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ARTICLE

Cosmic Imaginations of the Intra-Uterine

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Since the 1970s, theories by feminist psychoanalysts trained in the Lacanian school have highlighted the repression of the maternal in Western societies, deemed necessary to enter the symbolic realm and to become a full subject. Most recently, Bracha Ettinger has contributed to this strand of thought by developing the concept of the matrix as a primary stratum of subjectivization that is part of an enlarged symbolic besides the phallic stratum. Modelled on intimate intra-uterine sharing the matrix is a transformative borderspace of encounter which can be accessed by art practice. This article deals with a non-Western society: rural Punu society in Congo-Brazzaville, where the intra-uterine is part of the symbolic through the idiom of waterspirit beings and where relation to this waterworld and re-immersion in it are cultivated in collective song-dance rituals. It shows in detail how Punu imagery of the waterspirit world and the song-dance practices related to it give body to the matrixial, as viewed by Ettinger, in a way that is fully integrated in society and coexists with other non-matrixial dynamics.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, theories by feminist psychoanalysts trained in the Lacanian school have highlighted the repression of the maternal in Western societies, exploring thoughts and concepts that acknowledge the importance of a maternal sphere in relation or opposition to the phallic symbolic realm. Through the notions of the semiotic and the chora, Julia Kristeva (1980) describes a primary mode of sense-making that originates in contact with the maternal body: whereas the symbolic refers to the syntactic and denotative aspects of language, the semiotic is a rhythmic articulation present in the cries, vocalisations, and gestures of the infant and actualised in poetic language. Although Kristeva acknowledges the importance of the chora as semiotic space-time, which is chronologically anterior and synchronically transversal to the phallic symbolic, she nevertheless maintains that there is a need for its repression – which is never fully achieved – through abjection of the maternal body. Else, especially for women, psychosis results. Her essay ‘Stabat Mater’ (1985) textually produces a rupture – a scar – between a theoretical discussion of Mother Mary and a poetic attempt to describe the disturbing and fragmenting – albeit delightful – experience of pregnancy and motherhood.

In a far more critical stance towards Western patriarchal structures, Luce Irigaray (1985) deeply questions the need for one to sever the maternal in order to become a full subject. In her view, the rejection of the mother is a means for men to create a false and limited sense of autonomy based on a denial of the human being who gave life to them and was their first object of desire. For women, this results – painfully – in the impossibility of developing a valued sexual identity. Hence, she wonders where the much-needed imaginary and symbolic of the intra-uterine life and first body encounter with the mother can be found in our society (Irigaray 1991). In a dialogue with biologist H  l  ne Rouch, Irigaray returns to this issue, dismissing the common view of pregnancy as fusion. In an attempt to develop a symbolic that is respectful of prenatal dynamics, she describes the complex mechanism of adjustment that unfolds between mother and foetus through the regulating presence of the placenta (Irigaray 1993).

More recently, Bracha Ettinger (2006a) has contributed to developing an alternative perspective on the mother-infant bond as one of original fusion and subsequent rejection. Through her notion of the matrix, she steers the usual connotation of the uterus toward that of a '*transforming borderspace of encounter of the co-emerging I and the neither fused nor rejected uncognized non-I*' (Ettinger 2006a, p. 64). She further elaborates on the specific dynamics of this matrixial borderspace in innovative or newly defined terms such as borderlinking, encounter-event, copoietic web, distance-in-proximity, and impossibility of not-sharing. As with Kristeva's chora, the matrix pre-exists the phallic stratum of subjectivisation. Meanwhile, unlike Kristeva's view of the need to repress the semiotic, which hence only exists in the mode of transgressive irruption within the symbolic, Ettinger considers the matrixial as a primary stratum of subjectivisation that is part of an enlarged symbolic and which continues to coexist alongside the phallic stratum. In her view, evocations and irruptions of prenatal encounters and emergences of matrixial imprints are not psychotic. They only become akin to psychosis 'when they have no symbolic access whatsoever in a culture that takes them for non-sense' (Ettinger 2006a, p. 142).

Like Irigaray, Ettinger suggests in this passage that the repression of the maternal, in particular the intra-uterine, and its debarring from the symbolic realm characterises contemporary Western culture in its patriarchal features and need not be a universal fact. This suggestion remains hypothetical, though, since no alternative is presented. Through an anthropological study of an African society, this article endeavours to show that the intra-uterine can indeed be part of a society's symbolic make-up. In this way, it points to the interest of a cross-cultural view on the maternal and contributes to preventing generalizations based on Western phenomena in disregard of their historical and cultural specificity. In particular, the article deals with rural Punu society in Congo-Brazzaville, where the intra-uterine is part of the symbolic through the idiom of waterspirit beings and where relation to this waterworld and re-immersion in it are cultivated in collective song-dance rituals. Punu society is a matrilineal society and hence explicitly posits the mother-child bond as the critical generational link and the condition for society's continuity and well-being. This

importance of the maternal extends to the cosmic realm. Waterspirits are held to reside in pools, conceived of in analogy to the prenatal realm, and are deemed responsible for bringing prosperity and good luck in fishing and hunting. Each village has a main pool, owned by its dominant matrilineage, and inhabited by a tutelary spirit. Ritual celebrations, which precede the collective fishing of the pool or the birth or death of twins, considered to be waterspirits, are the means through which the relation with this spirit world is kept alive so as to assure wellbeing for the village. Extensive ethnographic fieldwork¹, comprising participation, observation and interviews², has allowed me to conduct an in-depth study of rural Punu society, the spirit celebrations and the related cosmology (Plancke 2014a).

