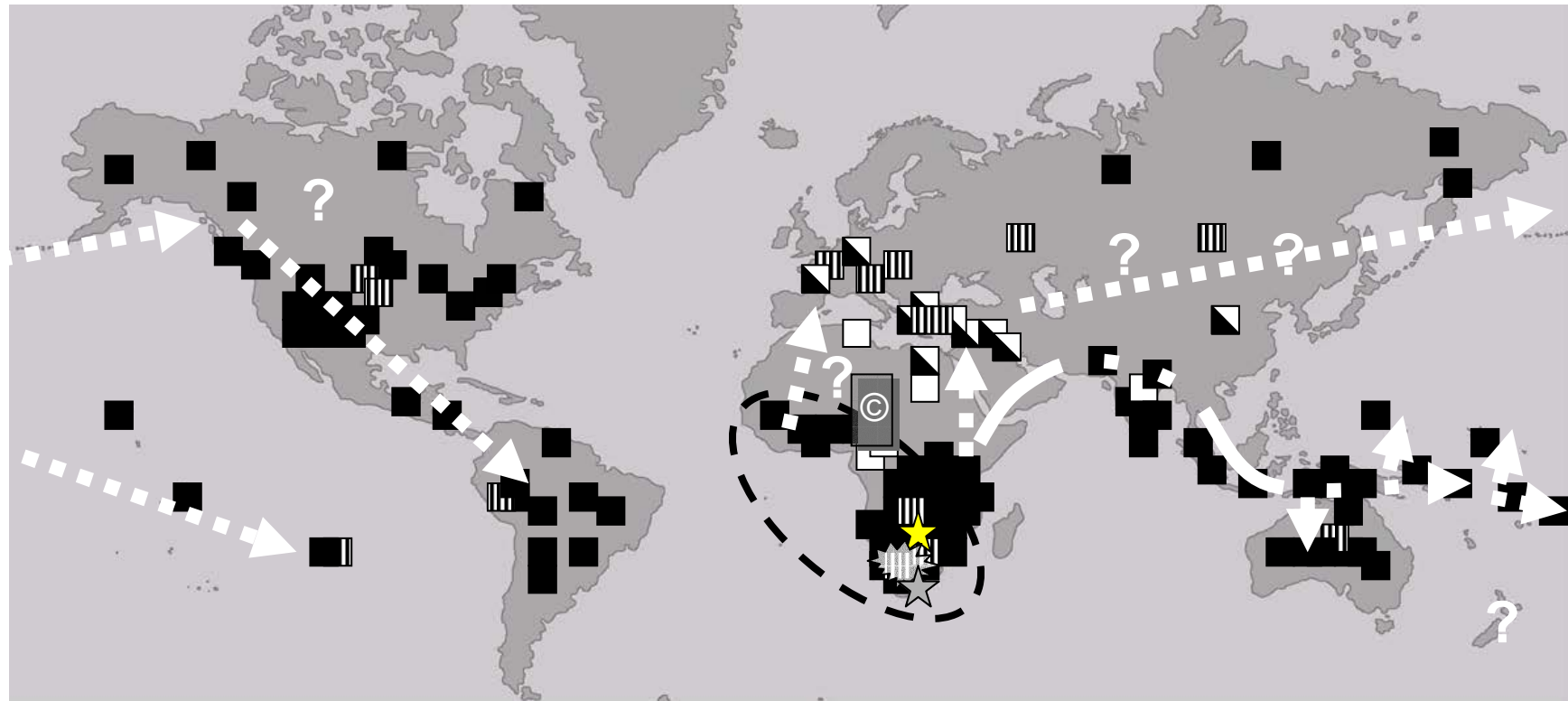
- The examination and interpretation of this type of global distribution has been one of my preoccupations during well over a decade, and in the process a number of considerations were contemplated and evaluated, which inform my final (but still tentative) conclusion
- Elsewhere (2012 *Presocratics*, 2018 *Confronting*; 2020 *Sunda*; 2022 *Prising Open Pandora's Box*) I have worked out a few rules of thumb by which the global distribution of a trait may be considered to have been part of Pandora's Box, i.e. the collective cultural heritage of Anatomically Modern Humans (AMH) – a package gradually developed inside sub-Saharan Africa from 200 ka BP, and distributed all over the globe with AMH's Out-of-Africa Exodus. By these rules, female puberty rites (FPR) must be reckoned to have been part of Pandora's Box.
 - In retrospect I am surprised that this crucial conclusion did not press itself upon me much earlier. I was so enamoured with the African variants which I studied at very close range among the Nkoya people since 1972, and by the further work on Zambian FPR by my dear and brilliant student Dr Thera Rasing, that I did spot the striking North American parallels (2012) but never thought they were part of a globally distributed complex. Only the extensive bibliographic research I undertook recently (see the appended bibliography) at long last allowed me to transcend the myopia which is the forgivable result of 50 years of fieldwork association with one particular group – even though in that immense period I also did plenty of fieldwork among other groups, in addition to extensive historical work on Graeco-Roman classical Antiquity, the Bronze Age, and the Palaeolithic
- In recent rock art studies, which are particularly flourishing in regard of Southern Africa, there has been considerable attention to possible interpretations in terms of female and puberty rituals. In the appended bibliography, I have marked a few selected relevant items with *. In the absence of contemporary metatext, and given the inevitable *ambiguity* (Hays-Gilpin 2004; van Binsbergen 2018) attending the interpretation of rock art, I am often unconvinced by such interpretations; but when I found the sacred cat cradles of Nkoya FPR to tally exactly with the pattern on the Middle Palaeolithic Blombos Block (*Shimmerings*, 2011), I believed I was beginning to identify the earliest, prehistoric attestations of FPR, their association with the Rainbow Serpent (a worldwide prehistoric mythical theme in Pandora's Box – usually radically hostile to women) which I propose to have a late manifestation in the Nkoya's menstrual blood demon Kanga), and all this in the context of early AMH cultural expressions, at Blombos 70 ka BP.

