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## The Banda Infanta. On Gender's Unspeakable Truth

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**Summary:** On gender's unspeakable truth. The genders' social role is arguably of prime interest to a young woman entering adult life. Calling her the Infanta, after Velasquez' famous painting of the Spanish Princess, this article looks at the Central-African Republic, the Banda society, to analyze what is implied for a girl at her initiation ritual, given the striking use of the their term for 'mother' (əyi), not just to indicate the genetrix and any female, fertile and imposing creature, but also to designate owners of property, male or female, and masters or incumbents of a social position. With the mother-related social domain offering solace for patrilineal demands, and notably for the menace of witchcraft, it appears that this remarkable term presents a basic value that transcends all gender differentiations, and the rivalries they involve.

**Keywords:** Gender rivalry, maternity, initiation, witchcraft, social complementarity, colonization.

## Banda Infantka. O niewypowiedzianej prawdzie płci

**Streszczenie:** Społeczna rola płci wydaje się należeć do zasadniczych obszarów zainteresowań młodej kobiety, wchodzącej w dorosłe życie. Autor nazywa ją infantką, nawiązując do słynnego obrazu hiszpańskiej księżniczki Velasqueza. W oparciu o własne antropologiczne badania środkowoafrykańskiej społeczności Banda analizuje, co kryje się za zaskakującym użyciem pojęcia „matka” (əyi). Określa ono bowiem nie tylko rodzicielkę i każdą kobietę, istotę płodną i dużą, ale także właścicieli mienia – mężczyzn lub kobiety, a także panów lub osoby zajmujące wysoką pozycję społeczną. Sfera społeczna związana z matką niesie ukojenie w zestawieniu z wymaganiami patrylinearnymi, szczególnie wobec zagrożenia czarną magią. Jednocześnie ten znaczący termin przedstawia podstawową wartość, która przekracza wszelkie różnice i rodzące się z nich antagonizmy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Czary, inicjacja, kolonizacja, macierzyństwo, rywalizacja płci, społeczna komplementarność

## Introduction

The social fluctuation between material realities and imaginary ideals shows up most clearly in gender arrangements. By ordering that women, non-heterosexuals and other marginalized, should come to make up 40% of its workforce on all levels, the European Union clearly seeks to fight a trend that has weirdly crept into Western patterns. For the male-dominated nuclear family – typically a man, his wife and (ideally two) kids – has received model status in a continent with Christian roots. However, by favoring this social order the Church had oddly ignored, so it seemed, an adverse ideal. For did its founder not advocate utter respect for women and the marginalized, and question the social practices of clan elders arranging their offspring's marriages? While its matrimonial law based Western society on the canonically sacramental and free marriage agreement of the bride and groom facing the Almighty, this revolutionary novelty was allowed to turn into a rigid bourgeois type of male *domination* (from Lat: *dominus*, lord of the *domus*), which is now being targeted. The etymology of the Polish *żeński* and *żona* (female and wife) and of Indo-Germanic words such as gender itself, presents the woman and her larger gametes as the core of society's generating power. So, why was she again brought under man's domination? Did the Christian faith perhaps worsen, rather than alleviate, her position; notably, after the industrial and urban revolution replaced the peasant village life?

As a student of social anthropology, I was ordered to study, long ago, how court rules shaped Western society, as argued by Norbert Elias and as depicted in Velasquez' famous *Las Meninas*, figuring Spanish court life, of which Michel Foucault held that the observer was the true focus of the scene<sup>1</sup>. For, does Velasquez not show the royal parents, reflected in the mirror, making the ladies in waiting (*las meninas*) teach the Infanta Margarita the courtly etiquette in preparation for her conjugal status, despite her obvious preference for her dog and childhood companions? In studying this composition, however, I noticed a special message by the artist to Margarita, expressed in a line that ran from the bottom right corner via her and his mouth to the two golden sections of the painting and of the canvass on the left. While my readings in anthropology spoke of a universal marital practice of women being exchanged by men, I now doubted if this was what Velasquez whispered to the beloved Infanta.

This question preoccupied me as I came to study African arts that place female fertility at its center and to read about males in certain ritual functions being called 'mother'. So, when I was sent to investigate Banda society in the C.A.R (Central African Republic), I decided to make this issue a focus of my study. My curiosity was soon triggered when I heard that a priest, who owned the car I was driving in, was called 'its mother'. What could that mean? In the following pages I elaborate on what I wrote earlier in *Studia Gdańskie* (2013) about the gender issue in Girard's mimetic theory, as I ponder how a Banda girl at her initiation as a *ganja* is made to

<sup>1</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris 1966, the opening chapter

see her role in the society, which I will describe in some detail<sup>2</sup>.

## 1. The sexually differentiated world

### *a. Entering the social order*

Initiation rites for youngsters are similar over a large stretch of the Central African savannah, where the Banda used to live in dispersed hamlets before being forced unto the new colonial roads. The reports of spectacular *ganja* feasts – with music by orchestras of horns from hollow tree roots and deer horns – usually refer to the boys' circumcision in the sacred forest, a *rite de passage* that makes them pass into the adult world via a symbolic and bloody rebirth. But *ganja* also refers to the rites for girls. In both cases the blood flowing from the wounded sexual parts counts as a reminder of the blood shed at their real birth. Both boys and girls become part of their father's clan by leaving the undifferentiated realm of the ancestors they lived in during childhood. The boys' ceremony is clearly the more spectacular one. They are given a new life by their male tutors. Their mothers are not allowed near. Their food is cooked and deposited at a crossroad leading to the initiation camp by their yet unmarried sisters, while their mothers sing laments and dirges as if for a deceased son. Of these rites, I will note just two important aspects.

