

# The politics of Eros: ritual dialogue and egalitarianism in three Central African hunter-gatherer societies

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It has become standard practice within feminist anthropology to repudiate any essential relationship between the biological body and cultural identity. In recent years, the ongoing deconstruction of the body has come to seem the only 'natural' fact. By contrast, this article seeks to reconnect sex, power, and culture in a positive sense, by identifying a political system in which power is kept in motion *through* the body. Literally dancing it out, organized Mbuti or Yaka gender groups perform a recurrent ritual repartee where power is continually churned up and funnelled back and forth between coalitions. The graphic somatic language that emerges through these dances suggests an alternative power-principle: kinetic, erotic, and fundamentally non-coercive. Here, the drawing back of the collective eye to the anatomical nature of power, with the simultaneous ritual de-privatization of 'biology', explodes the body out into a collective political force. The cultural visibility of the female procreative body in such contexts is striking. Using the core theme of dialogism, I rethink the creative potential of sexual duality, and work towards a new understanding of gender, power, and the body.

There is an odd discordance in the reading of Western gender theory alongside ethnography of Central African hunter-gatherers. The two don't sit comfortably. The complexity and plurality of Butler's (1990) gender tends to hover unconvincingly above empirical data that stays rooted in sexed bodies and their metaphors. Where power is expressed in ritual context, it is the visceral, libidinal power of the body in motion. Students of African societies have commented on this symbolic preoccupation with the very terms recent Western gender theory disposes of at the outset – sex, menstrual blood, gestation, birth, and parturition (Beidelman 1997; Kaspin 1999; Lewis, 2002; Moore 1999; Power & Watts 1999; Turnbull 1978; Turner 1969). These are elemental, organic terms, words that conjure up earth and skin rather than mind. Moreover, they are particularly resonant with the female reproductive system. In an essay on African gender symbolism, Moore notes a widespread concern with 'the power of sex and with issues of sexual access and denial' or with 'the relationship between body processes and social processes, the way that the inner rhythms and functions of the body have an established set of concordances with social structures and cosmological understandings' (1999: 3).

In this article I draw on several sources, including Bakhtin (1984a [1968]; 1984b), Bourdieu (1990; 1991), and Turner (1969; 1982), to construct an argument about a kind of body, and body politics, that surfaces in diverse ethnographic accounts of forest hunter-gatherers in Central Africa. Underpinning this theoretical weave are the data of three long-term ethnographers on the region – Turnbull in ‘The politics of non-aggression’ (1978), Kisluk in *Seize the dance* (1998), and Lewis in ‘Forest hunter-gatherers and their world’ (2002) – who have each in various ways prioritized the themes of sex and gender. The article is divided into three broad chunks. In this initial section, I detail the theoretical background to the ideas I am working through, and explain my use of terms. The second and main section focuses on the ethnographic data that underpin my arguments. The final and concluding section attempts to draw out the broad anthropological and political consequences of those arguments. An obvious risk with this kind of comparative approach is the neglect of significant differences between geographically distant groups. It is important to state at the outset, therefore, that I am not offering an empirical account of any of these peoples, but rather exploring the bodily conversation elaborated through ritual and dance repertoires across communities. While much has changed for the Mbuti since Turnbull’s (1978) research, and the approaches of Lewis (2002) and Kisluk (1998) differ substantially, it is impossible reading across the three writers not to be struck by a recurrent ritual dialogic hung around sexual duality.

### Power as the body

This is an ambitious article. I am working to construct a proposal covering several interrelated themes. Rather than the detailed examination of a single issue, I have chosen to look at some major terms through the grid of ritual action in three hunter-gatherer societies. I should be clear therefore that there are several things I am not attempting to do. This is not intended as a definitive article on gender. Gender, and our understanding of what it might be, is central. But gender in these societies makes little sense without taking a closer look at the materiality and politics of the body. Recent work by biological anthropologists such as Peacock (1991) or Hrdy (1999; 2009), which focuses on women’s co-operative strategies and the biological/evolutionary rationale underlying them, has served as a corrective to cultural analyses which began from gender with scant understanding of biological sex. The findings of Peacock’s research into subsistence practices among Efe hunter-gatherers in the Democratic Republic of Congo ‘contradict newly emerged feminist wisdom that in its extreme portrays the subsistence work of women in foraging societies as being unaffected by pregnancy, the birth process, or childcare’ (1991: 351). Hrdy’s (2009) influential work on maternal co-operation and allomothering introduces the dynamic of collective female agency into social behaviour. The important thing about these studies is that they draw the terms back to the *fact* of the biological body. Once we understand, for instance, that women are biologically more inclined (because of heavy reproductive and energetic costs) to develop co-operative strategies, and that these strategies can in turn have a direct impact on social politics within groups, the idea of sexual difference as a mere concept, ultimately irrelevant to cultural life and open for theoretical deconstruction, begins to seem like half the story.

Laying the foundation for an analysis of gender by first establishing its relationship to biological sex does not mean reducing the complexity of social life to sex. It means we begin to theorize with the full range of facts at hand. And, ultimately, it means

reintroducing into cultural analyses the rich material of the reproductive body, in order to appreciate how this body is influencing socio-political dynamics. Rather than the reduction of 'culture', this is the expansion of 'biology'. As Moore (1999) notes, it is sex – and specifically the procreative power of the body – that provides the symbolic fuel during ritual exchanges in many African societies. My proposal is that by looking closely at a particular ritual dialogic which occurs routinely in certain egalitarian societies, we can begin to grasp a new kind of politics: visceral, kinetic, erotic, live; an expansive power churned up from the motion of bodies acting together and upon one another. Assuming that the political is 'invariably centred on coercive power' (Gledhill 1994: 13) has obscured our appreciation of systems such as these, in which power never settles in the hands of any one group or individual but is continually funnelled back and forth between coalitions.

Regardless of the many variations on the production of power in egalitarian societies, these are above all systems which have actively resisted the possibility of power-over and the development of a political apparatus that would facilitate the emergence of the state (Gledhill 1994; cf. Clastres 1989). This article explores one of the mechanisms used by the Mbuti, the Mbendjele Yaka, or the BaAka in this collective movement against the possibility of coercive power. Or, more accurately, because the notion of 'against' enshrines another negative, it is about the collective movement *towards* a dynamic social politics that privileges relationship over ownership; persuasion over coercion; dialogue over monologue. And while it's clear that power is produced and distributed between the sexes, the focus here is on the women's collectives which dominate the social landscape of the three communities in question. This is not only to redress a deficit of theory on women. It is because in these societies it is *women* who move as a collective force whose ritual expression – bawdy, aggressive, kinetic – is, I argue, deeply political. While the three ethnographers whose work I draw on have each produced detailed data on a range of issues, not enough has been said about the politics of this collective female body, and what it is expressing through a sustained ritual emphasis on sex.