In order to explore how in Punu society a symbolic, cosmic space, attuned to prenatal maternal experience, is imaginally and ritually brought into being, I will present my ethnographic data in link with Ettinger's work³. In developing her matrixial theory, Ettinger gives detailed descriptions of the specific dynamics of a realm that pre-exists and co-exists with the phallic realm and is related to the intra-uterine. Using her innovative concepts in resonance with my observations, experiences and ethnographic findings makes it possible to highlight how the Punu cosmology on waterspirits and the song-dance rituals dedicated to them create a culturally specific symbolic account of the prenatal maternal. Besides the analogy between the matrix and the intra-uterine realm, some elements of Ettinger's theory make it especially appropriate for being applied to Punu spirit reality and practice. Ettinger acknowledges a cosmic dimension within the matrixial. Matrixial copoiesis, in her

¹ Fieldwork lasting a total of 20 months (from May to October 2005 and from June 2006 to September 2007) was carried out in the district of Nyanga, which is mainly inhabited by Punu.

² Due to the influence of Christian, mainly prophetic, churches seeking to eradicate "traditional" practices considered to be witchcraft, the waterspirit beliefs and rituals have severely weakened in the Punu region during the last decades. Still, besides some incomplete, rather small celebrations, I had the opportunity to observe and participate in a funeral ritual for an elderly twin in the village of Mougoudi in August 2005 which gathered a large number of women and, besides the specific songs and dances, also included typical ritual acts for twin funerals (Plancke 2012, 2014b). I also have been able to interview about 25 mothers of twins and spirit healers.

³ Anthropologists Paul Vandebroek (2000) and René Devisch (2006) have also drawn on Ettinger's matrixial theory to examine artistic and therapeutic practices by or for women in African societies, as well as the ethnographic method itself as a mode of intercultural borderlinking.

view, is a 'copoiesis with the Other and with the Cosmos' (Ettinger 2005, p. 708). The importance of art is another crucial element justifying its use in interpreting Punu spirit celebrations. Ettinger came to her theory through art practice, notably painting, and explicitly states that the matrixial can be accessed through the arts, including music and dance (Ettinger 2006a, p. 143). Finally, Ettinger emphasises that although the matrixial is not bound to gender, women nevertheless have privileged access to it because of their capacity for child-bearing (Ettinger 2006a, p. 70, 143, 182). Punu song-dance rituals for the waterspirits are primarily but not exclusively practiced by women. Moreover, the spirits themselves, while being male and female, are mostly referred to as mothers in the songs.

By introducing the term matrixial, Ettinger is able to delineate a field of dynamics linked to the intra-uterine encounter which differs from phallic ways of relating to the maternal without however discarding the latter. Similarly, in this article, I will show how Punu imagery of the waterspirit world and the song-dance practices related to it give body to the matrixial, as viewed by Ettinger, while also accounting for how it coexists with other non-matrixial dynamics. The analysis will proceed in three steps. I will first detail the Punu view of the waterspirit world in its matrixial features, beginning with a description of the matrix according to Ettinger and continuing with a detailed illustration of the Punu waterworld in its resonances with the matrixial paradigm. I will then examine Punu ritual practices and explore how matrixial dynamics operate within them. Finally, I will evoke the alliance or opposition with non-matrixial, phallic dynamics in these rituals, in the social structures they relate to, and in other collective imaginations and practices.

The Punu waterspirit world: a cosmic, life-awakening borderspace

The matrixial according to Bracha Ettinger

Ettinger conceives of the matrix, which bears reference to the prenatal encounter and the early mother-infant bond, as a 'dynamic borderspace of active/passive co-emergence *with-in* and *with-out* the uncognized other' (Ettinger 2006a, p. 64). It is a space of 'jointness-in-separateness' that is 'composed by linking and relating'

(Ettinger 2006a, p. 48, 85), a space 'of transmission and reattunement by which I and non-I co-emerge, co-change and co-fade within a shareable web' (Ettinger 2006b, p. 219). In the process of matrixial co-emergence, 'distance-in-proximity is continuously reattuned' (Ettinger 2006b, p. 220) and the co-emerging elements are 'borderlinked by frequencies, waves, resonance, and vibrations' (Ettinger 2006a, p. 186). Desire here is a desire for this very process of borderlinking as an ongoing, continuous modulation (Ettinger 2006a, p. 186). As a space of inclusive becoming, co-implication, and co-generation, the matrix is transformative. It is never static, but rather 'the locus of a process of multidirectional change and exchange on the borderlines of perceptibility' (Ettinger 2006a, p. 65). Metramorphosis is the name Ettinger gives to this process of change, an 'out-of-focus passageway of transgressive borderlinks that transform, simultaneously and differently, co-emerging partial-subjects, partial Others, partial-objects' (Ettinger 2006a, p. 65). Metramorphosis is a creative principle, a 'copoetic web of transformations' (Ettinger 2006b, p. 219) 'created by and further creating relations-without-relating on the border of appearing and disappearing' (Ettinger 2006a, pp. 140–141).