For both boys and girls it is their formal insertion into the father's clan. Lineage marks are cut into their skin and they are placed under the protection of the clan deity *yewo*. For the boys the circumcision implies a distancing from their mother's and a full-fledged participation in male activities. For the girls the *ganja* ceremony is separate and consists of an excision and various rituals to mark both the distance from their brothers and preparation for motherhood. Both boys and girls look forward to the occasion despite apprehension of the operation and of the distancing from their *koba*. From this moment on, the reciprocal kinship term *koba* that a brother and a sister use for each other obtains an ambiguous connotation implying an uneasy avoidance. The girl that came to deposit food near her brother's initiation camp may later still give him food for a dangerous journey, but once they get married open avoidance is the rule.

Secondly, we note that the *ganja* rites clearly point to the reproductive roles. The respective surgical operations are explained as the cutting from the child's body what remained of the opposite sex – for the boy the prepuce is reminiscent of the vulva and the girl's clitoris refers to the penis<sup>3</sup>. Thus, they enter into the differentiated earthly roles of procreation. For in the Banda worldview, a child is undifferentiated at birth and related to the world of ancestors, as is shown by two social facts. In the list

<sup>2</sup> The term *ganja* refers both to the ritual and to the boys and girls undergoing it, as in the rites among the neighboring Manja, well-documented in various works of A. Vergiat.

<sup>3</sup> Feminist claims that cliterectomy seeks to curtail sexual pleasure and to submit women to the men's whims are adamantly denied by the women insisting that sexual satisfaction is not lacking in any way.

of kinship terms there is no equivalent for the English distinction between ‘son’ and ‘daughter’; and in ritual terms, any child may be chosen to represent the ancestors at such ceremonial activities as carving a new master drum or making an oven for the melting of iron ore. While every child receives a personal plan (*andró*) from the ancestors when entering the earth, the crucial factor of differentiation for the purpose of passing on life is only activated during the *ganja* ceremony.

Connected to this are two crucial rules in the kinship order. There is the paradox of an ideal of a brother–sister marital exchange, which is glorified in story-telling and even in daily conversations, but is rarely effectuated and actually avoided. The explanation for this paradox claims that a brother–sister exchange would link the two couples so closely that troubles in one marriage would destroy the other too. In reality, there are strong exogamy rules, making sure that, as the saying goes, ‘blood is not mixed’. Related to this rarely realized ideal marriage are certain kinship terms that differ radically from Indo-European ones, notably as for the sister-brother relation. Like the neighboring Nzakara, the Banda use different reciprocal terms for same sex and opposite sex siblings. Brothers call each other *aye* and so do sisters; but siblings of different sex call each other *koba*. Sex differentiation thus presents an ordering principle. Once two *akoba* (brother and sister, plural of *koba*) enter their respective marriages they must observe a strict, yet much resented, mutual avoidance.

With ordered procreation being the central concern of earthly existence and the rules of sexual avoidance being severe and complex, there is the need for anyone coming into the area to be inserted in this social web. It explains the frequency of oracle consultations that seek to clarify mishaps by people’s infringement of their existential calling (*andró*) in this area. Sexual contact with a person that should be avoided is often the verdict of the diviner and it is commonly put on a par with witchcraft. Both can be fatal and yet may occur unwittingly. It is noteworthy that the predetermined life-program *andró* is pronounced on a high pitch, while *andrò* meaning witchcraft is pronounced in a low pitch. The former spells the rules to be adhered to, but when infringed, even unwittingly, it becomes like witchcraft. The Banda believe that anybody you meet may be a forbidden kinship link or a potential witch. Anyone may have that feared black organ near the pancreas, even by inheritance, and thus be a potential witch, while being unaware of it and never activate it, unless provoked. This view helps people to be prudent and careful, for fear of inadvertently provoking a witch. And something similar holds for sexual contacts. While extramarital chastity is not people’s prime concern, any link that infringes exogamy rules by unlawful mixing blood that should remain separated constitutes an area of alert. Although these rules are clear and well known, doubts about a particular link are common and diviners often attribute mishaps to such contacts. Since this focus on sexual life and procreation is so dominant, anybody arriving in the village will soon receive a place in the kinship order<sup>4</sup>. The complex kinship ties dominate daily life

<sup>4</sup> When I arrived at Wademi (a village 20 miles north of Ippy) and was given the house of the chief (*makonji*), who himself joined the house of his first wife (*ayinda*). My identity was quickly established,

and influence the economic and social rules. Here is not the place to scrutinize the complexity of these rules, but it is worth our effort to grasp some basic rules and the structures they impose<sup>5</sup>.

### b. Gender complementarity

Before looking at the role of the sexual divide in ordering economic life and social space, we must briefly study Banda kinship terminology and rules. We recall that brother–sister exchange constitutes the egalitarian ideal, even though rarely effectuated. The Banda kinship terminology is quite limited and has a simple logic. There are 15 terms, divided in three sets of five. Two of these sets contain only reciprocal terms; one to do with consanguinity and one with affinity. The third set of five non-reciprocal terms deals with the relations within a nuclear family. A child calls the father *aba* and the mother *ayi*, while it is itself called *ari* (or *əgbələ* pl: *aneci*). The wife calls the husband *akɔ* and he calls her *əwo*. These are the only non-reciprocal terms. But we note that they have wide extensions. The father's brothers and other male clan members of his generation are also *aba* (pl. *alaba*) and the child is their *ari*. The same goes for the mother. Also the terms for husband and wife stretch much further than the nuclear family. A brother's wives one may be called *əwo* and this term may get a joking value when a maternal uncle calls his niece *əwomə* (my wife). This jovial use of *əwo* and *akɔ* is quite common, for instance between grandparents and their grandchildren.

The set of reciprocal terms for consanguinity stretches over three generations. We already saw the curious terms for the same generation siblings, *aye* and *koba*, being respectively of the same or opposite sex. There are two terms for successive generations as well: *a'a* and *ə'u*. The paternal aunt and her nieces and nephews call each other mutually *a'a*, whereas the maternal uncle and his nieces and nephews use mutually the term *ə'u*. Grandparents and their grandchildren call each other *ata*. Here again the rule of extension outside the direct link holds and we shall see that the terms and the rules of behavior going with them often carry ideological charges that stretch far afield, as in the case of *ə'u*.