I have used the work of Bakhtin (1984a [1968]; 1984b), particularly in the later stages of the article, because there is a clarity in his writing on the 'material bodily principle' (1984a [1968]: 19) and the politics of its cultural world that resonates broadly with the data on contemporary hunter-gatherers. Bakhtin (1984b), a literary theorist and ethical philosopher, wrote prolifically on the theme of dialogue – particularly the theory of language in which 'the forces of dialogue struggle constantly against the forces of monologue' (Hill 1986: 89) – and on the dialogic nature of carnival and the grotesque body in the Middle Ages. The constitutive power of dialogue as defined by him is central to my use of the term 'ritual dialogism' throughout the article, and to my argument about ritually mediated conversation in Yaka communities: 'In dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is' (Bakhtin 1984b: 252). But my understanding of dialogism is also influenced by Turner's (1969) writing on the peculiar somatic power that shuttles back and forth between the sexes during organized ritual exchanges. Writing about the Ndembu, Turner refers to a 'tensed unity or Gestalt' that is constituted 'by the very forces that contend within it' (1969: 83). Vitality, these 'mutually involved irrepressibles belong together' and may 'constitute strong unities, the more so if both principles or protagonists in the conflict are consciously recognized and accepted' (1969: 83). The respective group interests '*do not break each other down; in a way they provoke each other*' (1969: 83,

emphasis mine). While a reading of traditional feminist perspectives on the construction of gender would commence from the constraint of duality, and proceed from there to a disembodied realm of multiplicity in performance, Yaka and Mbuti seem to commence from the experience of multiplicity and fluidity and *draw back*, in ritual performance, to a sharply defined gender showcasing sexual difference, procreative skill, and the inviolability of the collective female body. I have used Bakhtin's (1984a [1968]) writing in *Rabelais and his world* to theorize the way in which women capitalize on the subversive power of this collective body. Bakhtin's (1984a [1968]; 1984b) writing on both dialogism and the body point to a corporeal politics rooted in the tension between community and coercive power; between the principles of hierarchy and egalitarianism. His work has helped me to identify the body politics used by Yaka or BaAka women as part of a ritual dialogue – a kinetic interchange involving bodily fluids and sexual energies.

'The politics of Eros' is a term which has come to seem appropriate for naming this complex. Eros classically indicated qualities such as love, lust, joy, intercourse – 'the libidinal, sexual or life instincts, which are best comprised under the name of Eros' (Freud quoted in Abel 1989: 48). But as Ehrenreich (2007) has shown, the term was later shrunk to accommodate the dyad, and notions of romantic or erotic love between two people. As I became familiar with the literature on hunter-gatherer ritual dance, and particularly following a period with the Mbendjéle Yaka at Mbole in Northern Congo, it struck me that there is a pervasive sensual humour here that is largely absent from later theoretical writing. Some ethnographers refer in passing to the fact that Yaka women and children dance constantly simply 'because it's a good thing' (Bundo 2001: 95). It is this feel-good factor, visible in gendered ritual exchanges, which seems to be integral to their efficacy. Using the term 'Eros' as a caption for what we see in these dances is also one way to keep an eye on the positive aspect of a political system that confounds traditional understandings of power. I could have said 'the politics of sex', 'the politics of joy', or 'the politics of motion'. But Eros, in the old, complete sense, seems to encompass all of these elements.

Returning to the issue of how to understand egalitarian systems, Woodburn, like Gledhill (1994), has made the point that equality in such societies is never neutral – 'the mere absence of inequality or hierarchy' (Woodburn 1982: 431) – but is assertively and repeatedly acted out. Egalitarian society is defined by a number of features which set it apart from hierarchical society, and an acknowledgement of these is central to understanding women's status in such groups. They include the social and ideological imperative to share; direct access to material resources, knowledge, and skills by all members of the community; relative gender and age equality; an unparalleled degree of individual autonomy; and a strong emphasis on territorial mobility (Woodburn 1982). The attributes defined by Woodburn are part of a general social ethos mitigating above all against privatization, whether of people, things, or items of knowledge. Woodburn frames this as the 'disengagement' of people from property, and follows the logic to a more subtle disengagement of people from restrictive social commitments and dependencies. Like the Pintupi communities described by Myers (1991), for whom autonomy and relatedness constituted part of the same complex relational life, Woodburn (1982) identifies a distinctive sociality in which the obligations of close relationship are always being simultaneously cultivated and repelled. Certain Central African hunter-gatherers make this simultaneity the founding principle of their ritual life, in a collective acknowledgement that the creative 'opposition of one person to

another' (Bakhtin 1984*b*: 252) can instigate a kind of social flow difficult to achieve by other means. This is a politics based on the principle that carefully managed ritual opposition – a kind of intersubjective antiphony – has the capacity to churn up and circulate social power. The affirmation of egalitarianism through a seemingly antagonistic ritual play makes sense in view of Myers' (1991) and Woodburn's (1982) understanding of hunter-gatherer egalitarianism as perpetually balanced on the fine line between autonomy and connectedness.

Bird-David, in turn, has shown how fundamentally different metaphors about relationship shape the respective economic systems of hunter-gatherers such as the Nayaka and their farmer neighbours the Bette Kurumbu. Nayaka ideas about the environment gravitate around a root metaphor of 'forest is parent' (Bird-David 1990: 190) which represents what Bird-David terms a 'local economic model ... Unlike Western models, exotic economic models are constructed about primary metaphors that are frequently drawn from the human body or family' (1990: 190). The Nayaka model of a giving parent who provides irrespective of his or her child's conduct is in contrast with a potentially punitive ancestor who gives only if the correct behaviour is observed. The important point here is the *expectation* of generosity. This active resistance to privatization, and the sociality which is inseparable from it, is important to understanding the way in which the collective body is subsequently manifest in such communities.

