

## **Exploring the production of knowledge on African realities through the concept of ‘personhood’<sup>1</sup>**

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How can one produce a discourse about the ‘Other’ without falling into the trap of either exoticism or (cultural) relativism (Alvi 2001)? This is a rephrasing of one of the core issues posed by Pr Benson Mulemi. We are asked to “gaze back and forward” into ethnographies produced on Africa in order to uncover the western assumptions that lie beneath them. The second issue to be addressed is one of methodology, the “ultimate objective” of the panel being to “evolve methodological innovations for the study and representation of African reality and experience” that both respects the identity of locals, and empower their contribution in the shaping of a cultural unity-in-diversity in the context of the globalization process.

I will explore these issues through the concept of ‘personhood’ and try to provide suitable answers to both questions but will allow myself geographical and conceptual digressions. Indeed, in the first part of the paper I shall try to define the concept of personhood and clarify the analytical distinctions that have been outlined by several authors (person/self/individual).<sup>2</sup> But in order to do so I will probe into ethnographies of personhood conducted in different parts of the world; finally I will turn to a classical work on ‘African personhood’ (namely Meyer Fortes’ essays on Tallensi personhood). The second issue will be addressed not through an innovative methodology but with what I could label a ‘conceptual displacement’. That is, I will try to show that African data on ‘personhood’ may be interpreted through Melanesian(-ist) analytical concepts (especially Strathern 1988 and Wagner 1991). This is equivalent to a conceptual re-contextualization.

I am not going to address ‘personhood’ in general; rather I will take as an organizational principle a ‘western’ fiction, the individual/society opposition. In other words, I will explore what effect this fiction had on the study of personhood as well as on the conceptualization of ‘society’, and their interrelation. I shall read all the ethnographies (African and others), including my personal field experience in the Cameroon Grassfields, through this lens.

Why ‘personhood’? One reason for choosing the concept of personhood is that it synthesizes multiple fields that social anthropology usually separates in distinct categories: kinship, ritual, gender, etc. The concept of the person therefore

appears as what Mauss has called: a “total social fact” (Mauss 1925) and as such, is likely to be extremely productive.

## **Ethnographies of ‘person’, ‘self’, ‘individual’ and ‘society’**

### ***Mauss: concept of the person, sense of the self and category of the person***

The notion of the concept of the person has been introduced into anthropology by Marcel Mauss (Mauss 1950 [1938]). In this seminal essay Mauss wanted to provide: “(...) a summary catalogue of the forms that the notion [of the self] has assumed at various times and in various places (...)” (Mauss 1950 [1938]: 334). His subject, he goes on: “(...) is one relating to social history. Over the centuries, in numerous societies, how has slowly evolved – not the sense of the self (moi) – but the notion or concept that men have formed of it?” (*ibid.*, p. 335). Mauss underlines the fact that the category of the self (e.g. the western variety of the concept of the person/self) is not innate, natural (*ibid.*) but is linked to the way a specific society, in specific periods defines what it is to be a human being. Although Mauss explicitly recognizes the universal existence of the sense of the self, he leaves its study to linguists and to psychology (*ibid.*, pp. 334-5). In Mauss’s essay ‘notion’ and ‘concept’ of the ‘person’ and ‘self’ are synonymous. The notion/concept of the self/person turns into a category when it becomes the main idea by which a society defines a human being. In other words, when Mauss speaks of the category of the self he refers to the western variety of the notion/concept of the person/self, that is: the human being as bearer of the ultimate value. To sum up Mauss’s argument, as far as analytical distinctions are concerned, we can isolate three main ideas: the concept/notion of the person/self (universal); the sense of the self (universal) and the category of the self (specific to the ‘West’).

### ***Dumont: individual, ‘individual’ and society***

One can clearly see developments of Mauss’s seminal essay in Dumont’s work (see in particular Dumont 1983: Chapters 1 and 2) especially in terms of analytical distinctions. Indeed, Dumont substitutes the concept of the ‘individual’ to Mauss’s category of the self as a western transformation and ultimate product of the concept of the person. Dumont distinguishes the ‘individual’ as: **a)** “the independent, autonomous, and thus essentially non-social moral being, who carries our paramount values” (Dumont 1983: 37) as found in our modern

ideology of man and society (this is Mauss's category of the self) from **b**) the "empirical subject of speech, thought, and will (...) as found in all societies" (*ibid.*), he thus differentiates between two kinds of societies and, hence, two systems of value: societies where the 'individual' is found in the first sense and which he calls 'individualistic'; and societies that ideologically (e.g. of which the value system) emphasize society as a (conceptual) whole and subordinate the 'individual' and which he calls 'holistic'. But this opposition must be understood as a relative one, for although the 'individual' in the first sense is non-social ideologically, it is social in practice: "he lives in society, in the world" (*ibid.*, p. 304; see also Dumont 1966: 31). Whereas the idea of the autonomous person (the 'individual') is dominant in western representations/discourse, in India (as well as other cultures in space and time) there is an emphasis on the relational person, primarily defined through its relations to other persons and/or other living entities and objects.<sup>3</sup> The latter does not imply the absence of individualistic ideas and practices in holistic societies but, rather, that such ideas/practices will be relatively subordinated to a dominant value which stresses the relational person. Conversely, individualistic societies do not lack ideas/practices akin to the relational person, but these are given lesser value in the overall value system (See also Carsten 2004: 97). As the Comaroffs rightly put it: "the autonomous person describes an *imaginaire*, an ensemble of signs and values, a hegemonic formation" and "nowhere does it exist as an unmediated sociological reality" (Comaroffs 2001: 267).