The set for affine relations follows a similar pattern, but affects just two generations. A man and his affine relations of the superior generation (parents-in-law) call each other *mbeya*, and of the same generation *beza*, while the woman and her parents-in-law call each other *yinə* and affines of the same generation *angara*. The fifth term in this set is *əyinga*, by which co-wives refer to each other.

This simple system is entirely focused on the marital order and pivots around the

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when at sunset I brought a fruit from the forest asking for its name and use. It was a stimulant of the parturient's milk production, and was immediately applied to the chief's third wife, who had just given birth to a boy but could not feed him. So I was dubbed his *ə'u* (maternal uncle) and the boy got my name.

<sup>5</sup> Semi-complex kinship systems imply that the choice of the partner is not predetermined, as would be the case in an obligatory sister-exchange, but is left free, except for a rather rigorous set of interdicts.

opposition between *aye* and *koba*. Although the notion of *koba* holds the key to the system of marital exchange, it does not function in a wider, metaphorical sense, as do most of the other kinship terms. The *a'a*, the father's sister is another remarkable exception, since the father and his sister are each other's *koba*. She allowed the father to get married and thereby deserves his children's respect. But as the same goes for the mother and her brother, it is significant that the reciprocal term *ə'u* (for the bond between the maternal uncle and his nephews and nieces) behaves just in the opposite way, as we shall see.

How much marital concerns dominate the Banda social system appeared clearly when I asked about clan-relations. Living in the village Wademi, I saw that most social activities dealt with three clans: the Kpatcero and Walaka living South and North of the stream that divided the village, and the Ngele, two miles further North. Before the colonial era these three allegedly moved on the savannah in a fixed formation. Asked why they remained distinct, rather than merging into one clan, they answered decidedly: "so that we can marry each other." This seemed a clear confirmation of Lévi-Strauss' vision on the marital exchange rules as the key to the social order. But the remarkable role of the term *əyi* shows that this needs amending, as it dulls the idea of girls being items of exchange.

### *c. Order by sexual division*

The difference between the child's world before initiation and life after the *ganja* ceremony is huge. A person's true vocation is to enter the bi-polar sexualized conditions, geared toward an ordered passing on of life. The sexual complementarity permeates all social institutions, with one curious exception, as we shall see below. We first examine the social-economic life, notably the perception of the material activities and the social space.

While the Banda see themselves mainly as farmers, hunting, fishing, and gathering are still highly valued activities. At the beginning of the rainy season, the swarming of termites causes a flurry of festive activities, because they are the best protein-rich food available. In gathering activities no gender divide is apparent, except for technical reasons as in the case of gathering honey. In fishing, too, and even in hunting women may partake on a par with the men. But in agriculture an intriguing pattern emerges. On the complex agricultural cycle with its labor investment in clearing, tilling, sowing, weeding and harvesting, spread over several months, both Banda men and women eloquently mention the sexual division of tasks, making up a logical cycle, with alternating and complementary roles.

The men clear the bush and prepare the plots for women to do most of the sowing, planting, weeding and cultivating. The men take charge of the harvesting, putting the crop into the storehouses that are theirs, and from which they let the wives to take portions in turns under the authority of the first wife (*əyinda*). The woman cooks the meal and offers it to her man, which he digests in a process that is compared to co-

oking, since by the heat of his stomach and the erotic excitement he extracts what counts as the *ajaro*, the food's nutritive fat, in the form of semen. After the meal, which is normally in the evening, he will put this essence of the nutritive cycle into the woman's uterus, where she will form it into an embryo and return the baby to the man's lineage. This circular or rather spiral pattern is a common imagery, which appears as controlled by the man and by the male-ruled society; but it undeniably contains a key position for the woman's maternal role (*ayi*).

A similar pattern underlies the imagery of social space, which can be mapped in concentric circles. To illustrate this I recall pre-colonial times, before the Banda were forced to reside near the colonial roads. They lived in small units on the wooded lands. Hamlets consisted of a group of round thatched houses (*anda*), surrounded by small gardens, amidst a savannah with its streams lined with big trees and patches of farmland cleared for staple the food (formerly the sorghum and millet, now mainly cassava and maize). In Banda imagery there are eight conceptual realms in this social space, which can be divided as the cultural and the natural domain, and carry outspoken sexual connotations.

At the centre is the altar for the paternal lineage ancestors (*gbangi*), a marked male domain, where women do not tread during the prayers and sacrifices. This is surrounded by houses that are the women's domain, but obviously welcoming for the men. Just behind the houses, the women have a special area (*krahya*) where they produce their sell or oil, out of the sight of the men, who are forbidden there. Next come the vegetable gardens (*kindi*) that belong to the men, but with the women doing most of the work. The surrounding savannah (*gusu*) with its farm patches is the male area, notably for its hunting grounds, while the water streams are the ambiguous area for the women. They are of pivotal value as provider of water (*angu*), but also feared, since the dense vegetation and forest trees (*gbako*) count as the home of spirits that attack primarily women and children, but also the men that pass. Beyond these streams and farming area there is the wilderness (*mbundu*) where men go, not just for the dangerous animal hunts, but especially for that other 'hunt', the search for a wife. Whereas the *gusu* is valued as welcoming, the *mbundu* rather figures as a major challenge, as the outer space, that is to be crossed in pursuit of a wife from the affines that may be witches.

If we designate these two areas by the signs M for male and F for female and add the signs + for valued and welcome and – for restricted or dangerous, we get the following mental map:

$$M- / F+ / F- / M+ \quad ||| \quad M+ / F- / F+ / M-$$

This reads as follows: the former cultural area with the patrilineal ancestral altar at its center is surrounded by the mothers' homes, behind which women have a reserved area, before we get to the positive areas of the main economic activities of farming and small hunts, but also of gathering fruits and herbs done by all, including children. The latter group is the natural domain, with the men's rotating slash-an-

d-burn farmlands and the forest galleries around the water sources, where women get essentials for the home, but also feel threatened by the spirits of the woods. The final realm (*mbundu*) presents a scaring challenge for the men, not just because of dangerous animals – wild dogs, leopards, buffalos and elephants – but especially as the area is associated with the in-law family that is the first to be suspected of witchcraft. This last area's ambivalence is palpable in daily speech and notably in the story telling about the prankster-hero Tere (equivalent to the Azande Ture, described by Evans-Pritchard), trying his luck and constantly failing in an amusing manner. The laughs about Tere's failures betray a nervous tension about the hidden conflicts that surface in the notion of witchcraft and the all but daily practice of consulting the oracles.