Writing on what it is that distinguishes hunter-gatherers from their neighbours, Barnard (2000) argues that a recent 'revisionist' focus on history and the wider power-relationships within which contemporary communities are involved has detracted theoretical attention from the intra-cultural systems of hunter-gatherers themselves. Yet as long ago as 1981, Leacock made clear the problems with conceptualizing hunter-gatherer societies as *quantitatively* rather than *qualitatively* different from non-foraging societies, pointing out that '[t]he possibility that altogether different sets of relationships from those involving economic power might be operating in non-class society is not followed through ... [I]t is no accident that hierarchical patterns similar to our own are found to be "incipient" wherever they are not well established' (1981: 247). Writing specifically on gender egalitarian societies, Endicott and Endicott define these as communities in which 'neither males nor females *as groups* have control over the other sex, and where neither sex is accorded greater gender value than the other by society as a whole' (2008: 8, original emphasis). The need, they stress, is for new terms based on societies in which sexual difference and equality coexist. Following them, I contend that women's social prominence in the three societies cited is not a *result* of their egalitarianism, but a causal factor in it. This means reintroducing women's collectives into analyses of egalitarian systems, looking at power in much the same way that Strathern (1988) theorized the power Melanesian men have through access to male ritual collectives. Which brings us back to gender.

Euro-American understandings of the term have undergone a series of important changes in recent decades (cf. Butler 1990; Haraway 1992; Ortner 1996; Strathern 1988). The work of Butler (1990; 1993) in particular destabilized the feminist subject of 'woman' and claimed to replace it with a troubled and potentially gender-less or gender-multiple person. If the gender of recent Western theory pertains to biological bodies at all, it usually does so in the guise of hierarchy (though see Rival 1997). But 'our' gender is so heavily loaded with the *experience* of inequality it is almost impossible to think outside it. Even Strathern's (1988) path-breaking study of gender in Melanesia, while transforming the terms of analysis, dealt with communities strongly orientated to

male collectivity and the subordination of women. I argue that this fact profoundly influences what is happening politically in such societies. Both Amadiume (1987) and Oyèwùmí (1997) have objected to the transposition of Western gender categories to African contexts, and to the automatic problematization of the female biological body that travels within such categories. My analysis follows their demand that we develop new ways of thinking about sex, gender, and the body, based on the possibility that these might represent areas of communal power, rather than sites for the enactment of symbolic violence. A number of writers on the cosmology of gender in Africa have stressed this distinction (e.g. Broche-Due 1999; Kaspin 1999; Sanders 1999), but the political implications of it in specifically egalitarian societies have not been developed. I have chosen not to dispense with the term 'gender' in favour of the more direct 'sexual politics' because it seems to me there is a cultural elaboration here recognizably related to the sexes. The crucial difference is that the ritual gender we find among the Mbendjele or the BaAka is controlled by the group as a whole. 'Gender' here is not the quietly instilled disposition that freezes like a mask over the individual. Gender in these societies remains loud; political; a live thing in the hands of the coalitions who use it to produce power.

To restate the question driving this article then: where hierarchical relations with their felt divisions and constraints are *not* the norm, what kind of 'body' are we talking about? How might this potentially egalitarian body influence our understandings of core anthropological terms and debates – gender, power, sociality? Because a clear ritual dialogic involving the sexes sits at the heart of the social economy in these societies, we need to examine the kind of somatic power on which collective representations are based. The very notion of 'having' as opposed to 'being' a body derives from an ideology of ownership not appropriate to egalitarian societies. When we speak about 'the sexual division of labour', or unequal gender relations, profound assumptions of a discordance at the level of the person are triggered. These are emotive issues for us because they are experienced as painful, disempowering – injustices to be addressed. As when reading Bourdieu, we find the deferential Kabyle woman who must 'walk with a slight stoop ... looking down ... avoiding the excessive swing of the hips', and embodying restraint, reserve, a complex 'that orients the whole female body downwards, towards the ground, the inside, the house' (1990: 70). Here is 'political mythology realized, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking' (1990: 70). But standing in the central camp clearing at Mboule one night as a snake of beaded women stormed through camp – clapping, yodelling, cackling, cracking open the major social space with their bodies – I began to wonder what are the implications for a society when the story that is ritualized through bodily comportment *highlights* female reproductive anatomy, female bodily fluids, and female desire, and refracts these back to the community as cultural power? As feminist anthropologists working with hunter-gatherers began to point out three decades ago, we are talking about 'qualitatively different kinds of society' (Leacock 1981: 247; cf. Biesele 1993; Draper 1975; Endicott & Endicott 2008), and therefore potentially qualitatively different kinds of bodily experience.

In commencing from women's collective agency, and from the articulation of bodily semantics in ritual, I foreground the body through which Mbendjele, BaAka, or Mbuti women assert power. This is not the individual body familiar to Western science, ostensibly pre-discursive, derived as it is from notions of a delimiting 'nature'. There is

a base-line of political power which Yaka or Mbuti women experience *through* the body that much of Western feminism long ago sacrificed to the push for a kind of lobotomized equality dependent on sameness (cf. Amadiume 1987). Yet when one begins to examine what is being done and said by women in forest communities during large, collective performances, there is a new voice, which slowly becomes recognizable as the voice of the body itself. Sex, blood, gestation, birth, parturition – in Yaka ritual lyric and symbolism, these are already cultural items (cf. Devische 1993; Kisluik 1998; Lewis 2002; 2008). The traditional academic feminist attempt to break away from or deconstruct them has been formed in response to one historical trajectory. With such understanding, the critique of ‘phallogocentric hegemony’ (Butler 1990) remains valid, but loses its authority. It is no coincidence that in the 1970s and 1980s foment of feminist thought, the phallus became the metaphor for gender oppression. But compare this taunt sung with relish by BaAka women who have just seized the public camp space: ‘the penis can’t compete / it died already! / the vagina wins!’ (*eloko tembe ya polo / a mou wa laï! / eneke ganye!*)’ (Kisluik 1998: 131). Here, while the body is clearly at issue, the phallus is de-centred in the most graphic of terms.

While recent feminist anthropological writing has moved on considerably from an earlier focus on ‘universal subordination’ with its enshrinement of the body as shared problematic, that premise remains stubbornly rooted in the assumption that a basic tenet of feminist practice is to ‘locate sex differences in culture, not biology or nature’ (Abu-Lughod 2006: 158). Maintaining this hierarchy between biology and culture means that even if it has become central to feminist anthropological thought (Lewin 2006), there is still the impression of the body as *done-to*. It is difficult to find studies of the female body that challenge this initial premise of reproductive sex as being ‘entirely ideological, oppressive, or irrelevant’, as Rival (1997: 636) phrases it in her critique of Butler and others. That the female procreative body could express a collective agency which is both active and political, an agency expressed through public ritual celebrations of reproductive sex, birth, blood, and the female genitals, has rarely been considered.