### **Alvi: 'I', 'We', and 'others'**

Alvi (2001) further elaborates Dumont's analytical distinctions (individual and 'individual', individualism and holism) and argues that the notion of the self (she also calls 'I') is embedded into the concept of the person which, in turn, is constructed in opposition to what she calls the category of 'we', itself being constituted in relation to the 'others' category. In every society a human being thinks of him – or herself as a separate entity according to the role he/she plays and with respect to how he/she feels separate from all others as an entity thus constituting the notion of the self (Alvi 2001: 47-48). Similarly, a human being also perceives of other humans within and outside his/her own society thus constructing the notion of the person. The former aspect has to do with the perception of 'I' through its relations with the 'role' and with the category of the 'we'; the latter aspect has to do with the perception of what constitutes a human being in a specific society and is approached through the category of 'we' which acquires meaning in opposition to the category of 'others'. Therefore, the notion of the self ('I') cannot be separated from the concept of the person ('we') itself defined only in relation to 'others'. These three terms/concepts are hierarchically related to each other; the 'I' (self) is encompassed by the 'we' (person) which is encompassed by the 'others' category (Alvi 2001: 47-48, 49, 61). The author

further elaborates on the notion of the self and the notion of the person. She makes a distinction between the hidden and the shared aspect of the self; and a subjective and objective side of the notion of the person, all of which are culturally/socially defined/generated.

## **Ethnographies of personhood in sub-Saharan Africa**

### ***The seminal essays***

Although none of the ethnographic examples I have mentioned till now refer to sub-Saharan Africa, they are nevertheless extremely useful and relevant for studies of 'African personhood' for at least two reasons: first they help clarify analytical distinctions that by definition cross-cut 'ethnographic areas'; secondly, they provide a link between the Dumontian paradigm and Strathern's analytical concepts which I will use to interpret my own data collected in the Cameroon Grassfields. But the time has now come to turn to sub-Saharan Africa. I will try to provide a brief history of the concept of the person in West Africa generally before moving on to a more detailed analysis of the way Tallensi personhood and society (as well as their relation) have been addressed by Meyer Fortes.

The study of personhood in sub-Saharan African societies gradually developed as a central theme in the 1930's to 1950's, in the work of Marcel Griaule and his co-workers among the Dogon of Mali (ex French Sudan). Griaule's *Dieu d'eau: entretiens avec Ogotonmeli* (1948), Dieterlen's *Les âmes Dogon* (1941) and subsequent studies inspired by this school of thought include: Camale-Griaule 1965, Griaule and Dieterlen 1965, Dieterlen 1975, Zahan 1979 and Belgian missionary Placide Tempel's famous *La philosophie Bantoue* (1945). The main characteristic of this school was an emphasis on intellectual coherence and narrative symbolic meaning.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, British anthropologists (among them Evans-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes) of the early mid 20<sup>th</sup> century focused their ethnography on ritual behavior or the practice of belief systems in everyday life (*cf.* Richards 1966) and grounded the study of customs, behavior, personality, and so on in a thorough understanding of the social structure (social relations). Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion* (1956), Meyer Fortes' essays on Tallensi personhood (1973, 1987), Middleton's study of Lugbara personhood (1973) and Lienhardt's *Divinity and Experience* (1961) all typify the British school of social anthropology: all these authors focused on the relation between thought and social structure/relations.<sup>5</sup>

The study of personhood in (sub-Saharan) Africa was therefore initiated mainly by French anthropologists. The international colloquium held in Paris in 1970 by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (C.N.R.S.) is an example of the pioneering and sustained effort of French anthropologists in the

topic. Indeed, out of the thirty-one (mainly ethnographic) papers published in 1973 as proceedings, twenty-six are written by French scholars. The British school of social anthropology is also represented by one of its most prominent figures (but see also Middleton in the same volume): Meyer Fortes – by the way one of the few British scholars to have directly come to grips with the topic.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Meyer Fortes on Tallensi personhood and the individual/society opposition***

There are two main reasons for dealing with Meyer Fortes' work on Tallensi personhood. One is that his work is to some extent in continuity with Mauss's approach; the other one is that the individual/society opposition (the western fiction which precisely interests me here) is one of the most salient features of his work. Therefore, in order to better understand his idea of personhood, one has also to address how he conceptualizes 'society'. To do this I am going to comment briefly on descent theory.

#### **Descent theory, and the domestic and politico-jural domains**

Meyer Fortes explicitly uses Mauss's definition of the person in his 1973 contribution and shows that Tallensi idea of the person complies with Mauss's *personne morale* (e.g. role-character or concept of the person). In 1987, he alludes to Mauss's emphasis on the social derivations of the concept of the person (Fortes 1987: 249, 252-3; cited in Carsten 2004: 88) and concludes that for the Tallensi:

“Personhood comes (...) to be (...) externally oriented. Self-awareness means, in the first place, awareness of the self as a *personne morale* rather than as an idiosyncratic individual” (Fortes 1987: 285)

Here, we find one of Mauss's analytical distinctions namely the *personne morale* (concept of the person) and the “idiosyncratic individual” by which, I can reasonably presume with La Fontaine (1985: 132), Fortes means Mauss's category of the person (or Dumont's 'individual').