Before looking into the central role of female fertility in this complex order, I first recall the prime importance of initiation (*ganja*) in Banda life. It is when a child ceases to belong to the undifferentiated ancestral world and starts the journey of realizing the personal task (*əndró*) in sexual differentiation, emotionally marked by the fact that the kinship term *koba* will now imply avoidance. Because the ideal of the brother-sister exchange is all but excluded and replaced by a marriage with a 'stranger' via the tool of a bride price and with a complex concern for avoiding blood-contamination, this implies entering a world of uncertainty and probing, as the encounter with the in-law family is a hazardous exposure to bewitching. Although marital arrangements are the concern of the respective family heads, the couple feels this pressure to avoid affronts. While the tension is between the man's group and that of the wife, and not with herself, she nonetheless is aware of holding the key to the social order, which accords with the central role of the term *əyi*.

#### *d. Saying sooth on the skin of things*

We saw that witchcraft is called *əndrò*, the low-pitched opposite of the high-pitched *əndró*, a person's task in life. It is associated with a black internal organ, which the Banda compare to clotted blood and a destructive counterpart of the life-giving uterus. The two main causes one suspects when mishaps or diseases strike are witchcraft and sexual disorder, which are felt as connected. There will be a query by one of such techniques of soothsaying as pressing an egg till it cracks, inquiring a mygale spider or the rubbing board, and feeding poison to a chicken. While accessible to anyone, in principle, these tools are normally handled by specialists who are initiated, often after becoming the priest of a spirit taking possession of them<sup>6</sup>.

Rather than future telling, this soothsaying by the consulting of oracles is about seeking the hidden truth (or sooth). In Banda language the term literally means asking (*yì*) about the 'skin of it' (*tceku ərə*) or how *ərə* is in its skin (*tceku*). The

<sup>6</sup> As for the techniques used they largely agree with what had been analyzed for neighboring societies in classic studies by E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937) and by A. Retel-Lauretin. In *Oracles et Ordalies chez les Nzakara* (Paris 1969), the latter notes that the main techniques are shared by about 300 peoples in tropical Africa.



word *əṛə* is almost void of any specific contents. It both can mean 'it' or 'things' (as in *fa əṛə*, cook things), and also the totality of reality. In the latter case it assumes a religious depth. Wishing you good luck I say: "may *əṛə* bless you". Some dub it the equivalent of a Supreme Being, but without any personalist connotation. Soothsaying is querying how things are disturbed by the upsetting of ancestors that gave a person a specific *əndrò* (calling) for the wellbeing of their people.

The notion of *əṛə* deserves some further explanation, as it seems to give a certain hypostasis to the 'order of things', a reality that abhors being disturbed. In daily parlance, you may be said to be blessed or killed by *əṛə*. Sometimes it is the equivalent of sickness (*əṛəka*), as in the saying that *əṛə* 'took the child just like the father'. Someone who is lucky is said to be loved by *əṛə*. Someone observing the customs (*əṛə manda alata*, things following the elders) may be praised for 'seeing *əṛə*'. The term for soothsaying, 'asking how things are in their skin', projects the events onto a transcendent level while relating to social rules. But it does not stress moral guilt, for to infringe a code inadvertently can also upset *əṛə* and incur sanctions. This reminds us that bewitching can also be done unwittingly and still be abhorrent. Indeed, those accused of practicing witchcraft are said to be 'with *əṛə*'<sup>7</sup>.

If the notion of *əṛə* in combination with the frequent consultations of oracles rather seems a heterogenic fantasy constituting a lock on the social framework, we note that it represents both a beneficial and harmful entity. And if 'people-with-*əṛə*' count as potential witches, - *əyiəndrò* - it must be recalled that their power is sensed to be dormant unless provoked. In short, the reality named *əṛə* is treated as a transcendental and sometimes personified hypostasis that observes and acts, but does not figure as a venerated deity. Each one's calling in life (*əndrò*) it is to strife for the optimal agreement with this transcendent order of reality. This semantic frame has a link with the kinship order, which shows in the questions asked at soothsaying, but also more specifically in the instructive role of the notion of *yì*, both as a noun and a verb. Although distinct from *yì* (to ask) the verb *yì* (meaning to love, to desire, to connect) is felt as semantically close. This root returns in two pivotal nouns: *yirə* and *əyi*. The noun *əyi* we already met as a kinship term for 'mother', but shall occupy us further below. Let us first consider *yirə*, which some relate to the Western notion of 'soul'. It is a person's faculty to strive for a goal, and notably to connect with *əṛə*. But it does not warrant a metaphysical view in terms of a relation between the soul and God, because like similar concepts in other African languages (cf. *luvò* in Ewe),

<sup>7</sup> Much has been written about the oracle techniques and the possibility of manipulating them, both technically and by the type of questioning. The latter is mostly done by asking binary yes-or-no questions. While this has a scientific appearance, observers are prone to point out the prejudiced form of the questions, especially in cases of bewitchment or improper sexual conduct. The techniques of pressing eggs or rubbing wood to see if they break or stick may seem little reliable. The techniques used elsewhere, such as the famous *afa*-cult in West Africa using a set of 256 signs, appear more reliable, but they also work along the same line of inquiries into the social life of people, leading to binary yes-or-no questions that are submitted to an external instance. Whichever techniques are used, the choice of questions rather than technical manipulation is decisive in terms of social influences.

it also means one's shadow or reflection in water.