- In recent years I did a lot of work (e.g. 2019 Rethinking, 2020 Sunda) on Oppenheimer—Dick-Read—Tauchmann’s Sunda Hypothesis, postulating extensive South East Asian influence on the western Old World since the melting of the polar caps at the onset of the Holocene (12 ka BP) forced SE Asian original populations to fly their drowning homelands in all directions. As the subtitle of my 2020 book indicates, Sunda effects abound in Nkoya culture, and they have often been instrumental in transmitting the contents of Pandora’s Box further across the globe. However, in the case of FPR there turned out to be no reason to interpret their global distribution in Sunda terms. Even so, I found reason to suspect that genital mutilation, both male and female, may have a Sunda background – but such mutilation is only occasionally part of FPR, and certainly not among the Nkoya or elsewhere in Zambia
- In Africa, FPR are particularly conspicuous among groups speaking languages belonging to the widespread Niger-Congo macrophylum (of which Bantu languages are a major component, stretching from Cameroon and Kenya to the Cape). The origin of this macrophylum is contested – it is usually considered to have arisen in the Lake Chad region c. 8 ka BP, but I think that this view is informed by the ‘Africa for the Africans’ scholarly fallacy (see my 2019 and 2020 books on Sunda), whereas in fact (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011; van Binsbergen, in press (a)) Niger-Congo is a descendant of disintegrating *Borean (a language construct supposed to have been spoken in Central to East Asia c. 25 ka BP), and thus closely related to Austric and to Amerind languages – more at home in Upper Palaeolithic Asia than in Mesolithic or Neolithic Africa. Against the background of the discovery of FPR’s place in Pandora’s Box, we need not further consider the (erroneous) view of FPR as being particularly and characteristically *African* – their nominal Africanness is merely an aspect of Pandora’s Box having been situated inside sub-Saharan Africa, whereas the distinctive package of sub-Saharan African cultures and languages has emerged far more recently than Pandora’s Box, and in fact has a time depth of only a handful of millennia, in the course of which specific transcontinental influences (e.g. the Pelasgian one) have been incorporated.