Let me now turn his conceptualization of 'society' and 'groups'. What is 'society', what is a 'group' according to Meyer Fortes? To answer these questions, we must turn to the notion kinship (and kinship systems) for kinship is the stuff of what 'society' and 'groups' are made of.

In Fortes' work 'society' is conceptualized as an aggregate of corporate descent groups defined in reference to themselves. 'Society' and 'groups' can be so imagined because descent theorists arbitrarily give priority to unilineal descent: the line (patrilineal or matrilineal) through which material as well as immaterial elements are transmitted and which therefore confer groups a 'corporeal permanence'. Although affinal relations are often recognized (see Evans-Pritchard 1951: 177) they are "analytically erased" as McKinnon puts it (McKinnon 2000: 41); for example the rules of exogamy which precisely constitute the corporate groups as such *through their interrelation*) are largely underestimated (Dumont 1975: 87, 99). Ultimately, "affinal relations are subsumed within the category of bilateral kinship or cognation and consigned to the substructural domestic domain, thereby rendered irrelevant to the political domain" (McKinnon 2000: 40).<sup>7</sup> But here again, the analytical distinction runs counter to 'empirical facts' as Evans-Pritchard and Fortes themselves recognize, for all kinship relations, of any kind, are conceptualized by the authors as having their irreducible foundation in the bilateral kinship of the family and therefore cannot be consigned into the lineages (Fortes 1969: 65-66, 68-69, 75, 219-49; cited in McKinnon 2000: 40; see also Fortes 1953: 28-30 where he recognizes that kinship transcends lineages; cited in Dumont 1975: 98). The domestic domain referred, for descent theorists, to the internal constitution of a social group or relationship or institution, while the politico-jural referred to their external context: the internal perspective focused on relations between individuals within a lineage while the external perspective focused on relations between groups in the politico-jural domain.

### **Initiation rituals and the incorporation of the person into 'society'**

The separation of social life into two distinct spheres went hand in hand with a separation of the socializing functions: while the domestic group "having bred, reared and educated the child" then "hands over the finished product to the total society" (Fortes 1958: 10; cited in Strathern 1993: 42), the latter incorporates the child as an adult (Fortes 1958: 11). Through initiation rituals the total society adds relations upon the individual in order to incorporate him. Persons are 'linked' to the overall society via external relations. This is so because both persons and society are imagined as substances.<sup>8</sup> The person (individual) and the corporate group are images of one another at a different scale: "(...) descent-based collectivities are perpetual corporate bodies, replicating on the collective level the model of the person on the individual level" (Fortes 1973: 315). The ritual trajectory of the person (and its states) is linear and one-way. Adulthood is the first step of a linear progression and the person achieves completion (becomes a full person) only at death e.g. is fully incorporated in the total society by accessing to ancestry. This understanding of initiation rituals and of personhood presumes that: **a)** before entering initiation rituals, the person is into

a pre-socialized state, and: **b)** as far as gender is concerned, adulthood affirms an unequivocal gender for both man and woman (Strathern 1993: 42).

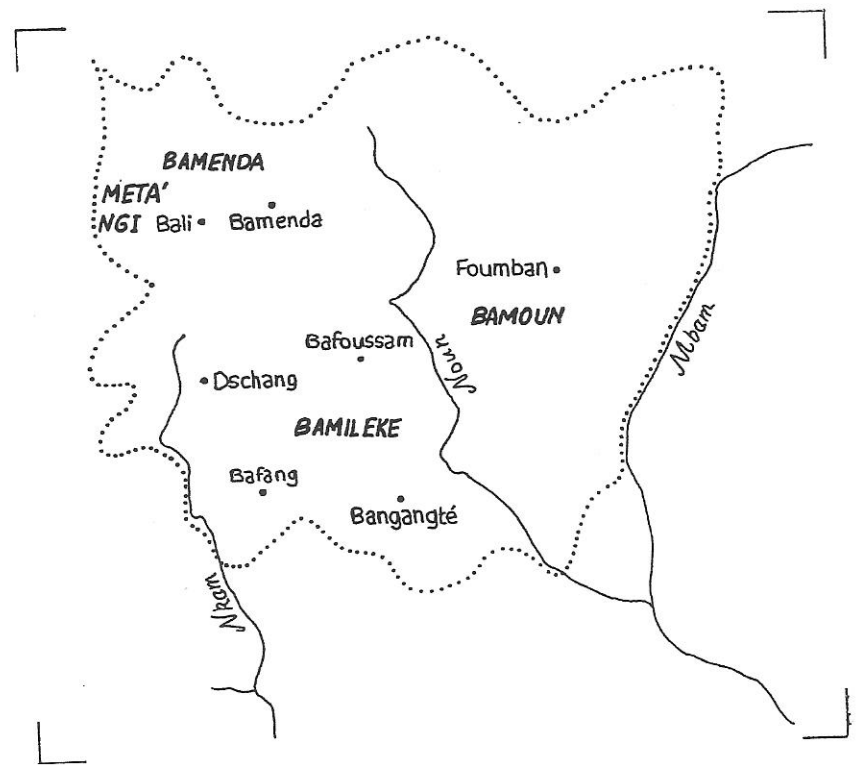
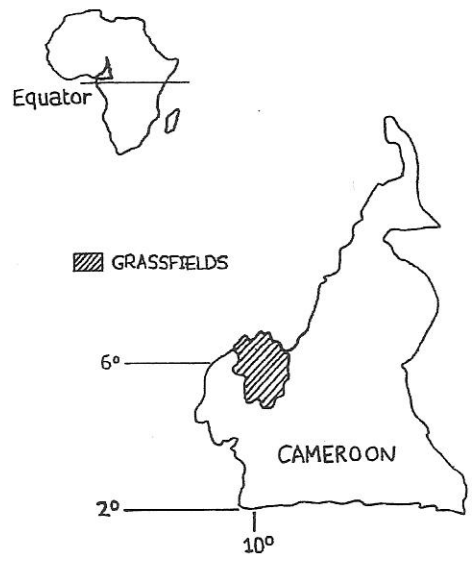
### **Personhood, ritual and society in the Cameroon Grassfields: A Melanesian(-ist) perspective on 'African personhood'**