It is essential to grasp to which extent the kinship terminology forms the semantic frame of reference in Banda society and how much witchcraft permeates this scheme of ideas, on which the Banda are comparable to the Azande, whom Gérard Mendel once described as a normal-paranoid society, who normally believe that evil strikes via mental, yet often unconscious influences of others wishing us ill<sup>8</sup>. People scale the surroundings on a continuum of liability to cause such harm. The Banda articulate these positions primarily in kinship terms. Given that the in-laws are the first suspected of bewitching you while the maternal relatives are beyond suspicion, we see a range of four kinship terms, running from negative to positive, *mbeya* – *aba* – *ayi* – *ə'u*, which reads as follows: as to the event of being targeted by witches one is to deal cautiously with the in-laws (*mbeya*); you may feel safe with members of the paternal clan (*aba*) provided you respect the hierarchical clan rules and customs; the maternal realm (*ayi*) gives emotional solace against stress caused by clan rules; and fourthly, absolute freedom and careless joking marks the dealing with the maternal uncle's clan (*ə'u*).

These terms are clearly metaphoric. One day I felt puzzled being respectfully addressed by a lady as *mbeya*. I was explained that women treat any visiting man as a potential husband of their daughter, i.e. as their son-in-law (*mbeya*). This reciprocal term carries a strict code of mutual respect. For any faux pas, on either side, may trigger witchcraft. Given the metaphoric use of kinship terms, we must turn specifically to the maternal side, after recalling that the patrilineal rules are dominant and impose a hierarchy to be strictly respected. The term *aba* expresses respect, while more relaxed contacts with elderly people rather use the reciprocal term *ata* (grand-parent/child). On the scale of positive emotions, however, we must consider first the terms *ə'u* on the maternal side and later, most specifically *ayi*.

### *e. The matrilateral shield*

Considering the four metaphoric kinship terms *mbeya* - *aba* - *ayi* - *ə'u*, we recall that the first and the last are reciprocal terms that respectively refer to the in-law and the matrilateral link. The *mbeya* relation between in-laws is the crucial bond that ensures the fulfillment of a man's reproductive calling, but is also the prime suspect of witchcraft. Given that witchcraft can be activated subconsciously, when a person is provoked, *mbeya* is indirectly the factual guardian of civil conduct. The terms *aba* and *ayi*, as metaphoric terms for paternal authority and maternal care, are not reciprocal and indicate one's link to the older generation, associated respectively with commanding or nurturing. The fourth term, *ə'u*, refers to the bond with the maternal

<sup>8</sup> See Gérard Mendel, *Anthropologie différentielle* (Paris, 1972, p.332-60). Based on the ethnographic work of Evans-Pritchard, Mendel stresses that the fear of witchcraft does not cause the Azande to live “dans le drame, mais plutôt dans une prudent méfiance qui pousse à la politesse...” (p. 344). Unfortunately, Mendel and Evans-Pritchard hardly pay any attention to the role of the “bonne mère”, so central to the Banda society.

kin group. But it has religious connotations that reach far beyond the kinship order and deserve a closer analysis.

The reciprocal term *ə'u* designating the relationship between a maternal uncle and children of his sister (*koba*) confers relaxed and congenial openness. The uncle's home holds no secrets or restrictions and thus *ə'u* is the structural opposite of *mbeya*, as it is entirely beyond any suspicion of witchcraft. The idea that the *ə'u* could be provoked into harmful witchcraft is inconceivable. The Banda trickster (Tere), whose jokes fool and deceive everyone, figures as the narrative embodiment of this relation. He allows himself hilarious liberties, which eventually turn sour, but that give a great enjoyment to the audience savoring his adventures. In the end he fails for infringing the codes of the extant law, symbolized by the paternal term of *aba*. But his exploits are seen as a-moral rather than immoral, and as such he is far from being irreligious. On the contrary, as a figure in the sky (Orion) and an embodiment of the joking relation that typify the *ə'u*-bond, he also symbolizes the special bond between the friends of a same initiation ceremony as also the members of a same cult. All of these treat each other as *ə'u*. It applies specifically to so-called blood brothers, who have performed a blood pact, creating a ritual bond of absolute mutual trust and openness.

As in many African societies, such as the neighboring Azande, the blood pact is an institution of pivotal import, which may connect both individuals and groups or even clans. The Banda draw a net parallel between those who shed blood together in the initiation (*atera*) and the partners in such blood pacts, on the one hand, and the *ə'u* kin relationship on the other hand. This seconds the backing Hocart gave to Evans-Pritchard's remarks that among the Azande the pact should not be viewed as some agnatic brotherhood. It would indeed be inconceivable for a Banda to invoke the clan *yewo* in support of blood pacts. Blood partners fling at each other joking insults unacceptable between brothers. Bonded by licking each other's blood, they totally count on each other in any mishap, more than on brothers. Their bond is the conceptual reverse of the witchcraft suspected from the *mbeya* side. It is shortsighted to call it an anti-kinship ritual since the term 'brother' is not appropriate, for the Banda explicitly refer it to *ə'u* ties and codes. Rules to exclude intermarriages apply even more rigorously to blood partnership than to consanguines on maternal side. It pays, therefore, to look at the structural polarity of *mbeya* and *ə'u* symbolisms, in which blood is a central ingredient.

The witchcraft the in-laws may be suspected of is seen as a nocturnal, surreptitious sucking of blood or of items associated with blood, such as sexual potency and even wealth. Witches are deemed to leave their body and, like vampires, go to unconsciously suck the victim's blood, life juices and sperm – seen as the "fat" (*ejero*) of the blood – or steal money that is often dubbed one's life blood. On the other end of the spectrum, we find *ə'u* and the *ə'u*-like bonds like the blood partnership, which are a mental refuge against any of these hostile attacks and rivalries, but should consequently exclude any sexual advances. The ceremony of exchanging

blood is usually between two male persons, but may exceptionally be performed by women or even by husband and wife promising absolute fidelity. A common form is the pact between two (male) elders on behalf of their lineages clan. In the latter case, it applies to both women and men and extends over generations. As a protective mechanism, it forms a congenial counterpart of the social control that is affected by fear of witchcraft. Actually, the formula pronounced in the ritual contains a threat that refusal to fulfill the obligations will cause the exchanged blood to outdo the worst witchcraft and kill the unfaithful, yes even the relatives. Even the refusal to offer a drink may count as such an odious breach of contract.

