

## The Anthropology of the Child. A Recent Case History.

### Interview with Doris Bonnet and Suzanne Lallemand conducted by *Face à Face* (Madina Querre & Claire Mestre)

Doris BONNET\* & Suzanne LALLEMAND\*\*

FAF (Face to Face)<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Lallemand<sup>2</sup>, can you tell us a bit about the background of the Seminar that you helped create?

SL (Suzanne Lallemand) To begin with, it was a case of what we would call in the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) a “research project”. Each laboratory or department has a certain number of themes which they feel ownership of. We had some themes at the developmental stage which gained in importance because several members of the Department were interested. For us, (Laboratory 221, Systèmes de pensée en Afrique) it was about early childhood.

We had already dealt with this theme in a special issue of the *Journal des Africanistes*<sup>3</sup> where Doris had chosen as her subject matter “The Return of the Ancestors”, a ritual associated with the naming of a newborn amongst the Mossi people in Burkina Faso. Other writers had taken part and we found them as follows.

Daniele Jonckers had already written elsewhere about Mali and the practices of adults who watched children of a young age pretending they are playing in a more or less religious context. These children were repeating the customs of grown-ups and, inspired by this, were creating new rituals. She carried on this work some years later.

It transpired that Guy le Moal had witnessed exactly the same thing during a detailed study of the Bobo people in Burkina Faso. He discovered there that children, who were imitating the rituals of their elders, were entering into a trance-like state. He filmed these rituals and the results are impressive - you see children falling down, fainting... - and he could make out what the adults present were saying about it all. Watching these children of between 5 and 7 years of age, they were commenting, “He is in a real trance, but him there, he’s only pretending”.

Also taking part, were two nutritionists who were working in Southern Senegal (M.-Th. de Lestrangé and B. Passot-Guevara) and who had written about children’s diets. There was also Monique Gessain and Alphonse Sara, who were dealing with childhood.

Anne-Marie Schweeger-Hefel, an art historian originally from Austria, gave us drawings done by young children. This led us to Poitiers, in search of Pierrette Arnaud, a psychologist whose expertise is in interpreting children’s artwork. She provided us with a most interesting paper

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<sup>1</sup> Madina Querre et Claire Mestre, « L’anthropologie de l’enfant, une histoire récente », *Face à face* [En ligne], 10 | 2007, mis en ligne le 01 octobre 2007, consulté le 21 décembre 2011. URL : <http://faceaface.revues.org/66>.

<sup>2</sup> Many thanks from S. Lallemand to Wendy and Brian Keys for their French/English translation.

<sup>3</sup> *Journal des Africanistes*, 1-2, 1981, directed by S. Lallemand & G. Le Moal.

detailing the significance of these characters drawn by children of 8 to 13 years of age, who could not read or write. These drawings posed a problem for her as, on the one hand they were clumsily done (for most of the children, it was their first experience of drawing) and on the other hand, they were overtly sexual - something rarely seen in drawings by European children.

Michèle Fellons was returning from the Bambara region and had specialized in the socialization of Bambara children.

Several ethnolinguists gave us other articles, one of which was a text on the child - subject or object of African stories. Suzy Platiel was working on storytelling. Annie Dupuis had produced a study about the weaning of Nzebi children in Gabon. Claude Rivière, at that time professor in the Sorbonne, sent us an article about childbirth among the Eve people of Togo.

Other authors have also participate: Odile Journet, with her "In Search of The Child", Oger Kabore, ethnologist and music collector of Mossi lullabies, Nicephore Ndimurukundo and his descriptions of children's areas in Burundi.

One of the characteristics of this issue was that, although a lot of people were obviously interested in the subject matter of early childhood, very few of them saw it as their "bread and butter". We were not foolish enough to concentrate solely on the area of early childhood! If you were an ethnologist, you were aware that it was not a worthwhile subject matter in those days. I do not know if that is still the case.

You, Doris, you had produced something on the Mossi people called "The Return of the Ancestors" which explains the phenomenon often found in West Africa - the idea that no child comes into the world from nowhere, but, in fact, each child born is the return of an ancestor.