- In my other attempts at long-range historical reconstruction of major mythical and cultural traits (as presented in my recent books already mentioned in passing) through a consideration of their global distribution patterns, I have often been brought to assume a West Asian proto-Neolithic origin for such traits. West Asia was also (with Gibraltar) one of the contexts where Neanderthal-AHM cultural and genetic exchanges took place most recently prior to Neanderthal extinction c. 40 ka BP. Given that the New World was largely populated across Beringia much later than 40 ka BP, and that major West Asian traits may be argued to have travelled to Africa (hence the striking parallelism between sub-Saharan African, and North American, cultural traits in such fields as divination, gaming, basketry, fishing, myth, FPR) it is remotely possible that the world distribution of FPR would have an epicentre of initial distribution in West Asia, and that in fact FPR might owe a lot to an hypothetical initial Neanderthal input (there are mythemes for which a similar argument could be advanced, see *Pandora's Box Prised Open*, 2022). However, given the Blombos perspective such an argument is entirely unnecessary (and in view of Occam's Razor, even undesirable).
- Although our global distribution map is adequately filled with attestations (many of them in fact multiple), that map displays a number of remarkable gaps, indicated on the map by a question mark:
 - Central to North Asia including China
 - North Africa
 - New Zealand (Tregear 1890 already explicitly stated that he never came across any FPR among the Maori)
 - Central North America

- At the present stage of my explorations, I cannot determine whether
 - these are simply bibliographic gaps which a further perusal of especially the older ethnographic and travelling literature (occasionally digitalised but scarcely available through Google Scholar) may yet fill,
 - or whether these are genuinely regions where FPR as globally cherished, often sacred contents of Pandora's Box have failed to penetrate (or, as prehistoric finds may help to ascertain, have failed to survive)
- I do not rule out the possibility that, for some of these areas, the answer to these questions is already available in the general and comparative literature on FPR
- Some of these empty areas (but by no means all) suggest an explanation in terms of the following hypothesis: *where extensive and complex early regional political and religious systems have incorporated the local communities, their alternatives or travesties of earlier FPR may be expected, e.g. in the form of state- or church-controlled education, marriage, and other forms of life crisis ritual. Islam, Buddhism and Confucianism appear to be cases in point.*
-
- *With these more systematic considerations, we are beginning to be in a position to derive a tentative historical interpretation from the global distribution pattern shown on the preceding world map; that reconstructed world history is shown on the next slide:*

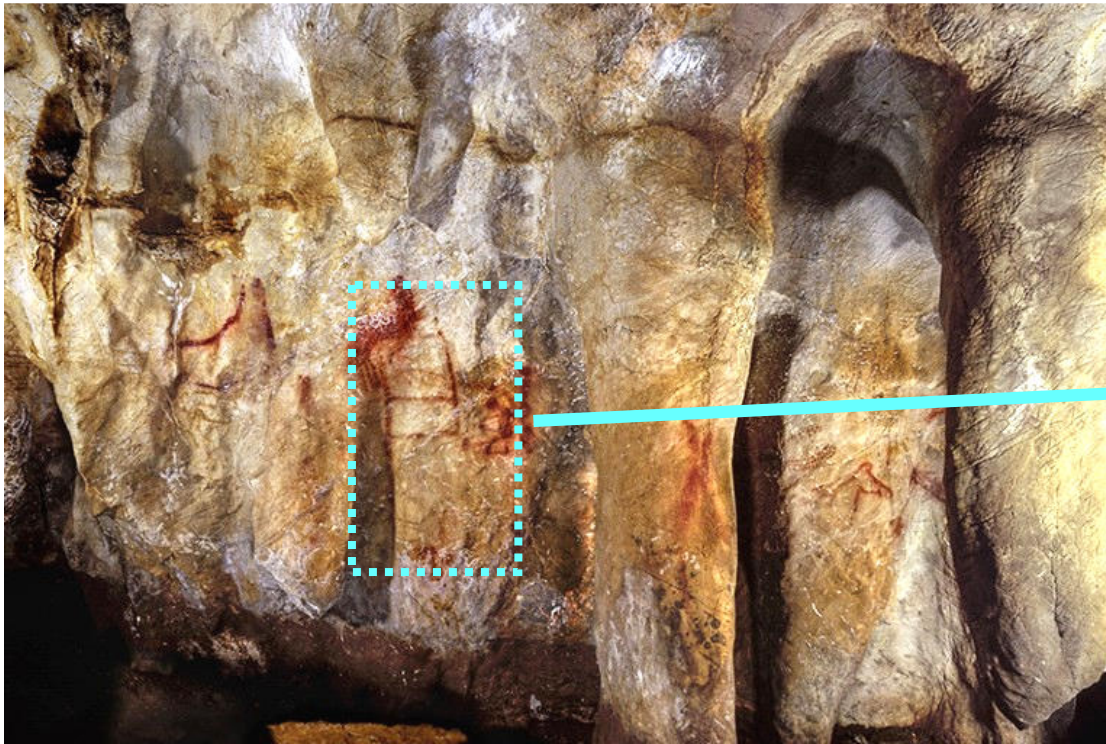
Female puberty rites worldwide: Attempt at long-range historical reconstruction