The matrixial borderspace, in its link to the intra-uterine, is 'modelled upon a particular conception of feminine/prebirth intimate sharing' (Ettinger 2006b, p. 219). Co-emerging elements 'share and are shared by the same vibrating and resonating environment' (Ettinger 2006a, p. 186); they 'ebb and flow' within 'the same resonance field' (Ettinger 2009, pp. 21–22). This sharing is an act that cannot be refused; there is 'an impossibility of not-sharing with the other' (Ettinger 2006a, p. 182), which is both empowering and fragilising. Although the matrixial co-emergence contains a healing power, it is also potentially traumatising 'because of the transgression of individual boundaries that it initiates and entails, and because of the self-relinquishment and fragilization' (Ettinger 2005, p. 705). Indeed, reattunement in the matrix cannot be voluntarily controlled. It does not depend on 'verbal communication, intentional organization or inter-subjective relationships' (Ettinger 2005, p. 703), but is rather a 'trans-subjective transmission' (Ettinger 2006b, p. 218) which generates 'affective, empathic, intuitive and even quasi-telepathic knowledge' (Ettinger 2005, p. 704) that does not rely on conscious decision. This

knowledge arises by way of 'sharing in fields of resonance and influence, and in one another's pulsative intensities – sharing in terms of wavelength, frequencies and vibrations not perceivable by the senses but transmissible and translateable by the mind'. In this sharing, 'I and non-I are crossprinting psychic traces in one another' (Ettinger 2005, p. 704).

However, this sharing and the transmissibility it entails do not extend automatically to everyone. Rather, they occur in a 'fluid jointness in severality' (Ettinger 2005, p. 704). This 'severality' is a necessary result of the 'affective shareability' that characterises the matrix: an encounter must have taken place (Ettinger 2006a, p. 196). In this sense, Ettinger also defines the matrix as 'a sphere of encounter-events' (Ettinger 2006b, p. 219). Affect operates specifically in the prolongation and delay of such an encounter-event, allowing metamorphosis to occur (Ettinger 2005, p. 707). Hence, metamorphosis is always an 'affective communication' (Ettinger 2006a, p. 43). This affective dimension underscores the sense-giving potential of the metamorphosis: 'Matrixial affect indexes a transformation and an exchange, and a matrixial phenomenon testifies that such a passage has taken place and that a minimal meaning has been created' (Ettinger 2006a, p. 193). It should be added that matrixial affects have specific qualities. The three major affects Ettinger distinguishes are awe, 'com-passion' and 'fascinace', defining them as 'primordial accesses to the other and the Cosmos' (Ettinger 2009, p. 1). While 'com-passion' and awe breed respect, 'fascinace' is 'the aesthetic duration of affective and effective participation-transformation within a subjectivising instant that actualizes a matrixial potentiality for borderlinking' (Ettinger 2009, p. 2). In this instance, it inspires 'feel-knowledge that we are transconnecting with the miracle of coming-into-life' (Ettinger 2009, p. 10). It is not death that is revealed here, but '*non-life as the not yet emerged, the not yet becoming alive*' (Ettinger 2005, p. 709).

The intra-uterine in Punu cosmology

The waterspirit world holds a vital place in Punu cosmology. This world elaborates on the intra-uterine in ways that, I advance, particularly resonate with Ettinger's description of the matrix. As aquatic beings, Punu waterspirits dwell in pools and sometimes

in rivers, manifesting themselves in waves, whirlpools, and the rising of the waters or tides. Their universe is one of movement, of flow in movement; these beautiful, white, human-like beings with their long, flowing hair are never static. When fleetingly seen in a vision, they move with the waves and pass by in their pirogues, leaving only a stone as a sign of their presence for the dazzled viewer. They can also take the form of the huge catfish *ngwangi* that suddenly comes to the surface for breath, only to dive back underwater again immediately. The waterspirits' presence is further suggested by strong, unexpected winds near a pool of water, animating the pool's surroundings. Less directly, a number of terrestrial and celestial animals hint at the presence of the elusive spirit beings, especially huge snakes – like the python with its unmistakable track, and the mamba betrayed by the laughing squirrel – but also the forest-dwelling grey parrot, who now and then pops up in the village and leaves behind a red feather from its tail. Even humans can be spirits: twins and disabled children originate from the spirit world or are assimilated with spirits, and their birth generally causes torrential rainfall. Because these children never fully belong to the human world, they always long to return to the world of the spirits; they do so when they are overly frustrated, leaving the humans disconnected from and disattuned to the spirit world that once was theirs as well. Indeed, all children come from the spirit world: I was repeatedly told that they 'come in the water', and the waterspirits drive out the amniotic fluid during childbirth. Newborn babies sometimes smile in an unfocused, absent manner, indicating to the Punu that they have not yet left this world completely and still long to be in the world of the spirits. Babies are massaged by their mothers every day in order to soften the pains of sudden separation from their originary water environment.