I use the three ethnographic synopses in this article to challenge the idea of the female biological body as culturally constructed with a straightforward relationship to gender and to social inequality. I propose that by examining the language of the body in Yaka or Mbuti ritual dialogue we can begin to develop an alternative understanding of the person, one in which biological sex is not inherently problematic (the move to deconstruct the body is based on that assumption), and can in fact be a source of great cultural power. The elaboration, the performative nature of sex, is in expansion rather than construction: ‘gender’ is what emerges from the ritual politics involved in *de-privatizing* the body. The stress throughout this article is therefore on the discursive potential of the collective body. I use the term ‘the politics of Eros’ to refer to a creative ritual complex stressing the power of sex, procreation, laughter, and aesthetics – the world of blood and breath – over the possibility of hierarchy and closure. Biology here is culture. And ‘gender’ is what coalesces in the ritual tension between the sexes, a ‘play of forces’ (Turner 1969: 84) that fizzes continually in certain Central African hunter-gatherer communities. I finish with some thoughts on the political implications of this kind of bodily agency, and this way of perceiving ‘gender’. The dominant terms slip therefore in the course of the article from gender and symbolic power to sex and laughter: the more fluent, compelling arguments of the body itself.

### Ethnographic context

Turnbull (1961; 1965; 1978) focused on the Mbuti, forest hunter-gatherers in the then Belgian Congo, within their own cultural environment. For him, collective performances of singing and dancing formed the substance of Mbuti religious life, in opposition to the more formal and hierarchical rituals of neighbouring agriculturalists (cf. Ichikawa 1987). In subsequent essays, such as the one I use here, Turnbull (1978) developed a thesis about Mbuti inter-sexual ritual as fundamental to the development of non-aggressive behaviour. Kisluik (1998), a musicologist, studied the song and dance performances of Aka groups in the Lobaye-Ibenga area of Central African Republic. Her interest in ethnographic narrative combined with a detailed knowledge of women's dance cults provides rich data on the sociality of Aka ritual and dance. Lewis (2002) conducted an extensive, three-year-long study of Yaka religion and 'ritual associations' – groups of initiates aligned to particular forest spirits. He, like Turnbull (1978), connects these to the politics of gender in Yaka community.

All those I refer to as 'forest peoples' spend at least four months a year hunting and gathering continuously in the forest, during which time they live in small groups composed of a few families. All have 'a strong identity with and preference for forest life' (Hewlett 1989: 187). All share a distinctive polyphonic song style and what Lewis (2002), following Barnard (1999), has described as a particular 'ritual grammar'. Many writers comment on the broad cosmological and religious similarities between groups from diverse parts of the Congo basin (e.g. Arom 1991; Joiris 1996; Lewis 2002; Sawada 1990). It is this ethnographic fund, combined with my own brief fieldwork experience with Mbendjele Yaka in Northern Congo-Brazzaville, that has generated the theoretical connections I make here. Before going further, however, I want to take a brief look at a typical Mbendjele camp setting, based on my experience at Mboule – a semi-permanent camp in the Likouala region of Northern Congo. The community at Mboule is comparatively large by Mbendjele standards. During the dry season, when families return from the forest, the total population numbers close to eighty. The central camp clearing is a thin lane hedged on both sides by rainforest, where women congregate around the doorways of small individual *oma* (shelters), grinding palm nuts, feeding babies, singing, and talking. The camp serves as a base from which women collectively set out on daily gathering expeditions. Men hunt more sporadically and in smaller groups of two to four individuals. Gathered foods are processed by women at their own fires, but these too burn outside doorways that lean towards one another in an intimate architecture reminiscent of Morgan's (1964 [1877]) 'longhouse economy'. One of the first things you notice on entering an Mbendjele camp is the collective nature of women's movement. Whether during trips to the forest, on fishing expeditions, or in the late afternoon preparation and consumption of food, they work and move in clusters, maintaining a loud, sing-song conversation with each other and the community at large.

As evening deepens and the light abruptly disappears, men sit along the central camp space rocking infants and smoking. Almost without exception, women's banter gathers momentum until it slips from 'speech' into song, from song into dance. The energy of the camp shifts as a small group of women either forms a circle, or assumes a more formal interlocked band that storms the length of camp – chanting, singing, laughing. People of all ages and both sexes gather to watch or join the singing. On some occasions, a counter-aggregate of young men is mobilized, and a new melody drawing on the sounds of forest animals is generated. Some evenings, the dancing burns out

within an hour. On others, it continues long into the night and towards dawn. Most dances are initiated by young women, who dominate the singing and provoke men to a response. Forming a close (physically intertwined) group, women use their song to galvanize or taunt men. As a kind of language, these dances far exceed the possibility of lexical forms, structuring a visceral inter-sexual conversation.

*Turnbull and the theatre of conflict*

It is this active ritual exchange that Turnbull (1978), in a detailed essay on the politics of non-aggression among Mbuti forest hunter-gatherers, chooses to foreground. He begins his analysis with a description of the unborn child as a person whose relationship with forest and community has already commenced. Shortly after birth, infants are passed around a variety of complementary 'mothers' so that the child's experience of parenting begins to incorporate 'a plurality of mothers and safe territories' (1978: 177). Central African hunter-gatherers are notable for the remarkable extent to which babies are held and carried (Hewlett 1989). Turnbull's (1978) work implies that this incorporation of the infant's body into the body of the community, and, beyond that, the body of the forest, has profound consequences for the bodily kinesis we see later in the ritual domain. His work suggests that this kind of sociality derives from a corporeal imperative instilled from birth. If it is true that the absorption of a particular habitus (Bourdieu 1990) rests on a plethora of subtle bodily indicators and perceptions, then the social implications of this intensely communistic mode of parenting by forest hunter-gatherers remains under-analysed. It is common knowledge among ethnographers of Yaka peoples that breastfeeding is not an individual woman's prerogative (Peacock 1991). Mbendjele babies are nursed routinely by women other than their biological mother. Again, the socio-political consequences of diffusing such labour out into the community – of literally sharing substance – has received little attention by social anthropologists (although biological anthropologists such as Hrdy [1999; 2009] have been calling attention to the interesting cultural possibilities raised by this level of maternal co-operation for some time).

All of this is a preamble, however, to the main source of *akami* (conflict, noise, or hunger): sex. Turnbull postulates that it's the potential conflict between the sexes that is from the moment of birth onwards being prepared for by parenting and socialization practices which emphasize the need for co-operation and the integrity of community. He stresses that 'it is sex and sexual relationships that are important to the Mbuti both as a potential source of aggressivity and as a principle of social organization' (1978: 190). It is at the moment that male youths begin to hunt seriously and girls to menstruate that *akami* rises to the level of performance. The opposition of the sexes is clarified by those rituals which formalize and showcase difference. Ostensibly, it is the need to avert conflict between the sexes that is performed. Yet this is achieved in the ritual *theatre* of conflict. It's worth mentioning here Turner's (1982) examination of the Anglo-Saxon etymology of 'play', where he cites *pleyan* (to dance), or *plega* (a fight, a battle). He then goes on to refer to the idea of 'a danced-out or ritualized fight' (Turner 1982: 33).