The first theoretical exchanges between Malanesianists and Africanists began in the 1960's. The first generation of Melanesianists was largely influenced, as far as the study of kinship and group processes are concerned, by descent theory which dominated anthropological discussion and African studies (see for ex. Meggitt 1965). However, some Melanesianists raised significant objections to this 'imported' 'African' model (see Barnes 1962). The critical assessment of the lineage theory by Melanesianists led them to shift their interest from descent to exchange and from there to personhood via gender. This critical assessment rebounded onto the African ethnographic contexts and the potential for a dialectical dialogue was set up (see Karp 1978). The 1990's proved to be extremely productive for Africanists who used Melanesian(-ist) analytical concepts to interpret their data (on exchange see Guyer 1993, 2004; on exchange and personhood see Piot 1991, 1996 and 1999: chapters 3 and 4; on gender issues see Moore, Sanders and Kaare 1999; A. Strathern and M. Lambek 1998).

### **Gender and domestic activities in 'traditional' context**

The Cameroon Grassfields area roughly extends to the present North West and South West provinces of Cameroon (Map 1). The region is characterized by a common political institution referred to as 'chieftaincy' or 'chiefdom' in the anthropological, historical and sociological literature. The degree of political centralization of these polities varied considerably both in space and time (Tsékénis 2010a, 2010b). The chiefdom of Batié, where I conducted fieldwork from 1995 to 1997 is located in the southern part of the Grassfields (also called 'bamiléké country' or 'eastern Grassfields').

In the Cameroon Grassfields "men own the fields, women own the crops" (Goheen 1996). This was a master narrative in gender discourse up till the beginning of the 1990's. Traditionally, male labour focused on the cultivation of tree crops such as raffia, plantains, avocados, and kola nuts (in pre-colonial times and till late nineteenth century men's duties included hunting – thus they provided meat – and warring). Women cultivated food crops (maize, beans, and peanuts). Chicken farming was women's task while goats were breed exclusively by men. The husband provided his wife with meat, palm oil, and salt to add to



MAP 1. THE CAMEROON GRASSFIELDS



the culinary ingredients she produced herself (maize, beans, and peanuts). The wife mixed male and female ingredients to cook a final product, the meal. Women fed their husband and their children. Of course, these distinctions were not clear cut even in a 'traditional' context but what is more, colonialism and industrial capitalism have brought transformations: adding new activities and sources of income (especially wage labour) as well as changes in gender relations. Still, much of the distinctive activities briefly described above, still guide everyday life in the village.

### **Metaphors of sexuality, culinary images of procreation<sup>9</sup>**

In the Cameroon Grassfields fire (heat) is a symbol of female sexuality while water stands for male sexuality (Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Pradelles de Latour 1991; Tsékénis 2000).<sup>10</sup> The term for marriage is *lôm ndi* lit. "cooking (inside the) house" where 'cooking' has a literal and a metaphorical sense: the first refers to a spouse's principal activities: cooking and feeding;<sup>11</sup> in the second it refers to human reproduction where husband and wife may be seen to "cook children"; this expression also refers to the cooking of children within the female body (gestation).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, when a man impregnates a woman, he "cooks" her (Goldschmidt 1986: 58; cited in Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: 84). The term *lôm ndi* contains two sets of idioms: one refers to mixing, cooking, and eating (key symbols pervading Grassfields concepts of procreation, gender, and the constitution of society), the other to social space of enclosure (representing marriage and related to the cooking idiom through the kitchen). Fire and water as metaphors, sexuality and culinary imagery as a metonym for procreation occupy a prominent role in birth and death rituals. Here, I shall limit my argument to birth ritual avoiding a detailed description (detailed descriptions of these rituals can be found in Tsékénis 2000).