In the society of dispersed hamlets without leaders that preceded the colonial agglomeration in villages along the constructed roads, everyone had various grounds to approach the other in a variety of moods, depending on so-called *mbeya* or *ə'u* type of links. A curious term that shows how much the two poles are semantically linked to the marital order is *bengamela*, literally the 'co-husband' who, rather than being a rival, is a close associate or comrade who, like the *atera* of the initiation rite and the blood partner, is treated as an *ə'u*. While the Banda do not practice polyandry, they treat a man who within kinship rules is in a similar position of possible spouse to their wife as a co-spouse, blood partner or *ə'u*. And even the brother-in-law may sometimes appear as close as this *bengamela*.

In these and countless other variants, we need to value the subtle references to the maternal domain. The mental map on which to situate others and their daily dealings is made up in terms of a more or less congenial kinship ties. To the positive side on this map, there is the *alata* (the always positive bond of grandparent and grandchild) the *alaye* (the link to sibling of the same sex), and the *ə'u* (the maternal kin), to which are associated the *atera* (the one initiated in the same year), the co-adept of a religious shrine, and the blood partners, be they personal or collective. On the negative side there is the hazy avoidance rule between siblings of different sex (*akoba*), the hierarchical relation with clan elders (*alaba*) and most definitely the in-laws, to whom, in case of the women, we must add the co-wife (*əyinga*), who is among the first to be suspect of witchcraft. But let us once again recall that suspicion of witchcraft also urges mutual respect and care. As for women there is also the underlying solidarity in motherhood. While pregnant women are always on the alert for negative signs, at any birth the gathering of helpful women in support of the parturient is remarkable. This now makes us finally turn to the multifaceted term *əyi*, primarily meaning 'mother'.

#### *f. The mother of being*

My surprise at hearing the priest that owned the car I was driving being called "its mother" (*əyinə*) soon deepened when I found the diviner handling an oracle as the priest of a deity being *əyiyə*, lit. mother of that deity. The word *əy* has a triple meaning: plant, remedy, and deity. These three are metonymically linked. The names

of deities are usually in plural, starting with *a* (or *al*) – like e.g. *avingi* (rainbow), considered to be a divine animal – and the priest is said to be the mother (*ayi*), even though he is commonly a man, applying herbal medicines. This peculiarity of priests being called the ‘mother of a deity’, not only reminded me of my findings in West Africa, but moreover pointed to a wide range of facts leading to the core of our topic. Its singularity appeared at a ceremony for one of these deities, with much festive singing and dancing. While investigating the names and roles of the various drums, I surprisingly learned that the big master drum, producing a powerful low sound, was called *ayinā*, the mother or the female drum, whereas the high-pitched smaller ones counted as the male ones: *akānā* (lit. the husband).

It indeed appeared that the term *ayinā* is applied widely. By contrast to *akānā* it designates the difference of female and male animals and as to plants it contrasts fruit-bearing to sterile forms of shrubs or trees. But in addition to this rather ‘logical’ divide, this polarity is also applied to the big and small versions of technical things, such as the blades of a Swiss knife, where the bigger blade is called *ayinā*, the explanation being that the bigger blade was more useful and effective. The fact that – in this patrilineal society – the *akānā* (husband, or male) is dubbed the smaller and less useful variant urged a further inquiry into this curious use of *ayi* (‘mother’) as the index of superiority, mastership and ownership.

What makes people call a smith *ayindawo*, (lit. the mother of the house of fire)? In modern settings this may lead to strange ambiguities. In the past a man envisaged the house (*anda*) as the woman’s domain. A polygamous man would build houses for each of his wives and move from one to the other to spend the night, without viewing himself as the house owner. She was the *ayinā* and at her death the house would be destroyed. But in modern times the more permanent houses along the roads are owned by men who now may call themselves the owner, *ayinā* (lit. the mother). To assess this we must first look at some religious aspects and the specific sociology of the maternal kinship ties.

Banda religious life is less spectacular, but no less complex than in many African societies. The term *ayi* appears on several levels. We saw that priests of a shrine – be they a man or woman – are called the *ayi* of the deity. The most important of these is the *ayiyewo*, the priest of the patrilineal’s guardian deity (*yewo*, which is different from paternal ancestors). All clan members rely on *yewo* for their wellbeing. But there are other deities (*ayō*) that transcend the patrilineal focus. They may be nature spirit, such as *yavoro* or *ayevri*, the sky god of rains, but more typically spirits that are said to fight witchcraft. But none has the outspoken transcendence we find with *lingu*, in the feminine domain. While all clan members are given the protection of the paternal *yewo*, we find a maternal protection called *lingu* and transmitted in female line. A woman gives it to her daughters to pass it on to theirs, usually in the form of a copper ring. A son may also receive it in case of fatal threat, but he cannot pass it on. The *lingu* is a protective spirit that has no other priest, but the mothers themselves. The term *ayilingu* does not refer to a human priest(ess), but to the deity

itself, which is considered a supremely protecting god and in the eyes of many, the equivalent of the white man's God. This actually means that in a patrilineal society the core religious instance is feminine.

But an even greater enigma than this religious role of the feminine is the intriguing use of this kinship term for 'mother', not just to refer to the gender of living beings, but much wider, to social functions that are occupied by men and even seem typical of men.

### *g. Summarizing*

So as to situate the Banda Infanta, the adolescent *ganja*, let me summarize the above, first by noting two basic divides. The *ganja* rites apply for girls and boys alike what we might call a vertical and a horizontal divide. From being part of the ancestral domain they enter an earthly gender-coded life so as to play the sexual roles, which the horizontal divide between siblings of opposite sex (*akoba*) symbolizes. Ideologically the male perspective is privileged by the emphasis on patrilineal emblems and taboos. The threats of witchcraft are also calculated from male perspective; but the perception of space and life cycles is remarkably balanced. We further note the weight given to the crucial role of the female emblem *lingu* and its deity *eyilingu*<sup>9</sup>, to the image of *ə'u*, and most strikingly the use of the term *əyi*.