The 'honey-bee dance' described by Turnbull manifests this 'danced-out or ritualized fight', graphically portraying the tension of desire and 'the individual quest for pleasure' (1978: 205). The dance is a bodily commentary on the social interweaving of sex and labour, the way in which themes of complementarity and sharing mediate both. Sex and honey as metaphors are used interchangeably in many Central African cosmologies, the sweetness of both being something one must hunt and share. Men are the

prime honey hunters, and are expected to return caches of it to their wives. During the honey-bee dance, men in one line, brandishing bows and arrows, advance on women, wielding burning firebrands in another. In Mbuti communities it is women who control fire, and the ritual intention of the men is to steal this. By stealing fire, men steal women's cultural power over food brought into camp, and subsequently over honey. As they approach, however, women break lines and attack men aggressively with burning torches, spraying them with sparks and coals. 'Unlike the tug-of-war, this dance has a rather more definite conclusion in that the men never succeed in their attempt to "steal" honey' (Turnbull 1978: 207). The dance concludes when an older woman presents a leaf cup of honey to the men.

Here, the giving out and pulling back rhythm is tangible between the sexes. Turnbull is explicit in his view of inter-sexual tension as 'the major line of potential conflict' for the Mbuti (1978: 207), in contrast to stereotypes confining political negotiation to men and intra-male power struggles. *Ekokomea*, 'the most formal of the rituals of reversal' (Turnbull 1978: 215), demonstrates this by its explicit spotlight on sex. 'In *ekokomea* ... groups of women and men ... ridicule the opposite sex, most often in terms of sexual behaviour and cleanliness ... Until the ridicule itself goes so far beyond the realm of reason that *aggressivity becomes unthinkable*' (Turnbull 1978: 215, emphasis mine). This brings out a key characteristic of all such collective performances of tension through burlesque. Using a concerted mockery of the biological self, of sex and sexual bodies, the core *social* issue is flagged and overturned in one move. When friction reaches a climax in the community, recourse is sought to such bawdy exchanges. Two things are being commented upon then in sequence. One is the assertion of a female-controlled reproductive body. The other is the paradox of the *twisting* of this, the refraction back at men (and for men, at women) of the pantomime of sex and sexual identity. Through ritual commentaries like *ekokomea* the conjugal relationship is temporarily destabilized in favour of same-sex solidarity. But this regrouping is set within a broader cosmological tapestry that weaves together female procreative power and male hunting power, male observance of prohibitions surrounding menstrual blood and female ritual hunting. As in many hunter-gatherer societies, where one of the sexes claims corporeal speciality, the other steps forward with a corresponding ideological or metaphysical prowess (cf. Gow 1989). And in fact, Turnbull's (1978) analysis of the communal achievement of non-aggression is striking in its interpretation of things conventionally assumed to be male privileges as burdens placed upon adult men by the community. What comes through in his writing is not the omnipotent hunter busy accruing economic and ritual prestige, but men as *relational* beings – sons, brothers, husbands – who are always involved in a gendered debate entailing compromise and self-control.

There is in all this the injection and contraction of power, an oscillation between the sexes and between individual desire and group equilibrium. In order to produce the piston-like motion, poles are required. But bear in mind Bakhtin's 'culture of laughter' in which 'the drama of bodily life' does privilege sex, growth, birth, blood, eating, defecation: 'But of course it is not the drama of an individual body or of a private material way of life; it is the great generic body of the people' (Bakhtin 1984a [1968]: 88). This point is crucial in thinking through the move from sex to gender. We are not talking here about a private biological body, severed by a long history of politico-religious repression from its own language (or, rather, from the cultural ability to express that language). The formality achieved in the move from sex to *ritual sex* – or gender – is what expands the body out into 'something universal, representing all the

people' (Bakhtin 1984a [1968]: 19). So how does this collective body manifest in lyric and gesture? Where the reproductive and sexual self is the nodal point in negotiations about power, we should expect women to articulate it in collective ritual performance.

*Ritual taunting and the contested body*

Kisluik highlights the sexual teasing which is the focus of women's songs. One popular *dingboku* chant, directed at male spectators, cries: 'The penis gives birth to nothing, only urine!' (1998: 131). An obvious but sometimes neglected point is made by Lewis concerning women's ritual focus on their ability to grow and produce new human beings: 'Making babies grow in their wombs from men's sperm is a miraculous feat that mystifies Mbendjele men' (2002: 194). In its creativity and doubling capacity the body, particularly the female body, is a powerful cultural player. In a direct reversal of much Western philosophical and feminist theory, where biology is what diminishes or reduces the social person, biology here is what enlarges it. Several writers have described how the production of new people from one's own skin is considered a cultural achievement, requiring the co-operative labour of the sexes (Ichikawa 1987; Lewis 2002; 2008; McCreedy 1994; Turnbull 1965; 1978). It is important to point out, however, regardless of the rich conceptual field highlighting men's part in the formation of people (and women's corresponding part in successful hunting), that during women's dances there is a recurrent statement about the specifically female power that is birth, and the sexual economy that runs parallel to it. In amplified body-statements, women publicly capitalize on their power as the producers of children.

Which brings us to another well-known Elamba song, stripped back to its lyrical bare bones and consisting of just one word: '*Dumana!*' – 'Sex!' (though Lewis [pers. comm., 2009] claims this word is more accurately interpreted as 'Let's fuck'). When Kisluik later relayed these songs to some non-BaAka Congolese men they were, she reports, horrified that BaAka men 'would put up with such humiliation' (1998: 131). So why *do* BaAka men engage with women in a ritual dialogue that assertively undermines their own ability to dominate? In order to answer, we need to step into the context of community ritual as this is choreographed by women. Lewis writes that the Mbendjele believe it is the beauty of women's song and the eroticism of their collective dance that lures spirits in from the wider community of the forest. Women, through bodily comportment, captivate non-human entities and enchant them (Lewis 2002). Having experienced these performances, most memorably *Biboudja* – the 'dance for joy' – what occurs to me is the corresponding 'enchantment' of Mbendjele men, the way in which they too might be 'tied' by the power of a communal female Eros. Jackson, commenting on the *sui generis* power of dance and music in indigenous dialogue, notes that 'movement and music promote a sense of levity and openness in both body and mind ... which verbal and cognitive forms ordinarily inhibit' (1989: 338). Turnbull (1978), Kisluik (1998), and Lewis (2002) each comment on the trance-like state achieved by participants during these dances, and Turnbull explicitly connects such experience to the politics of the dances. Kisluik recalls 'dreamy, trance-like states', 'euphoria', and 'the transcendent moment' (1998: 138). Lewis describes 'a sort of dreamy, heightened experience and appreciation of sound and movement' (2002: 150) and an atmosphere that is 'extraordinary, an aesthetic delight that lifts the spirits of all present' (2002: 151). He adds that for the Mbendjele it is self-evident that the forest also 'loves' women's song and dance.