The Punu waterspirit world is one of vanishing and re-emerging, of appearance and disappearance. It can never be caught, but instead is only accessed in a glimpse, a trace, in a being that can never be made to stay but leaves as it pleases. These unpredictable, ephemeral encounters happen everywhere – mostly in or near the pools where waterspirits live, but also on the land surrounding them. If there is a sign – some stirring of the water, a swift meteoric change, or an animal that unexpectedly

passes by, betraying itself through a sighting by a fellow being and in some cases leaving traces or some tiny part of itself – only then is a linking with the spirit world possible, a borderlinking where the spirits' presence is felt but never fully accessed. This linking changes – transforms – the being that is connected to this originary, life-awakening world. Merely catching a glimpse of them, feeling their nearness, or suspecting their presence yields well-being and prosperity – game, fish, a good harvest, children, or money – for oneself or for another as the spirits please. Those who receive visions or bear twins are gifted with intuitive knowledge and acquire previously inaccessible healing powers. Dreams also ensure a continuous transmission with spirits or twins: through dreams, healers acquire knowledge about which medicinal herbs to use. It is also through the medium of dreams that twins inform people about a gift that is awaiting them. These dreams and intuitions, like the spirits themselves, appear in an affectively charged dynamic of borderlinking for those still close to the infant state. An open mind is required to achieve this dynamic, as the mind is situated on top of the head near the fontanel. Hence, participation in the spirit world is never impossible for anyone; it extends itself in a characteristically wavelike manner to those who do not distance themselves completely, but instead remain in wonder and open to its manifestation. This state of openness is fragilising: receiving visions of spirits is usually accompanied by headaches and fevers, and can even lead to madness.

However, if the relation with the spirit world is to remain unbroken, transmission cannot be refused. Dreams that come in close proximity to this life-awakening world can only be welcomed. That which spirits want to offer must be accepted; their gifts cannot be consumed without sharing amongst other people. It is necessary to let oneself be involved in this world, to confide in it, and to be willing to share indiscriminately what is offered – be it for oneself or for others. Just as humans suffer when they refuse waterspirits, spirits likewise suffer from rejection by humans and can decide to leave their pools if they do not feel welcomed and longed for. A mutual passion is needed – a passion for the very linking between human and non-human worlds. At first sight, it seems that humans mainly depend on spirits, like children on

their nourishing, life-giving mothers. Indeed, spirits are often addressed as 'mama' and imagined as nourishing beings who provide fish and game. However, they are also conceived of as whimsical children whom humans have to take care of and satisfy. In this mutual process of caring and longing, life is at stake: when the relation between humans and spirits is interrupted, barrenness and famine follow. This does not mean that death is antithetical to the spirit world. On the contrary, death is fully part of the spirit world, but like rotteness, it is seen as engendering life in a never-ending cyclical process of renewal.

Re-attuning to the waterspirit world through singing and dancing

Rhythmically becoming the spirits' life flow

For Bracha Ettinger, painting is the primary way to access the matrixial borderspace. Her matrixial theory issued from her practice as a painter and her subsequent analysis of it in her notebooks (Ettinger 2006a, p. 94); thus, viewing her artwork allows for a direct experience of what the matrixial is like. Ettinger's paintings are typified most by their fading quality. The images, which are taken from photocopies stopped midway through and therefore caught in the process of appearing, are blurred and seem to be drifting away. Overlaid oil paint, in its slight transparency, makes it possible for one to see the images while never fully accessing them. In this sense, her art 'functions to preserve the evanescence of things' (Massumi 2006, p. 204), rendering it rhythmic. As Brian Massumi (2006, pp. 207–208) states, Ettinger's painting is concerned with rhythm before vision; it is more fundamentally vocal than visual. What is presented is less the image 'than the sensation of its remaining in its fading, re-arising: rhythm' (Massumi 2006, p. 203). Ettinger recognises the importance of rhythm to the matrixial, stating, 'The originary metramorphoses in the field of joint matrixial sensibility and affectivity are connected to oscillations of touch and pressure, fluctuations of motions and balance (kinesthesia), changing amplitudes of voices and light-and-dark variations' (Ettinger 2006a, pp. 65–66). This kind of rhythmic repetition has nothing to do with mere imitation, but is rather 'a constant dis/appearing' (Ngianni 2009, p. 2). In its ongoing fluctuations, it generates

something new in a spiralic manner; according to Ettinger, all repetitions are occasions for differentiating in the matrixial space of transmission and transference. Cycles of repetition open into spiralic transformations (Ettinger 2007, p. 130).

Rhythm is of primordial importance in regard to the Punu waterspirits, as it is the primary mode of accessing their evanescent world. This rhythm is mainly vocal and kinetic: it is through singing and dancing that humans connect with the spirits, who are said to be especially fond of these rhythmic expressions. In Punu society, celebrations for the waterspirits are held on two occasions: before the collective fishing in the pool of the tutelary spirit of the village and upon the birth or death of twins.⁴ These celebrations never happen at the initiative of humans themselves: the spirit has to send a dream giving their approval for the fishing to take place, and the birth or death of twins are always unforeseen events. When the nearness of the spirits and their willingness and desire to connect with humans are manifested, only then can humans organise a celebration in response. The main component is a circular song-dance performance; in the case of preparation for collective fishing, the performance takes place near the pool around the spirit's shelter, and on occasions involving twins, the performance occurs around the newborn twins or the body of the deceased. A large majority of the participants in the dance are women, and the dances are conducted by a woman – either a mother of twins or a waterspirit healer – who introduces songs and enjoins the congregation to dance.