- Female puberty rites attested in modern times
- ▨ Female puberty rites attested in ancient times
- ☐ Female puberty rites doubtful in modern times
- ▨ Female puberty rites doubtful in ancient times
- ☀ Proposed origin; (dashed circle) Nigercongo macrophylum (but not older than 8 ka BP!); ☐ Lake Chad region
- ☐ First sally out of-Africa, 60-80 ka BP; ☐ proposed transmission; ☆ Blombos; ★ Nkoya

Conclusion

- The study of FPR is an extensive field, to which over the decades major anthropologists and archaeologists have made significant contribution, including Audrey Richards, Victor Turner, Thomas Dowson, George Devereux, Ronald Berndt, Geza Roheim, Harold Driver, Alfred Metraux, Pnina Werbner, etc. The accumulated literature raises major questions of societal theory, method, global distribution, the unity of humankind and its prehistoric background, valid comparison, viricentric (i.e. male-centered) perspective, Eurocentric perspective, presentist perspective, the social significance of ritual, sex education and pandemics e.g. HIV / AIDS (in whose context many studies of menarche customs were undertaken), the health hazards of bodily intrusive ritual, the balancing of gender power relations, etc.
- There is not the slightest chance that the present tentative discussion could even begin to do justice to these extremely important questions.
- Given my present age and my current publication agenda, there is neither much chance that I will ever treat these themes more adequately in the near future. Hence this provisional and inconclusive instalment.
- One final point concerns the long-range time depth attainable with the present method. On this point, the next slide opens up one final exciting new vista.



- Menstruation, hence menarche and the invitation to mark this life crisis event ceremonially, is fairly unique among mammals let alone other vertebrates. But it is shared with other primates such as chimpansees hence probably constitutes a universal human feature, with a time depth of several million years rather than the mere 200 ka of AMH's existence. Menstruation, and Prticularly menarche and the growth of breasts as dramatic turning points in any female human's life did not begin with the rise of AMHs, and as yet we have no idea if prior to the emergence of AMH there were any detectable institutional ritual responses to the female maturation that has kept our species alive. In the absence of contemporary comments in a metalanguage decipherable to us today, shall we ever be able to reconstruct this potentially earliest history of FPR by an examination of rock art?
- Strassmann, B.I., 1996, "The evolution of endometrial cycles and menstruation". *The Quarterly Review of Biology*. 71 (2): 181–220
- Anonymous, Menstruation, wiki, at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menstruation>

The picture top left shows recently discovered Neanderthal rock art from Spain, estimated to date from 65 ka BP; source: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-02357-8>

Apart from the colour red, little in this iconography compellingly suggests any relation with FPR. However, the strangely geometric central pattern (indicated by the superimposed rectangle in the left-hand figure, and schematised in the central figure, is not totally without parallels in the Blombos block, which is roughly of the same age but from Southern Africa instead of Spain, and usually attributed to AMHs rather than Neanderthals. My analysis in *Shimmerings* (2014) suggests that the Blombos block does have a relation with FPR and contains a coded representation of the Rainbow Serpent, which is (as attested in myth all over the world) inimical to women and may be equivalent to the Nkoya Kanga blood demon.

Bibliography

- The extensive provisional bibliography will not be part of this presentation, but is added in a different format; you may use the following clickable link: van Binsbergen, Wim M.J., 2022, PROVISIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY, FEMALE PUBERTY RITES, at: http://www.quest-journal.net/shikanda/topicalities/BIBLIO_Female_puberty_rites_and_biblio_FINAL3.pdf
- It is specifically gered to FPR, and does not contain all the additional literature which was mentioned in the course of this PowerPoint presentation.