Kisluik (1998) brings this out in her description of a performance of *Dingboku* organized by two experienced dancers – Sandimba and Djongi. Two closely entwined lines of thirteen women each (including grandmothers and women carrying infants) open the performance with a rendition of *Dumana*. No boys or men are directly involved in the dance, and in contrast to most other BaAka dances no drummers are used. The women's lines move back and forth together in parallel until, entering a rendition of 'the vagina wins', they turn to face each other, and with one line moving backwards 'they move together as a unit across the space' (Kisluik 1998: 137). Then, 'Sandimba's line circled around at close range to face in the same direction as the other line, only a foot or so between each line, and the women all ran forward together, then backward together. Mandudu leaves bobbed on buttocks, and dust rose from tramping feet' (1998: 137). Kisluik views *Dingboku* as 'an aesthetic abstraction of love-making' (1998: 134). Yet no men or boys are directly involved. It seems that women, in showcasing the erotic, are making a clear social assertion about control of the body and, by extension, of sexual and procreative energy. It is the way in which the body directs its desire, and more precisely the affinity of its desire, that matters in these moments of female '*communitas*'. There is clearly a connection between collective effervescence and the engagement of adult men with such performances. When lines like 'the penis can't compete' (Kisluik 1998) or 'their testicles are broken' (Lewis 2002) are delivered from within the ecstatic moment, their sting is softened. But the fact they have been spoken is important. The words and gestures have flooded out into the community; people dance them, children absorb them, women have reinforced a particular coalitionary voice.

#### *Ngoku and the power of antipathy*

Lewis states of Mbendjele community politics: 'Each gender group continuously subverts the potential prestige the other group might accrue from their role in society ... *Massana* [Mbendjele ritual associations] celebrate gender, and emphasize independence yet interdependence, antagonism yet desire, separation and unity, subversion and respect' (2002: 196). Women emphasize an aggressive sexual power, reproductive skill, recourse to collective action, and willingness to 'share' dances. Men, in *Ejengi* (the corresponding male *mokondi massana*) emphasize the potential of force to override all this. Both sides constitute aspects of an unfinished dialogue. During ritual time both sexes create a secret '*njanga* path' in the forest, which draws individuals back into gender coalitions and stresses the value of this political regrouping. *Ngoku* (referred to as 'the primary dance' by an informant of mine at Mboule) is believed by women to be the most powerful spirit (Lewis 2002: 191). This is the *mokondi* – spirit – that represents women's collective potency and, like *Ejengi*, is dangerous to men. When *Ngoku* is summoned by women into camp, men are expected to retire to their huts or leave for the forest. Older women lead the songs, most of which focus on sexual insults to men or declarations of women's reproductive and sexual superiority (Lewis 2002: 193).

The female body and its collective response to male claims to authority is the substance of the ritual commentary being elaborated. Examples of songs sung are: '*Doto ba die ebe!*' – 'Old men are no good!' – and '*Mapindi ma mu bola!*' – 'Their testicles are broken' (Lewis 2002: 193). While relatively little is known about *Ngoku*, there is a wide repertoire of dances connected to this *mokondi*, most of which 'have sexual connotations' (Lewis 2002: 194). During one performance Lewis observed women lie

together on their backs in the dust, ‘rubbing their thighs together until they become frenzied and are lifted up from behind one at a time by one of the elder Ngoku initiates’ (Lewis 2002: 195). These are not wifely, available women. *Ngoku* seems, rather, to be an extremely frank commentary on women’s sexual inviolability. That they so flagrantly flaunt their desire, yet only with other women, is a clear statement of sexual solidarity and self-possession. In day-to-day life Mbendjele and other forest hunter-gatherers are meticulously egalitarian. Every last cigarette is shared out; every string of beads distributed. It is during ritual that the community splits sharply into contending coalitions. The ensuing conversation, involving sexual taunts, teases, and insults, resonates with Bakhtin’s assertion that true polyphonic dialogue demanded ‘the opposition of one person to another’ (1984b: 252). The dialogic repartee was not an end but a means in itself: ‘Dialogue here is not the threshold to action, *it is the action itself*’ (Bakhtin 1984b: 252, emphasis mine). As noted earlier, many of those who have worked with hunter-gatherers have described this kind of dynamic egalitarianism, fusing the principles of autonomy and relatedness. Among the Mbendjele we see this played out literally in the organization of ritual coalitions and dance choreographies.

One of the most popular *Ngoku* songs is explicit about the confrontational dimension of this *massana*. Women parade up and down camp singing: ‘*BiYaka-i! BiYaka-i! Bibale mayelle!*’ – ‘We the Yaka! We the Yaka! Twice the intelligence [of men]!’ (Lewis 2002: 194). Lewis is clear about the socio-political uses of this dance, and the thread running from such periodic statements to each individual woman. Speaking about the ability of women to shame a problematic husband, he comments: ‘The solidarity that underpins such behaviour is based in *Ngoku*’ (2002: 195). During *Ejengi*, men explore fear, threat of physical harm, the potential (tightly controlled by experienced adult male dancers) of brawn. In *Ngoku*, women use mockery, desire, and ambiguity. These are privileges that end with each performance, but they belong to a political ethos that draws energy from difference, heat from antagonism. Which is why work such as Lewis’s is of such interest (Lewis 2002, but see 2008 and 2009 for subsequent developments of that initial study). His research shows that *Ngoku* and *Ejengi* together express the politics of the same-sex solidarity central to Mbendjele egalitarianism, constituting two halves of a conversation that first plays out in large-scale ritual spaces and subsequently shapes more informal relationships. I have argued that they, and other *mokondi massana*, are not *additional* to political life and the absence of hierarchy, but central to these. It is in the bodily conversation between the sexes, a ritual debate or weave, that power is made and the nature of power measured and celebrated.