### **Melanesian(-ist) readings of Grassfields ritual**

Before providing a Melanesian(-ist) analysis of Grassfields ethnography I will briefly refer to what Alfred Gell has called 'the system M' ('M' standing for either 'Melanesia' or 'Marilyn') (Gell 1999). The system M rests on a particular definition of what a relation is. Relations are prior to terms for they define them. 'Terms' are not things: numbers are term: four exists only in relation to three and five. Similarly, a mother is a mother only as being part of the relation which links her to her child. The system M is an account of the social world based on the premises that the social world consists of relationships between terms and that the perceptible world consists of appearances which encipher the social world ('mother', 'child'). Relations as such are not palpable, they are not accessible.

Their existence/presence is revealed through sign-vehicles. ‘Mother’ and ‘child’ are sign-vehicles, appearances of the mother-child relation: they objectify this relation. Objectification is conventional and is guided by what Strathern refers to as an ‘aesthetic’, that is: “a system of conventions as to which appearances indicate which relations between which terms” (Gell 1999: 37). Let me now proceed to the interpretation of the data and illustrate this interpretation with diagrams.

### **Procreation**

Conception: man and woman mix their “waters” or their “bloods” during the act of sexual intercourse to form the foetus. They are said to contribute equally to the substance that makes a new human being. Man’s contribution to the making of the foetus appears more important during pregnancy: indeed, it is said that the father’s semen (“water”) is an essential ingredient which fortifies and feeds the foetus during pregnancy. Note that: whereas at the moment of conception husband and wife contribute similar substances (“waters” and “bloods”) the contribution of the father during pregnancy is differentiated through its gendering (“men’s water”).

Of course, the feeding of the newborn does not end at birth: the newborn not only is fed with her mother’s milk but also with (gendered) food produced conjointly by his mother and father. Therefore one can say that, as in Melanesia, the person is a product of a cross-sex unmediated exchange between his parents (they exchange their capacities for work and procreation to make children).

### **Birth rituals**

From the moment he is born and till a ritual called “plantain bananas of the umbilical cord of the child” the newborn has two ‘bodies’: one (the ‘real’) which is in inside the mother’s house, the other a plantain tree which is outside. During this period the ‘real’ body of the newborn is still a part of the mother’s body (“growing takes place when the body is imagined as part of another” – Strathern 1993: 50). The newborn’s ‘real’ body is detached from the mother’s body when it is inscribed into the paternal land (and agnatic genealogy) and his external body incorporated by the women of the compound. The ‘real’ body thus displaces the external body.

## Girl's initiation (prebetrothal puberty rites)

Inside her mother's house, the girl was subjected to restrictions on movement and forbidden to do many small actions such as feeding herself. As Feldman-Savelsberg notices: "This ritual enclosure involved much of the cooking, eating, and fattening symbolism of procreation" (1999: 211 n.15). The girl could be compared to a foetus which grows (e.g. she is fattened). If so, the seclusion house could be a 'womb'.

## Marriage exchanges and commensality

During the preliminary period the bride-to-be is transformed by her father-in-law into a marriageable woman. Indeed, by acting as a husband (he makes gifts of palm oil, salt and small amounts of money all of which are 'male' products) he activates her female part (she cooks for him). These statuses are also expressed (linguistically) in reciprocal terms of address: the girl calls her future father-in-law *da kbue* "firewood gatherer" a term commonly used by a spouse towards her husband; reciprocally, her father-in-law calls her *ndjui'a* "my spouse". Conversely, the groom-to-be is compelled to act like a husband: gathering firewood for his mother-in-law and her cowives, and performing various services for his future father-in-law.

***Bridewealth ("the goat of my wife's father"):*** the groom-to-be offers a goat and a tin of palm oil to the girl's father and half a tin of palm oil to her mother. Here again, the suitor hands over typically 'male' products (he is compelled to do so by his father and mother in law). This prestation is important in that it broadens the circle of kins and non-kins (the "girl's side", wife-givers) and involves the members of the cognatic groups of each side.

***"Pouring of the raffia wine":*** **a)** the cowives of the groom's father hand over ('detach') cooked 'male' products (plantains, goat meat, firewood and salt) to the "girl's side", on behalf of the "husband's side" (cognatic group); the "girl's side" too offers cooked food (but not plantain which is 'male') which is eaten by both sides (commensality); the "girl's side" can be seen as (collectively) feeding the "husband's side" just as a wife feeds her husband; **b)** the groom offers palm oil, (raw) plantain and raffia wine to the cowives of the girl's mother; the later hand over the palm oil to the girl's father; **c)** the girl's side offer yams, potatoes and/or taro to the "husband's side".

***Separation of the female agnate from her lineage:*** the conjugal bond will be instituted during a ceremony called "wedding meal". But before this, the girl (female agnate) must be severed (detached) from her lineage. This separation is activated (sanctioned) by her father's ancestors and the male agnates of the lineage (this separation is a precondition for her being marriageable, e.g. definitely transformed into a spouse in relation to her husband, and an affine in relation to her husband's lineage/cognatic group). The father-daughter relation (and the agnatic relation of the female agnate to her lineage) is 'eclipsed',

‘encompassed’ by the wife-husband (and wife-givers / wife receivers) relation. The former does not cease to exist but through its ‘encompassment’ by a conjugal (husband-wife) and affinal (wife-receivers/wife-givers) relation, it is transformed: indeed, from now on the girl cannot either eat from her father’s dish, sit on his chair and on his bed.