A special repertoire of songs is dedicated to spirits and twins. Compared to other songs, spirit songs are characterised by a wavelike, undulating motion and a high degree of repetition. Their structure is responsorial: a mother of twins or a spirit healer introduces a song as a soloist, and the remainder of the participants repeats the refrain as a chorus. The soloist then adds new improvisations while the chorus continues to repeat the refrain, producing an echo that resonates with each solo phrase and extends its vibrations of sound. These refrains mainly consist of descriptions of the waterspirit world in its diverse sensorial characteristics. They evoke phenomena and animals reminiscent of it in their specific way of being and glorify the

⁴ For a detailed discussion of Punu waterspirit and twin rituals, see Plancke (2012, 2014b).

twins' parents for taking care of the spirit children. This vivid evocation allows the participants to reconnect with their ordinary world and feel part of it once more. The smooth succession of images and songs, connected without interruption or by introducing a short, concluding formula that does not break the rhythm, creates the feeling of a fluid and constantly extending universe that integrates all those who are willing to share in it. During the singing, participants gradually enter this imaginal reality, but never reach its core. Indeed, the spirits themselves are not described in the refrains; they are only cited by the soloist as a result of the refrain's capacity to borderlink with the spirit world. The transition between refrain and improvisation literally attests to this borderlinking quality: the soloist begins her new phrase while the chorus is putting down the refrain, and vice versa. This small overlap links the two parts fluidly and allows for the continuous attuning necessary for creating a shared experience in co-presence.

During a celebration, the singing is accompanied by the sound of a bell specific to the occasion, which produces constant rattling and clinking. The singing is further musically supported by a drummer, who plays a rhythmical formula that is co-metrical with the songs and is heightened by a marked beat on the first pulsation of each period. Through its repetitive, circular structure, the dancing further amplifies the sense of a continuing, intensifying movement, produced by the songs and the musical accompaniment, as well as the possibility this gives for attuning, resonance, and borderlinking. What is most important for participants is to keep the same rhythm as they continuously move in the circle, following one another. First, they mark one or three steps while slightly advancing, with upper body inclined and arms bent. They then propel themselves and lift up the heels on a second, more marked step, simultaneously redressing the body and letting the arms drop. Through the repetition of these steps, in a whirling, seemingly never-ending progression, dancers progressively co-attune, not only through perceiving the movements of one another but especially by sensing the energetic intensity and vibrations emanating from their bodies. A heightened dance drive ensues; in being transmitted from one dancer to another, it awakens a shared enthusiasm spreading to all who are present in the event. A refusal of this sharing is not possible – if it occurs, the event threatens to

break down. This is why women who remain seated are enjoined to participate in the singing and dancing, so as to allow for a shared dance motion to arise.

Significantly, the verb which refers to the celebration and dancing, *u kimbe*, is related to the noun *kimbu*. *Kimbu*, which literally means 'big movement', is used in reference to the huge catfish *ngwangi* when it suddenly rises out of the water. Hence, it seems that the dancing during a celebration is meant to produce a commotion similar to that produced by the spirits themselves, in this way allowing participants to attune to their world and partake in it. Over the course of a song-dance event, vocal techniques are used to stimulate dancing and its desired capacity for borderlinking. The singer regularly returns to the refrain instead of adding improvised phrases or repeats a part of it while the chorus completes the remainder. The continuous resounding of the refrain and/or the speeding up of the alternation between lead singer and chorus creates a spiralling dynamic which strengthens the singing, amplifying the resonances and shared vibrations between participants. This in turn intensifies the dancing and enhances its potential for attunement between the dancers and with the spirit world. In this very physical way, by viscerally evoking the feeling of being enveloped in a space of shared being, the dancing generates a continuous, energising motion that creates the sensation of the fluid, cyclical, and life-giving nature of the waterspirit reality.

Separation and longing for the spirits' presence

Ettinger insists that the matrixial borderspace is neither a space of fusion nor rejection. It is a space of '*encounter of the coemerging I and the neither fused nor rejected uncognized non-I*' (Ettinger 2005a, p. 65). Ettinger's use of the hyphenated expressions 'separation-in-jointness', 'distance-in-proximity', and 'relations-without-relating' seeks to evoke this space, which is not marked by a scansion of on/off or presence/absence. However, after birth, 'relations-without-relating are partly transformed and set on a matrixial "track". They are also partly transformed into moments of relating and moments of nonrelating, joining in that way the phallic track of fusion/rejection' (Ettinger 2006a, p. 85). In dealing with the postnatal relation to the mother, Ettinger (2007) further identifies three primal Mother-phantasies: the

phantasies of 'not-enoughness', abandonment, and devouring. 'Not-enoughness' regroupes representations of the 'originary disattunement with the outside into phantasmatic *originary not-enough mother*', abandonment corresponds to the '*primal phantasy of the abandoning mother*', and devouring refers to the '*primal phantasy of the devouring mother*' (Ettinger 2007, p. 106). Under the conditions of postnatal shifting from the primordial matrixial severality, feelings arise that include abandonment, rejection, lack, insufficiency, overwhelming control, domineering, or devouring (Pollock 2009, p. 24).

In Punu song-dance events for the spirits, the gradual intensification of the event triggers two additional performative modes aside from responsorial singing and dancing, notably the monodic song and possession trance. With reference to Ettinger's model, these modes seem to introduce non-matrixial dynamics, linked to a feeling of separation from the mother/the maternal and a desire to join her/it. The monodic song is made up of a succession of long and evenly sung adages whose propelling force flows out in more expressive melismas. In contrast to the call-and-response song, the monodic song has a non-isochronic rhythm and hence includes variable periods that depend on the length of the adage and the subsequent melismas. Alongside adages from the funerary lament, which largely revolve around the pain of separation, the monodic song also contains specific sayings. The adage 'The father is also the child of a mother', for instance, suggests the primordiality of the maternal, while another, which recalls how birds live in couples, situates male-female inclusiveness as a constituent element of the spirit world. Certain sayings forcefully express the cyclical fertility-renewing nature of the spirit world by suggesting that life and death are not opposed in this world. In this sense, the saying 'A very old kapok tree, a kapok tree where a healer was buried, when the healer has putrefied, the tree grows' illustrates how life grows out of dead material. Several adages also celebrate the hunter who, thanks to the spirits, returns home with plenty of game. Conversely, the evocation of the absence of good luck emphasises the importance of honouring the life-giving spirits. Depending on the area where the singer lives, other adages cite specific spirit pools and their environmental characteristics.