In a society with minimal economic and political diversification and where kinship ties linked to marital bond dominate social communication, the role of motherhood is bound to be of prime semantic importance. Even though myriads of details on the semantic range of *əyi* are beyond the scope of this limited article, we are in position to ponder this term for 'mother' in relation to the message implied in the *ganja* rite for the Banda Infanta, so different from the Western Infanta.

## 2. The *əyi* mastery of the cultural domain

The gripping place of *əyi* in the Banda semantic scheme, as a noun, an adjective, and a prefix deserves a thorough analysis that is beyond this tentative sketch. It not only holds a basic role in the definition of kinship dominating the social life, but also plays a pivotal part in the people's rapport to material values and determines the appreciation of these material values themselves. So, when the girl at her *ganja* ceremony enters her maternal potential, she is arguably rising to a state of crucial significance.

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<sup>9</sup> Early missionaries have viewed *lingu* as people's spiritual soul, transcending the agnatic clan structures and their protective *yewo*. A ritual for the newly wed woman may illustrate the sexual focus of this *lingu*. Soon after the wedding the woman will catch a catfish and take it back to her home and her father will put a piece of the cooked fish on the *lingu* and into her mouth. This assures a speedy pregnancy and symbolizes, not so much the paternal control, but rather the priority given to fertility and motherhood. It is to undo the threat her people might be suspected to pose to her husband and his group. And similarly, the father of a newborn ailing child will actively partake in a rite of transmitting the protective *lingu*.

So as to grasp the feminine key to this semantic cluster we must therefore study its use as a prefix expressing control and 'mastership'. We saw that the priestly ranks are topped by the *əyiyewo*, the priest of the clan deity (*yewo*), who will be the one to open the yearly season of hunts with fire, preceding the agricultural work on the scorched patches. At each hunt, both he and the priests that follow in an established order will receive choice pieces of the animals killed. The priests – some of them women – have to take responsibility for their fire and, at that occasion, they are called *əyikeko ewo*, lit. 'mother' of the bush fire. They are assisted by the *əyitadja*, the master of the torch (*tadja*), whose task it is to prevent the fire from raging wild, by deciding where to ignite the controlling safety corridors. Whereas the prefix *əyi* for the priest marks both a symbolic power and a ministry, in the latter case it designates a technical role. The lord of the torch is like the *əyindawo*, the smith in technical control of the *ndawo* (house of fire). The semantic core of the prefix, therefore, is not to be sought in a notion of power or a ritual. Someone who is *əyi* of whatever entity does not speak of it in the terms of authority. And alternatively, the *makonji*, the village chief – imposed on the village in colonial times – is never described as the *əyi* of whatever power, except, ironically, that he counts as possibly the most dangerous *əyiəndrò* (witch). A really commanding authority is expressed not by *əyi* but rather by the male term *akɔ*, in various expressions. Thus, the thumb is said to be *akɔne*, the male among the fingers, which commands the others. This brings us to the explanation of these two terms in respect of the drums. The high-pitched small drum cited as *akɔ* is said to command the rhythm, whereas the low-pitched big slit-drum (*əyi*) is said to cause the visceral sense of vibrating life, which the dance and music is supposed to effectuate. This also holds a clue to the puzzling variety of words starting with the prefix *əyi*. In philosophical terms it might be expressed as what activates and enlivens the essence of the noun's potential, be this positive or, as in the case of *əyiəndrò* (witch), negative.

Here, the popular etymology proves enlightening. The word and prefix *əyi* were explained to me as related to the verb *yi*, to desire, love, or strive after. The meanings female, fruitful, and big are never read as imposing, powerful and mighty, as if to suggest that the patriarchal aspect of the agnatic lineage system were fake. The idea of matriarchy is dismissed and the claim that *əyilingu* is truly the equivalent of the Christian Supreme God was not to convey a suggestion of authoritarian power. In a comment on the male-female polarities in nature, the even and uneven numbers were dubbed female and male respectively. This was explained by relating the verb *yi* to the number four in the female physiology of two loving breast and two vaginal labia; whereas three was related to the penis, commanding the testicles to direct the sperm distilled by digesting the food. The imagery of parallelism in the female body is thus linked to even numbers and to the idea of love (*yi*) and alliance. By contrast, the uneven suggests notions of command and strife, to be associated with the verb *ko* (to cut)<sup>10</sup>. My suggestion that the latter might be behind the kinship term *koba* was

<sup>10</sup> The connection between the verb *yi* (love) and the woman's *labia* reminds us of the feminist ar-

met with a wry smile expressing, it seemed, the ambivalence of the brother-sister relation (*koba*). While belonging together, the *akoba* are forced, after the painful cutting experience of the initiation (*ganja*), to forget their childhood bond and observe avoidance.

Although these popular etymologies were accepted by some older villagers, the implications on a wider scale met with apprehension, notably in the case of the prefix *ayi* with its wide-ranging application that appear to contradict the very basis of the agnatic kinship system. Which explanation is there for patrilineal institutions, centered on the paternal ancestors and clan taboos, to take a maternal value as a pivotal code? While the *a'u*-type of relaxed joking can easily be defended in the Banda mental map as counterbalancing the threat of hostile witchcraft, hesitations arise when the informants are asked to explain the wide use of *ayi* in designating even male control and ownership.