### **Conclusion(s):**

#### *The singular (individual) and the plural (collective)*

Grassfields persons, like Melanesians, can be seen as composed of a female and a male part which is activated in the course of cross-sex unmediated (conjugal cooking) and mediated exchanges (marriage exchanges between different kinds of ‘groups’). The same analysis can be conducted as far as ‘groups’ (of different magnitude) are concerned. Through marriage exchanges, a ‘group’ (whatever its dimension) is compelled to detach a (gendered) part of itself thus implying that it is, like persons, made up of a male and female parts. A ‘group’ is an androgynous entity and is made to act as either a male (husband) or female (wife) in the context of marriage transactions. At each level of magnification the same processes are at work: detachment of parts from persons, detachment of persons from ‘groups’. Spouses exchange parts of themselves and deliver parts of themselves (children) for one another, and cognatic groups entering a relation of affinity exchange parts of themselves in analogous ways, and reciprocally reproduce one another but on a larger scale (Gell 1999: 63). Therefore, the relation between marriage (the union between specific spouses) and affinity linking collectivities (whatever their dimension) can be understood as fractal magnification/minimization.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Images of the body: birth as initiation, initiation as birth*

During this presentation, we have encountered multiple kinds of ‘bodies’. Let me recapitulate. The body of the pregnant women. The house of seclusion, during the prebetrothal puberty rites. Finally the cognatic group: indeed, the cognatic group as wife-giver can be seen as a ‘body’ which ‘expels’ a female cognate to be given away in marriage.

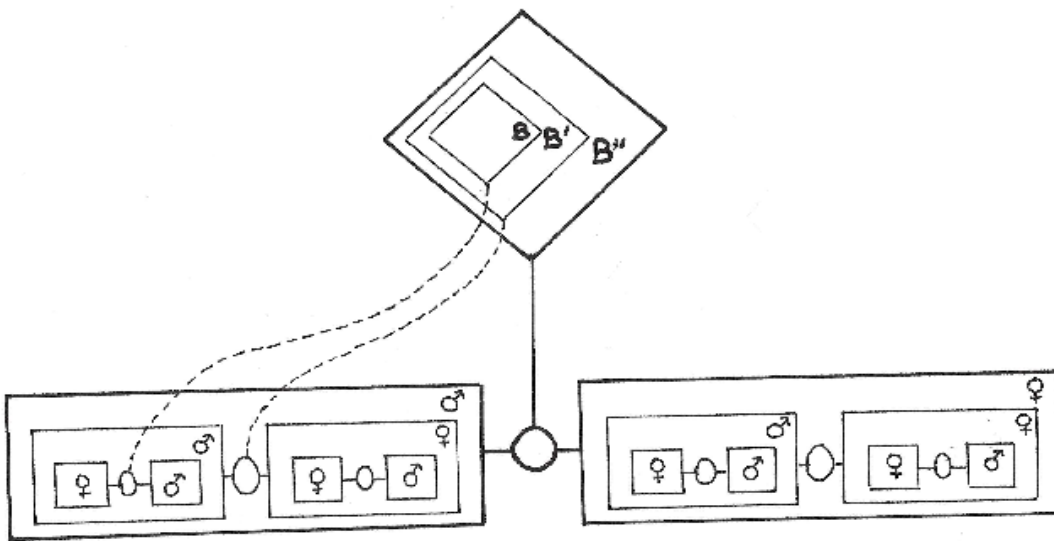
Immediately after birth and for a month the mother is passive: she is kept in semiseclusion, she is not supposed to work and she is fed (like a foetus) by others; Thus her house can be seen as a ‘womb’.

We saw that during the prebetrothal puberty rites, the girl is like a ‘foetus’ (she is passive: subjected to restrictions on movement and forbidden to do many small acts such as feeding herself). She is fed by others (like a foetus) in order to

get fat, e.g. to grow like a foetus. The seclusion house is a 'womb' from which she comes out after nine weeks.

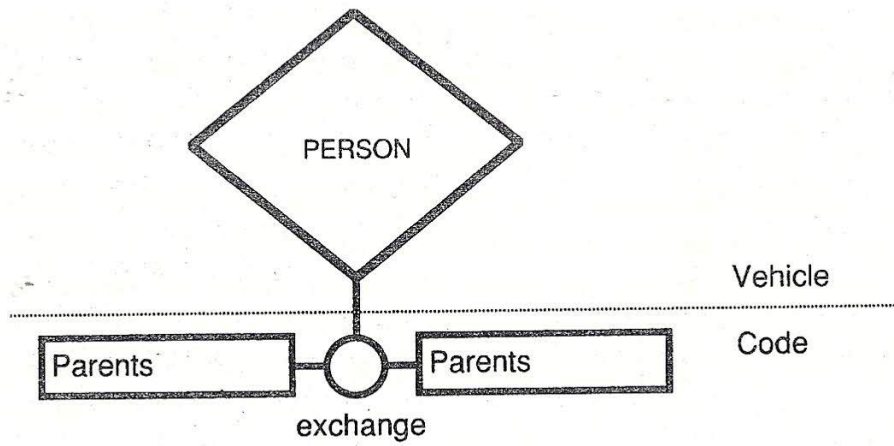
As far as procreation is concerned therefore, a woman is alternatively active (gives birth) and passive (is in a parturient state). Moreover, she alternatively gives birth and is given birth (both during the seclusion following birth, and the seclusion of the prebetrothal puberty rites). Birth is initiation and initiation is birth.