The monodic song can only be introduced when the participants are sufficiently carried away by the singing and when the dancing has taken on sufficient strength. It is as if the resonance of the ongoing circular and wave-like motion, in a constantly modulating attunement with the waterspirit world, triggers the realisation of the ultimate separation of humans from this world and awakens the need to bridge this perceived separation. When the lead singer launches into the monodic song by interrupting the responsorial songs, the dance stops and participants literally direct themselves to the centre. Instead of a circular movement echoing the spirit world, a direct appeal is now addressed to the spirit. The song often begins with the expression 'Let's go' (*toondi*), conveying the song's development as a movement towards a desired place. The singing of the adages physically creates an impetus towards something, while the melismas that follow express the deep affective quality of this drive and the subsequent realisation of an ever-present gap. On one occasion, at the beginning of the rainy season, the women were waiting near the pool of the waterspirit Ireyi for the fish there to swim into a newly formed tributary. After a grandmother of twins had sung the monodic song followed by other spirit songs, she gave a personal interpretation of a song usually reserved for mourning ceremonies. Since the woman had been living in town for ten years, she was deeply moved to be near the spirit pool again. However, she was greatly upset by the absence of heavy rains needed for the fish to enter the stream. After expressing her anger to the other women present for not having sung in honour of the spirits as she had done, she asked Ireyi why he refused to give up his fish. Addressing the spirit as 'mama', the grandmother of twins plaintively wondered why she did not reject Ireyi because of this painful abandonment, but then vowed that she could only accept her with her misdeeds and visualised her own death in the absence of her mama Ireyi, whom she imagined was now dying far away from her. By way of culturally specific imagery, this personal interpretation of a song gives voice to what Ettinger (2007) deems 'the phantasy of the abandoning mother'. Significantly, the melismas of the monodic song which preceded this interpretation are not only made up of a succession of sounds, but often include the word 'mame', revealing, in a very explicit manner, the maternal dimension of this desired but ever-vanishing world.

During a celebration, the monodic song is never abruptly finished. When ending the song, the soloist ensures a fluid transition to a responsorial song, and the circular dancing resumes. Hence, the feeling of desire for the spirit world propagated in the audience through the solo song infuses the subsequent singing and dancing, intensifying them and activating their potential to render the spirit world present experientially. From the position of humans separated from the spirit world, the participants are taken with even greater enthusiasm in a movement that imaginably links them with/in the spirit reality. Ideally, in order for a waterspirit celebration to be successful, the dancing not only needs to be intense, but – in the spiralling effect of its all-consuming, whirling movement – it also must awaken possession trances among some participants.⁵ Here, the distance between humans and the spirit world is completely abolished in a moment of fusion in which a human embodies the spirit and lets the spirit speak through her. Although this possession experience is highly desired, as it allows for a direct encounter with the spirit and clears disturbances, it is also experienced negatively. Trance, which gives way to uncoordinated and often violent movements, is generally described as ‘being beaten by the spirit’ and hence evinces a feeling of being overpowered and dominated by an entity more powerful than oneself. During a trance, spirits generally express their dissatisfaction with the lack of respect given to them by humans; hence, spirits are also perceived as children who are never satisfied and never feel sufficiently loved and cared for. Two more of Ettinger’s primal phantasies come to mind here: the phantasy of the devouring, domineering mother and the phantasy of ‘not-enoughness’. However, the emergence of this troubled relation to the spirit world does not negate the matrixial dimension of the event. Whenever a trance occurs, participants increase the force of their singing and dancing in order to restore the sought-after attunement with the spirit world at the very moment it is unsettled. This amplification of actions is done with the precise aim of integrating the disturbing energy of the possessed person into the group’s ongoing rhythmic movement.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of Punu possession trance, see Plancke (2011).

The maternal foundation of Punu social and symbolic order

Maternal belonging and gender complementarity

According to Ettinger, the concepts of matrix and metramorphosis can 'serve to explore the feminine as an otherness beyond the Phallus in psychoanalysis and in works of art, as well as to analyse social phenomena' (Ettinger 1992, p. 179). While she herself has mainly followed the first track, she shares an interesting observation related to the second when she advances that the 'matrixial psychic space concerns shareability yet evades collective community and organized society' (Ettinger 2006b, p. 219). As described above, through the idiom of the waterspirits in Punu society, the matrixial is a dimension of the symbolic that is shared between the members of the community. This shared symbolic is socially institutionalised, which can be deduced from the fact that celebrations are regularly and collectively organised in honour of the spirits; moreover, these celebrations take on a strong ritual character, making them part of an ancestral heritage. More importantly, such celebrations uphold the matrilineal structure of Punu society. This reveals a connection of dynamics related to collective organisation and authority with the previously described matrixial dynamics of the celebrations.