### 3. The Banda enigma

The local etymology and explanation of the enigmatic use of ‘mother’, at least, ascertains that the *ganja* girl, the ‘Banda Infanta’ is not made to view herself as a ploy in male machinations. But it also shows that a true interpretation of the peculiar female prefix must avoid easy tagging<sup>11</sup>. There is no sign of devaluing the male role, let alone a suggestion of structural homosexuality. Rather than suggesting a pre-eminence of either gender, this typical signifier appears to point to a creative balance deserving our further investigation. Clearly, any Banda woman desires to have her man (*akɔ*) and real fears mainly concern the witchcraft (*andrò*) that impedes the fulfillment of one’s personal vocation (*andrò*). It might seem that *akɔ* and *ayi* form a negative-positive polarity that men try to twist into their favor. But even if some tales on the prankster Tere – the epithetical *a'u* figure – contain such attempts, they always end in hilarious failure, sending the anti-hero back up as Orion in the sky and leaving the audience to continue their complementary social roles, as described in the imagery of the food chain leading to the woman’s gestation of the man’s sperm into an embryo to swell in her<sup>12</sup>. The hypothesis that this use of *ayi* for

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gument advanced by Irigaray to point out the constant bond between women and love. The valuation of even and odd numbers varies in Africa. But scholars themselves may add to the confusion. In her study on *Oracles*, Retel-Laurentin on pp.105-6 claims Jaulin’s study on the Sara in Tchad to say that even stands for positive alliance and odd for war, whereas her bibliography on p.378 quotes him to say the very opposite.

<sup>11</sup> If the word Banda also means truth, it must be noted that we are dealing here with an ineffable truth of the most basic male-female differentiation being surmounted in one denominator. The etymology of *infant*, *infanta*, *enfant*, just like the Polish *niemowlę* refers to speechlessness.

<sup>12</sup> The Greek root of embryo speaks of swelling (*bruein*), which returns in many European languages such as *bru* (French: daughter in law), *bride*, *bruid*, *Braut* (English, Dutch, German), which tallies the



male positions parallels the agnatic grip on the child is not supported by any facts and is rejected off hand by the Banda. Similarly, the idea of an ancient matriarchy is also rejected as preposterous.

What we are left with is the search for a common denominator linking the various uses of the term *ayi*, and for the semantic value of the title a Banda girl longs for as she undergoes the *ganja* ritual on the way to her status of *ayi*? Rather than fathoming a constant male-female rivalry for ascendancy and power, the Banda use a model of synergy around the multifaceted term *ayi*, which in philosophical terms may seem comparable to the phenomenological idea of the 'other' as embodiment of the infinite which Levinas termed the 'feminine' in his attempt to counterbalance the dominating male perspective that haunted both existentialism and structuralism as well as the ethnology and psychoanalysis in Europe's late-colonial, post-war circles. Within the limited space available, I wish to pursue this perspective and connect it further to the opening offered by René Girard's mimetic theory, in line with my earlier contribution to this journal<sup>13</sup>.

The special Banda use of *ayi* partly supports Scubla's critique of Girard, of psychology and anthropology that I mentioned in that article, and which he has recently elaborated upon<sup>14</sup>. But it leaves us with the enigma of a society being aware of the feminine superior input – biologists might say: her larger gametes – while stressing the agnatic principle. This paradox appears to presume a two party commitment to a semantic value implied in the term *ayi* which has a far-reaching cultural inference, suggesting a root in the originary scene. The origins of humanity were linked to sexual arrangements by Freud as a violent solution of libidinal feud and by Lévi-Strauss as a male-dominated exchange pattern, to which Girard objected that they both ignored the sacrificial-religious mechanism that took shape in human scapegoating habits. The pervading mimetic nature of humans, based in prominent mirror neurons, increasingly led to conflicts fatally affecting the community, if it were not for the arbitrary sacrifices that neutralized rivalries. Girard saw the sexual rivalry as an instance of appropriative drives. But if the survival of the community beyond conflicts is the urge behind ethics, it may be argued that the care of reproductive offspring holds a special place and that the interdependence of the sexes is the very root of 'alterity'. In this sense the term *ayi* may represent, in the sense of Levinas' *La Femme*, the life-containing value that both genders are committed to. When it stands for some ownership, either by men or women, it represents the view that the owner has hold of that reality so as to let it come to fruition. Rooted in the originary seen

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Banda imagery of the sperm accumulating into a fetus.

<sup>13</sup> See W. Eggen, *Girard's gender neutrality and faithful feminism*, „Studia Gdańskie” XXXII (2013), p. 189-206. Emmanuel Levinas penned his disputed vision of the feminine in *Totalité et l'Infini* (The Hague 1961, p.128)

<sup>14</sup> See Lucien Scubla, *Giving Life, Giving death*, East Lansing 2016.

where rivalry over a woman's fertile gametes was neutralized by the community's forceful intervention, it implies a measure of commonality, of which the girl, the Infanta entering her fertile life, is made aware of being the prime depositor. Recent primate studies have suggested that males increasingly adopted assisting roles in the growing load of education and that females might have accepted their dependent position on that ground. But if gender conflicts are rife in that situation, the Banda term *ayi* suggests, just like Velasquez' whispering to Margarita, that her true value is contained in the treasure she exhibits, but which ineffably transcends the diurnal denominators that underpin all languages. While the Spanish royal couple may still think of the Infanta in terms of clan exchanges, Velasquez may offer an alternative that resounds with insights in Central Africa.

## Conclusion

The Banda social order 'without rulers', in its idiomatic linguistic system term *ayinə*, harbors a social mechanism and a truth about the two-gender solidarity that, from its originary setting, has continued to warrant humanity against the odds of differentiation that lead most sexually organized life forms into harsh rivalries. Yet, the very term *infanta* – like the Polish *niemowlę* and many parallels – suggests that this basic 'infantile' truth is beyond 'being spoken' openly, and is factually contradicted in formal cultural rules and daily discourses, as happens even in the so-called enlightened systems. It may need artists and visionaries such as Velasquez to bring it within our awareness, even if codification in legal structures may remain beyond human reach, thus allowing the bourgeois observer of the depicted scene to frame his order and calling the Banda term for mastership 'odd'. Girard's critique of the cultural patterns as half-hearted means to control social rivalries, as explained in previous issues of *Studia Gdańskie* seem to be helpful to overcome this enigma, in ways that exceed the space available here.

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