'Bodies', as much as marriage and affinity, can be seen as fractals. This is illustrated in the figure below:



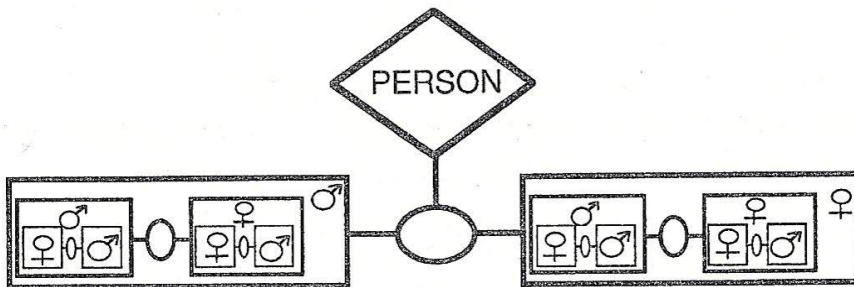
**Figure 1.** 'Bodies'/persons and relations in fractal perspective (after Gell 1999: 50, 51)

I said earlier that the person/body can be perceived as the product of cross-sex unmediated exchange between his parents. The figure below (Figure 2.1) depicts this diagrammatically:



**Figure 2.1.** The person as a product of exchange relations (from Gell 1999: 38)

But the parents themselves were produced by gendered exchanges and so on, so that each person is the objectification of numerous gendered exchange relations. The terms shown in figure 2.1 can be conceptualized as fractals. Hence, the diagram 2.2 below which represents the ‘fractal person’ (Wagner 1991):



**Figure 2.2.** The ‘fractal person’ (from Gell 1999: 50)

*On 'African personhood' and the individual/society opposition*

The possibility for persons/groups to detach parts of themselves and to produce persons implies that the foetus (or at least the child) is already a social being before initiation rituals. Adulthood therefore is not conferred to persons by 'society'. Rather than completing persons and groups, initiation rituals and marriage exchanges 'make them incomplete' (Strathern 1993). Gender is not unequivocal: persons and 'groups' alternate between 'male' and 'female' states, and constantly switch from active to passive. Moreover, there is no antinomy between persons and 'groups' as they are both conceived as made up of both internal and external relations or in Strathern's words: "What makes the part (individual) also makes the whole" (1992: 82).

*'Hierarchy' (Dumont), 'eclipsing' (Strathern) and the comparative method or how to speak about the 'other'?*

In this paper I made extensive use of the terms 'encompassment' and 'eclipsing'.<sup>14</sup> In fact the term 'encompassment' used by Dumont and Strathern has the same meaning in both paradigms. Let me clarify this. In the example given above (the different scales at which the 'body'/person appears in Figure 1) relations of/at the first scale (the woman's body as produced by the cross-sex unmediated exchange of her parents) are 'encompassed' by second scale relations (those produced by feeding during the prebetrotal puberty rites; e.g. *in terms of value* initiation rituals are hierarchically superior – yet not different in nature as we have seen – to the cross-sex unmediated exchanges that produced the person); and third scale relations subordinate second scale relations (while, again, not at all different in nature than the previous ones).<sup>15</sup> What the system M does not (at least explicitly) stipulates is the possibility of 'reversal', namely the fact that first or second scale relations may in certain contexts (especially in ritual ones) subordinate first scale relations. In a Dumontian perspective, this is not a contradiction, for this reversal occurs on contexts-levels considered of lesser value (contexts-levels which still remain 'encompassed' by first scale relations and value). I gave some examples of this property of 'hierarchy' (reversal) in the first section of this paper when discussing the analytical distinctions pertaining to the definition of personhood.

In *The Gender of the Gift* Marilyn Strathern argues that one cannot extract oneself from the particular (western) mode of knowledge, e.g. fictions like gift/commodity economy, Melanesia/west, feminist anthropology/anthropology, and society/individual (Strathern 1988: 7; 1993: 44). The only thing one can do it to "make the workings of this mode [of knowledge] visible" (Strathern 1988: 7).<sup>16</sup> In so doing we turn these fictions into powerful reflexive tools as I have tried to show using the society/individual opposition. But I suggest we should see these oppositions as relative. In other words we could say that both gift and

commodity logic (for example) exist in both Melanesia (see Gell 1999: Chapter 2) and the 'west', the relative difference being that whereas the former subordinates commodity to gift, the later does exactly the inverse.

Beyond the insights gained by Strathern's comparative method we can now add a hierarchic dimension. Dumont's comparative approach is bi-dimensional (Dumont 1985 [1983]: 219-28): on one level, the modern western world, and with it anthropological discourse and practice, promotes a universal representation of societies as made of individuals – the human species. On this level, human beings are persons as *members of the human species*. However, on another level, the west (and anthropological discourse and practice) faces 'cultural differences', and has to deal with the fact that in other societies human beings are persons because they *belong to a specific society*. According to this perspective, western universalism is transformed at least in two ways: it uses 'society' as a medium between the 'individual' and 'collective' – here individualism remains the ultimate value but cannot serve as an interpretative device to describe other societies. From this, stems the second transformation for this two-dimensional comparison reflects back our specificity, our particular form of humanity. Whereas one can be 'universalistic' on the first level, one must switch to the other level when confronting specific cultural forms; from this perspective the modern concept of the person (Dumont's 'individual') appears as a particular variety of the non-modern. Consequently, anthropological discourse cannot pertain to universalism on both levels.