Punu society is divided into nine matrilineal clans. Since the residence principle is patri-virilocal, these clans are geographically dispersed and locally segmented into lineages. Each village is ruled by the dominant matrilineage, which owns the pool of the tutelary waterspirit and the surrounding territory. This matrilineage is ruled by senior male members, and the heritage line, according to the matrilineal principle, goes from maternal uncle to nephew. These social structural arrangements intervene in the previously described spirit celebrations. Before collective fishing – one of the occasions for such celebrations – can take place, the lineage chief needs to give his consent after having received a dream by the spirit. Once this has happened, a path is collectively cleared towards the pool; the shelter for the spirit, built near the pool, is restored and decorated in white and red, the colours dedicated to the spirits. After the female-led celebration, which is needed in order for the spirits to give their full consent through the occurrence of possession trance, the fishing takes place,

supervised by the lineage chief. Strict rules of sharing apply, with the goal of establishing solidarity on the village level. An equal distribution of fish is ensured between inhabitants of the village who belong to the dominant matrilineage and those who are members of other matrilineages.

Similarly, the twin rituals reveal the alliance of matrixial dynamics aimed at borderlinking with the waterspirit world, on the one hand, and dynamics supportive of Punu social structure, on the other. The ritual actions, executed by a ritual specialist who is either a mother of twins or a spirit healer, focus on what is situated at the border between persons, places, or states, in this sense achieving a literal borderlinking. After the birth of twins, the placenta and umbilical cord are kept in a pot along with ashes and kaolin. A few years later, these substances are pounded together into a paste which the twins' parents, accompanied by the person charged with keeping the twins, rub onto their skin. During rituals performed in the event of illness befalling the twins, a medicinal powder made from plants linked to the waterspirits is blown onto the twins' heads, chests, and backs, which for Punu are the liminal zones of opening to the invisible worlds. The twin birth ritual also requires a small garden of trees and plants to be planted together with some hair and nail clippings of the twins' parents. When burying a twin, a second garden is planted in an identical manner, but without the residual bodily substances. In this way, birth and death, both liminal moments of life, are represented as identical passageways between the human and spirit universes. The desire to preserve a continuous link between these universes is further revealed through the custom of throwing large quantities of water on the road when carrying a deceased twin to the cemetery, as well as the custom of keeping the feces of the twin children so it can be thrown into a river. As shown, chanting and dancing – the main activities during rituals dedicated to the twins – realise in a very corporeal way the motion of continuity and flow, so characteristic of the waterworld, and materialise its matrixial dynamics. Simultaneously, the issue of solidarity beyond one's lineage affiliation, which supports social structure, is also addressed, as in the case of the collective fishing. Not only are the parents of twins expected to be generous, altruistic, and respectful

towards these beings, as their children embody the spirits, but the entire village community is also enjoined to assist as a unified whole at twin celebrations. Any individual, unrelated to their lineage affiliation, can experience dreams of good luck sent by twins.

The joining of a matrilineal principle, based on the prominence of the maternal in descent, and a patri-virilocal principle, which asserts male prominence in conjugality, is enacted most distinctively in another dance celebration: *ikoku* dancing.⁶ In this paper, my focus on this rejoicing dance pertains to how it balances matrixial dynamics of borderlinking and co-attuning with a non-matrixial on/off logic, unlike water-spirit dancing, which is more fully aligned to the matrixial. *Ikoku* dancing consists of alternating invitations between two rows of dancers – one of men and one of women – followed by a phase of rhythmic jumping and a sequence of face-to-face hip rotation. Since the jumping phase, which requires the qualities of a hunter, is considered male, and the hip rotation phase – which evokes the similar movement of women during sexual intercourse, ideally leading to pregnancy – is considered female, the dance celebrates gender complementarity as the foundation for conjugal union. Simultaneously, however, because the hip rotation phase is performed by a male-female couple, it evokes the encompassing nature of the matrilineage containing both sexes. What is at stake here is not feminine difference as the difference of the opposite, but rather what Ettinger calls ‘an originary feminine difference’ (Ettinger 2006a, p. 46) linked to the intra-uterine experience of the maternal body. Moreover, the continuous circular hip movement, characteristic of this female phase, calls forth a continuous attuning between the dance partners and hence evinces a matrixial dynamic in opposition to the intermittent, vigorous, and energising steps of the male jumping phase, supported by the drummer’s marked beats which move away from the base rhythm and also come back to it. When the dance is successful, the couple fully surrenders to the circular motion and is carried away by the rhythmic movement in a spiral-like intensification. However, unlike spirit dancing, this state of ecstasy never leads to a trance. Humans remain fully in

⁶ For a detailed discussion of *ikoku* dancing, see Plancke (2010).

the human realm and ultimately celebrate human distinctiveness in connection with the spirits, but not in a mode of complete participation with them. In this sense, rather than forming a metamorphical passageway that directly opens into the spirit world, *ikoku* dancing creates a metaphorical, indirect connection to this world. This metaphorical link is evidenced by the analogy established between dancing, sexuality, and fishing: the dancing human couple mirrors the fertilising capacity of the spirits on a human level and displays a proud attitude similar to the spirit's attitude without fully rejoining their world as in waterspirit dancing.