### Conclusion and analysis

I began with the attempt to describe an alternative kind of body, and body-politics, and with the idea of non-coercive power, a power defined as being *for* – relationship, sexual self-possession, joy, social equilibrium – rather than *against*. This in turn led to the exploration of a ritual dialogic constructed around sexual polarity, and the assertion that the ‘gender’ we see through this ritual frame has more to do with increase than division. It is by pulling back into sex, and ostensibly splitting the community, that the collective movement *forward*, into a new domain, is achieved. When Yaka, BaAka, or Mbuti women dance, they assert their collective presence by forming a tightly branched body. The lyrics of their songs relish bodily fluids, appetites, and productions. This assertion of bodily meaning makes sense because on a daily basis they *are* so intimately

part of one another's skin, pooling labour, milk, and children. This kind of solidarity, formed on the basis of somatic power rather than 'universal subordination', shows up the losses – ontological, epistemological, political – when as a society we separate biology and culture from one another, setting up a false dichotomy that goes on to shape diverse other fields. Studies such as Martin's classic ethnography of *The woman in the body* (1987) documented the impact of such thinking on women's experiences of themselves.

A review of the performances cited here, alternatively, depicts articulate bodies in a state of heightened awareness. During their dances women link arms, sprawling on the earth, working up erotic frenzies, and executing choreographies the beauty of which is believed to summon forest spirits and captivate game animals (Joiris 1996; Lewis 2002). In the same breath, they publicly mock male sexual prowess, declaring the triumph of the vagina, the miraculous division of skin from skin (Kisluik 1998; Lewis 2002). They rush at men and boys, beating them gleefully, hitch up skirts, and *perform* men and boys with ruthless humour (Turnbull 1978). This is the body at work, the person of the female body at work. 'Culture' comments Hastrup, 'exists only in practice' (1995: 77). Using the term 'the politics of Eros' is part of an attempt to remain faithful to this culture of the body, in which sex provides the creative material for ritual action and thought. It does so, I argue, because these are real tensions at the root of any society. What the Mbendjéle, the BaAka, or the Mbuti accomplish is in keeping this under constant negotiation in the public eye. Sexual difference is never allowed to sink out of sight and become a hidden force. It remains a live material in the hands of the collective ritual body. It is not surprising that women, in such contexts, are declaring the significance of reproduction, blood, sex – the very things a Western focus on cultural constructs starved of biological currency might sideline.

Says Devische, '[C]ultural symbols and metaphors are operative through the body ... Ritual symbols are not images but primarily corporeal devices' (1993: 280). Focus on the body during *mokondi massana* such as *Ngoku* does not privilege individuals; it is a means of opening up contemplation of the *shared* body and its cultural import and power. The dialogic we see here suggests the need to expand our understanding of bodily epistemology; bodily ways of knowing and speaking. Johnson is clear on this point. In keeping with the literature on African hunter-gatherer ritual thought, he describes 'a vast realm of meaning structure ... that lies beyond concepts' (1987: 167), a domain in which symbols are living entities drawn up from the body. Image schemata and metaphor are both 'embodied imaginative structures ... forms of imagination that grow out of bodily experience' (1987: xiv). Symbols are the way in which bodies, acting together or upon one another, bring out of inarticulacy the sense of action. In the context of Mbuti or Yaka dance, they could almost be defined as the thoughts of the body: blood, sex, birth, meat, death, fire. The world not rendered more abstruse and complicated, but stripped back to its bare bones, its reflective core. Braille for the skin. Which brings to mind Wagner's 'concrete imagination', and the challenge faced by anthropology of how to articulate it (1986: 130). Like Hastrup (1995), Wagner urged new ways of thinking about symbols which retained their primary bodily meaning. Ritual dance – the point at which symbols are still visible as 'live' entities – provides us with a clear perspective on the root issues and debates at the centre of a culture.

Think of Yaka women's dances and the sparse nature of their songs – visceral, scatological, libidinal. Pared down to the bones: 'The vagina wins!' 'Their testicles are

broken! ‘The penis gives birth to nothing!’ ‘Sex!’ So many analyses begin with the logic of the mind, the ordering and categorizing of these bodily statements. The body as object to be dissected, peeled away from the finer, more complex sense of ‘the mind’. Mbuti and Yaka women’s rituals lead us towards another kind of analysis, and I have followed their essentialism in pulling the terms back to the sexed body. But as with the people themselves, this is an essentialism privileged only in order to transcend it. What I have tried to build throughout the article is an appeal for rethinking how some Central African hunter-gatherers use the imaginative language of ‘biology’; and how we might begin to weigh this against what Sahlin refers to as ‘the history of sadness’ (1996: 415): a kind of ontological silencing which the Western body has progressively undergone. In re-examining what gender means in such contexts, ‘the hope ... is for something more comprehensive than simply demonstrating the inapplicability of this or that particular Western concept ... Our own metaphors reflect a deeply rooted metaphysics with manifestations that surface in all kinds of analyses. The question is how to displace them most effectively’ (Strathern 1988: 12). Following the literature on Central African egalitarian peoples means paying close attention to bodily conversations, played out continuously in dance and ritual gesture, and to the guttural lyrics which move through these, iteratively flagging the power of withheld sex, of potent procreative fluids, and of their joust – an unending, hilarious joust – with corresponding male attributes and powers. There is a lot of humour here, and I want to raise a few final points regarding the relationship between the culturally articulate body and the social laughter so important to it.

Bakhtin (1984a [1968]) noted the mediatory power of laughter, capable of representing counter-culture while circumscribing and defusing powerful tensions. ‘All fears and lies are dispersed in the face of the material bodily festive principle’, he wrote (1984a [1968]: 94), and he used this principle with its instability and contradiction as a contrast for the world whose ethos it punctuated, defined by hypocrisy and control. Foreshadowing scholars such as Turnbull (1978) and Devische (1993), he used specifically the analogy of the mother ‘which swallows up in order to give birth to something larger’ (Bakhtin 1984a [1968]: 91). ‘Warm blood’, the genitals, the womb, the nipples, are what give flesh to and unify the comic principle as it attacks ‘all that oppresses and restricts’ (1984a [1968]: 92). The cosmic laughter of this body ‘could never become an instrument to oppress and blind the people. It always remained a free weapon in their hands’ (1984a [1968]: 94).