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<sup>1</sup> The data this paper draws on has been collected during fieldwork conducted in the polity of Batié in the southern Cameroon Grassfields from 1995 to 1997. This paper is an attempt to address 'African data' on personhood through analytical tools forged by Melanesianists (especially Strathern 1988 and Wagner 1991). Therefore, ethnographic data and description has been shaped by this kind of 'symbolic anthropology', with all its associated weaknesses. I contend, along with Strathern (1988: 7; 1993: 44), that while one can hardly extract oneself from the western mode of knowledge (and the objective-like ethnographic description belongs to this knowledge practice), one can make its workings visible. Therefore, what one loses on the ground of methodology, one gains on the ground of conceptual re-contextualization.

Secondly, the paper seems to deal with human beings and communities which are out of place and time – a utopia. True enough, this ethnography has still to be given its historical context as well as a *saveur locale* for all my arguments sound all too Melanesian. Notions of personhood and 'society', for example, will have to be studied in the context of both 'local' transformations and the incorporation of the region in the world-system in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (see Argenti 2006 and 2011 for the Grassfields; Piot 1996 for West Africa). 'Persons' will also have to be linked to 'things' (Piot 1996, Guyer 1993; Guyer and Belinga 1995).

The audience shall bear in mind the limited scope of this paper as well as the fact that this is a work in progress, the ultimate objective being to combine fractal theory with thorough historical and cultural contextualization, following the work of other Africanists (Piot 2005; Taylor 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Many of the contributors to a book dealing with "The Category of the Person" (Carrithers, Collins and Lukes 1985) touch on distinctions such as sense of the self and the concept of the self as well as on the relationship between the concept of the self and the category of the self.

<sup>3</sup> 'Individualism' as a configuration of values that (ideologically) subordinates the 'whole' to the 'individual' (perceived as the bearer of ultimate value) does not refer to a homogeneous reality. The same remark holds for the term 'west' (and all its derivatives). Dumont himself has offered a comparative study of French and German individualism (Dumont 1991) whereas MacFarlane, for example, has studied English individualism (Macfarlane 1978).

<sup>4</sup> For a critic of these constructions as homogenous, essentialized and from the outsider's – western/objective – eyes, perspective see Clifford 1988, Gyeke 1995, Houtondji 1983 and Van Beek 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Although Evans-Pritchard topic in this monograph is not primarily Nuer personhood it nevertheless runs as a theme because what a person is occurs in discussions concerning the spirits, ghosts, mortality, etc.

<sup>6</sup> As Riesman notices in his review article of the colloquium proceedings, personhood was not a central theme for British scholars, and American anthropologists had generally conducted fieldwork elsewhere than in Africa (Riesman 1986).

<sup>7</sup> This analytical distinction between a domestic domain and a politico-jural domain was constructed by Evans-Pritchard and Fortes on the foundation of Radcliffe-Brown's kinship theory (Fortes 1969: 72).

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<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, Fortes describes the Tallensi person as primarily defined by roles and statuses, and as constituted of detachable parts (see Fortes 1973: 289 *sq.*) external to it but shared by both human beings and other living entities; on the other hand, groups (either corporate lineages or ‘society’) are explicitly defined as substances. Here appears an antinomy between person (as defined through internal and external relations) and groups as defined in relation to themselves. This could have led Fortes to reassess his perception of groups but apparently led him to the inverse: to see persons as substances on which external relations are added upon in order to link them to other (larger) substances.

<sup>9</sup> Grassfielders, like Melanesians, draw heavily on metaphors of gestation and birth (see Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Pradelles de Latour 1991; Tsékénis 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Thus, sperm is “man’s water” whereas a spouse who cooks well and gives birth to a lot of children is called a “good hearth”.

<sup>11</sup> To which one must add the production of food.

<sup>12</sup> Thus pregnant women often compare their belly to a bubbling pot (Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: 86).

<sup>13</sup> A fractal is a mathematical figure which displays self-similarity at different scales of magnification and minimization.

<sup>14</sup> Roy Wagner uses the term ‘obviation’ (Wagner 1986) which is a synonym of Strathern’s ‘eclipsing’ except that whereas in the case of obviation the encompassing relation suppresses the encompassed, in the process of ‘eclipsing’ the prior set of relations is still implicit in the succeeding one.

<sup>15</sup> We could ‘collapse’ figure 2.2 into one of the parts of figure 1 for each person is composed of the exchange relations between his parents, themselves composed by the relations of their parents and so on.

<sup>16</sup> Her task is to: “(...) convey the complexity of the indigenous concepts in reference to the particular context in which they are produced”; hence, she chooses: “(...) to show the contextualized nature of indigenous constructs by exploring the contextualized nature of analytical ones.”(Strathern 1988: 8).