Anti-social witchcraft and the devouring maternal

In Punu society, the witch typifies the antisocial.⁷ A witch is someone who captures the vital forces of a fellow being out of jealousy and greed in the search for self-aggrandizement, causing illness and death. Instead of reaching the ancestral world, the witch's victim becomes an eternally wandering phantom who remains controlled by the witch. Hence, the witch is at the antipode of the qualities of sharing, generosity, and self-relinquishment, celebrated in the spirit and twin rituals as the basis of social well-being and prosperity. However, as in the world of the spirits, the world of witchcraft is related to the maternal. The person most readily suspected of being a witch is the maternal uncle in regard to his nephew. Witchcraft as such is said to be transmitted in the matrilineage. More importantly, bewitching is seen as an act of devouring someone's vital forces. In the Punu imagination, women are seen as natural witches: they have the capacity to capture men in their vaginas and cause their life force to fade away, reducing them to slave-like phantoms. This kind of imagery visibly echoes Ettinger's primal fantasy of the devouring, domineering mother. Interestingly, most witches actually accused of witchcraft in Punu society are men, notably those who are in positions of authority. Moreover, the witch in his nocturnal wanderings acts like a hunter. He goes out to capture his victims, and the best way to defend oneself from a witch is to put invisible traps around the house. A distinctly male imagery dominates here, as ultimately, the witch is someone who

⁷ For a detailed discussion of Punu witchcraft, see Plancke (2014a).

actively tries to acquire and manipulate the forces of life and death which women naturally possess. In this view, the feminine is associated with death seen in opposition to life, as in classic male-oriented psychoanalytic theory (Pollock 2009, p. 6). In waterspirit imagery, to the contrary, the feminine is part of a life-renewing cycle and encapsulates what Ettinger defines as a 'a sub-symbolic knowledge of growth and decay, utopia and apocalypse, evolution and entropy, living and non-living with-in the cosmic timespace' (Ettinger 2009, p. 28).

Hence, a clear polarity is revealed between the world of the waterspirits – the source of life which integrates death – and the world of witchcraft, which leads to death as destruction. While the former is the basis for the social structure centred around matrilineages, the latter is a perversion of it. However, the opposition between the two worlds is not so clearly defined. The power required to be a witch, which is located in the belly, is also necessary to contact the spirits, according to some of my interlocutors. The presence of both spirits and witches is revealed by similar phenomena. For instance, rain and thunderstorms break out not only upon the birth of twins, but also when a witch seizes his victim and drags him or her to his hiding place. Sudden winds suggest the nearness of both waterspirits and roaming phantoms; snakes are similarly ambiguous. Moreover, many acts which aim to maintain good contact with the waterspirits are also accomplished by either witches or healers treating cases of bewitchment. A witch spits powder on an object belonging to the deceased or on his or her tomb in order to capture the deceased's vital forces; this powder has the same name as twins' medicinal powder and contains similar ingredients. In addition to the gardens planted in front of a house where twins are born and at their funeral, a garden is also planted by the witch at the hiding place of his phantoms. Interestingly, Punu symbolic thought recognises ambivalence and uncertainty in reference to the colour red, whereas white and black symbolise positive and negative values, respectively, in Punu colour symbolism. Red and white are the colours for waterspirit celebrations, while witches rely heavily on black. This shows the different orientations given to a vital power accessible in both fields. One of the advantages of Ettinger's notion of the matrixial in distinction from postnatal

dynamics is precisely that it allows one to see the common basis of Punu views on waterspirits and witches, inasmuch as they are rooted in the maternal, as well as the differences between these views, which result from disparate imaginations of the maternal body.

Conclusion

At the very beginning of my ethnographic fieldwork in Punu communities, I decided to focus on women's dances and activities. However, this was not as easy as I had initially imagined. As a European foreigner, I was immediately approached and surrounded by men and had to make explicit efforts to take part in the life of the women. Due to the women's heavy workload and lack of formal education, men were more readily available for translation and interpretation. Additionally, men gave more overarching, metadiscursive explanations on their culture, while women suggested instead that I should participate in their activities in order to understand the culture. This was especially the case regarding dance, where participation and experience were deemed essential and little discursive elaboration was offered. In waterspirit dancing especially, the role of humans was minimised due to the fact that the spirits themselves are primarily held responsible for these events and for their efficiency through manifesting in possession trances. In reference to *ikoku* dancing, which emphasises the dancer's virtuosity and self-affirmation, a distinct vocabulary was presented to me for the different dance phases and for the desired attitude of dancers. I further discovered a whole network of metaphorical expressions, used when evaluating dance performances, which link dance with fertilising sexuality and fishing. This gave me a ready framework for analysis. Waterspirit dancing, however, was typically seen as a response to the wish of the spirits whenever they allowed their presence to be felt. Here, the spirit world as such was described in detail, and its power to bless humans was extensively illustrated by lived experiences. These descriptions were evocative in nature and defied conclusive analysis. I realised this most clearly when a spirit healer, quite irritated, asked me if I did not believe the account she gave me of her vision of the spirits after I had pointed to a logical inconsistency in her story with the aim of finding the 'right' version.

Nevertheless, as a researcher, I needed to be able to provide an analytical account beyond the restitution of descriptions. This account had to delve into the topic of the intra-uterine, as it is what inspires the waterspirit world. In this sense, the discovery of Ettinger's theory was highly valuable to me. Immediately, I sensed a deep resonance between her descriptions of the matrixial borderspace and her paintings, on the one hand, and the waterspirit world and dancing, on the other. Most importantly, as I have tried to develop in this article, she offers conceptual tools which, in their defiance of a binary on/off logic, allow to account for the Punu waterspirit world and dancing without introducing a bias linked to the privileging of phallic models. Her additional theorising on the three primary mother phantasies further suggests paths to deal with witchcraft imagery among the Punu in such a way as to distinguish contrasting ways of experiencing the maternal.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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