Importantly, Bakhtin (1984a [1968]) viewed the contorting of this principle in the hands of later writers who were shocked by Rabelais’s ‘sexual and scatological obscenity, his curses and oaths, his vulgar quips’, as the beginning of a move in which folk humour, and the jokes representative of it, were ‘torn away from the original stem, the ambivalent material bodily lower stratum that supported them. Thus they lost their true meaning ... the broad social and political ideas were broken off this original stem; they became literary, academic’ (1984a [1968]: 109). All that remained was the obscenity, rendered ‘narrowly sexual, isolated, and individual’ (1984a [1968]: 109). I cite this as a caution in approaching the ethnographic material in this article. The body we find in large, licentious Yaka dances is closer to the Rabelaisian person: an open, ambivalent body whose jokes are ‘particles of an immense whole, of the popular carnival spirit, of the world that laughs’ (1984a [1968]: 134). The body normatively at work in Yaka ethnography has a kinship with the body that only occasionally breaks through the moral veil of hierarchical culture. Bourdieu emphasizes that ‘male domination tends to

restrict women's verbal consciousness ... their discourse is dominated by the male values of virility, so that any reference to specifically female sexual interests is excluded' (1990: 77). The 'verbal consciousness' of Mbendjele or BaYaka women is clearly not restricted by dominant male discourse. The collective female body, with its contradictory signalling power, does seem to speak to a corresponding principle whose urge is to break off or close. Yet as long as the two groups remain in dialogue, balance is maintained.

What I have tried to assemble using the work of Turnbull (1978), Kisluk (1998), and Lewis (2002; 2008) is the speaking body at the pivot of this pendulum. This is the body that must be repressed by orders in which hierarchy prevails. Take away the static ideology of hierarchy, maintained Bakhtin (1984a [1968]), and the body begins to laugh. What is striking, reading his writing on the world of carnival and a 'laughing body' animated by strings of abuse and bawdy jokes, is the parallel with many of the data on hunter-gatherer ritual life. I have found his work – in some ways an odd choice for this kind of article – important in thinking through the political nature of Yaka women's social collectives, and their spotlight on procreative sex and corporeal power generally. It is important too in setting into 'our' political terms the repercussions of the loss of the collective body, once so powerful a counter to state hegemony. Each of the ethnographies I've drawn on, despite differences of approach, emphasizes the centrality of sex in Central African ritual dialogue. Turner (1969) and Bakhtin (1984a [1968]) together offer a nascent theoretical frame in their focus on the formative power of the dialogic repartee between 'mutually involved irrepressibles' (Turner 1969). The double meaning or contradiction generated by these performances – their push/pull motion – is at the heart of them. The streamlining into gender for us conjures up partiality, disjunction, alienation of self from self. But here we have a situation in which the pendulum has not been frozen, fixed on one side or another, one kind of body or another. It is one where *being* the body, with all its productions and desires, is experienced as empowering. Sexual duality is integral to Central African ritual and symbolism, but it is the *engine and impetus* of duality rather than a calcified echo of it. Turner (1969) saw this in his meticulous empirical presentation of Ndembu ritual – where contradiction acts upon itself to instigate motion.

At Mboule one evening I watched two lines dancing at each other during *Elande* – 'the courtship dance'. The women stamped and clapped, pouring out a high polyphonic alto. The men, a few yards away, growled their way through a deeper bass polyphony. Then a girl shot out across the space and struck a boy, before flinging herself back to the women, her victim in pursuit. When he reached the women, he struck another girl, and she immediately broke lines and flew back after him, choosing a different man. And so on, back and forth, back and forth, the antiphony growing stronger as the motion became more fluent, the separate song lines held by the core dancers. Muscles and tendons shining in the firelight. Finally, the laughter reached a climax and the women, cackling, crumpled into the dust before a second, more ponderous stage began. There was something fierce behind the game. This was politics as a live force; the tension of sex being given form and voice and space. The movement – the continual back and forth as power swung between the two lines – seemed integral. It was both a literal and metaphorical dance, a politics rooted in motion.

Public ritual performances among the Mbendjele Yaka, the BaAka, or the Mbuti operate as a powerful bodily statement on behalf of egalitarian reality. These exchanges are a means of creating society, not one of society's tools. The conversation they ignite

between the sexes is the structure (albeit a fluid, fizzing structure) of social life itself. The antagonism or tension of sexual difference is managed by simultaneously privileging it and subjecting it to a theatrical or ritual motion. Which suggests that antagonism is explored as part of a cultural conversation that is necessary and positive – tension being continually juggled as a creative force. It is normal to attempt to resolve social antagonism from an ethical stance formed in the belief about dualism not as a conversation but as a permanently closed door. But resolution in such contexts is potentially the point at which the dialogic freezes, motion stops, and hierarchy floods the intersubjective field. Evidence suggests these communities neither detach gender from biological imperatives, nor confine it to them. ‘Gender’ here is more accurately understood as the power produced by coalitions as they work through the unending ritual repartee that helps to maintain social fluidity. A somatic conversation is maintained between the sexes in which one side may temporarily claim supremacy, only to relinquish it to the other. The political implications of this way of managing power – the way the power-field is kept plane by the work of the sexes – is enormous. Credit for the rich body of data I have drawn on goes to the three ethnographers whose sensitivity to these issues has made my argument possible. What I have contributed is bringing a sustained theoretical focus to bear on these data, pulling together certain themes which recur in the literature in order to see what story they might tell. It is one which I believe has relevance far beyond hunter-gatherer studies, for analyses of sex, gender, and the nature of power itself.

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## La politique d'Éros : dialogue rituel et égalitarisme dans trois sociétés de chasseurs-cueilleurs d'Afrique centrale

### Résumé

L'anthropologie féministe réfute aujourd'hui systématiquement toute relation essentielle entre corps biologique et identité culturelle. Au fil des années, la déconstruction du corps est devenue, en apparence, le seul fait « naturel ». En réaction, le présent article cherche à rétablir des liens entre sexe, pouvoir et culture selon une approche positive, en identifiant un système politique dans lequel le pouvoir est maintenu en mouvement à *travers* le corps. Ainsi, dans les échanges récurrents de reparties rituelles chez les Mbuti et les Aka, le pouvoir est sans cesse extorqué et échangé des uns aux autres entre groupes d'hommes et de femmes. Le langage graphique des corps qui émerge de ces danses suggère un autre principe de pouvoir, un pouvoir en mouvement, érotique et fondamentalement dépourvu de coercition. Le regard collectif, ramené vers la nature anatomique du pouvoir par le rituel simultané de privatisation du « biologique », fait exploser le corps en le rendant force politique collective. La visibilité culturelle du corps de la femme en tant qu'instrument de procréation est frappante dans ce contexte. En faisant du dialogisme sa thématique centrale, l'auteure repense le potentiel créatif de la dualité sexuelle dans ce type de contextes et cherche à élaborer une nouvelle compréhension du genre, du pouvoir et du corps.

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