In 1981, this special issue sold very well and generated a large degree of interest. In 1988 a group from CNRS was formed in order to carry out a research project. It brought together several people: Odile Journet, an ethnologist who was working in Senegal on the Dioula people. She was part of our research team as well as being attached to Lyon 2 University; she is now in the École Pratique des Hautes Études [EPHE]. She was working on a fascinating subject matter - the rituals of female sterility and maternal mourning. She had discovered an unusual ceremonial about which she had written at least three papers. It concerned the lengths that childless women had to go to in order to try and rectify their misfortune (the local population saw no difference between women who could not have children and those who had lost their babies during childbirth). In the West, prospective mothers will petition various saints to help with childbearing problems. There it is somewhat different - women are expected to cut themselves off from married and professional life... to disappear from home and family in order to carry out a series of bizarre rituals - eating their food whilst crouching on all fours, wearing no clothes, shouting obscenities... it is like living life as an animal. These women are expected to behave like dogs in effect and after a period of this suffering, they are deemed to be worthy of a return to the human race, with a renewed ability to have babies and to carry them to full term. This custom is called *Kanyalen*.

Annie Dupuis is worth a particular mention as it was she who discovered certain instances of couvades (where the husband of the woman giving birth is treated as if he is going to bear the child), a practice which was not even considered to be in existence in Africa before her findings amongst the Nzebi people.

There was also Bodo Ravalolomanga who was working on pregnancy, early childhood, ways of looking at motherhood and childcare in the Tanala people of Madagascar (she wrote up two studies on this theme). Michele Cros was with us from time to time.

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It was with this group that we were finally able to produce a booklet entitled *Pregnancy and Early Childhood in Black Africa and Madagascar*<sup>4</sup>.

There were also other contributors, but we have completely lost contact with Élisabeth Ewombe-Moundou who worked as an expert for an international Aids organization. She produced a fascinating work for us on taboos linked to pregnancy.

The initial group quickly became bigger as several of our number accepted invitations from Alain Epelboin (medical ethnologist, CNRS) to link CNRS with the National Museum of Natural History [MNHN]. He proposed the formation of one association: he was about to give a Seminar involving both ethnomedicine and film analysis. His suggestion was for several people to study variously-sourced ethnological video material with a view to seeing beyond the verbal significance into the rich and varied background of the non-explicit. Furthermore, he had made and he asked the group to make video footage about early childhood and specifically the children's washing habits, to be kept in the Museum.

FAF That was in which year?

SL It was in 1989-1990... We had done very little seminar work at Évry [CNRS] since we had quickly been attracted by Alain Epelboin's suggestion. So we organized a Seminar together: the morning devoted to our 'early childhood' and the afternoon to their "anthropology of medicine and analysis of video material". Each person being supposed to take part in both the morning and afternoon sessions, most of us used to set aside the whole day as this was taking place once a month.

DB (Doris Bonnet) I got back from Africa, where I had been on an IRD [Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, ex-ORSTOM] posting for 7 years. I joined the group there and then in 1990. I was in Burkina Faso from 1983 to 1990. On my return, I joined the team for this famous all-dayer. Then, if I remember correctly, Odile [Journet] gradually stopped participating in the sessions due to her teaching duties and I joined Suzanne in the running of the early childhood Seminars. It represented an unforgettable time of discussion involving various disciplines and different generations.

FAF How many people were involved in the group?

SL About thirty.

FAF Did the spirit of openness within the seminar group encourage the dialogue between different professionals?

SL In fact, people like Jacqueline Rabain only joined the GDR [Groupe de Recherche] at a very late stage. Jacqueline had two strings to her bow. On the purely academic front, she was an ethnologist, but she was also a psychologist. Her first book on psycho-anthropology<sup>5</sup>, which dealt with early childhood in Senegal, is an important work. Subsequently she left us and went to work in a psychology laboratory.

Three new arrivals, in quick succession, provided a lot of new interest: Marie-France Morel, an historian brought to our attention a whole new field of visual documents. She looked for answers in artwork in order to find out about the daily life, the dress, the emotional ties between parents and children in former times. Her work was admirable. Then we were joined

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<sup>4</sup> S. Lallemand, O. Journet, E. Ewombe-Moundou, B. RavololoManga, A. Dupuis, M. Cros & D. Jonckers, *Grossesse et petite enfance en Afrique noire et à Madagascar*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> J. Rabain-Jamin, *L'enfant du lignage : du sevrage à la classe d'âge*. Paris, Payot, 1994.

AnthropoChildren, 2012, 1, Bonnet & Lallemand:

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by Didier Lett, a mediaeval historian, with whom she had produced a recent study on breastfeeding and how it is portrayed in art<sup>6</sup>.

DB Lett had written three or four works on early childhood. He was of the opinion that ethnologists were adept at providing themes. It is true that, on the theme of relationships, for example, we do not have an equivalent as an historical subject. We have 'lent' lots of our themes to others: the deaths of children, the interpretations of deaths... and that is the way it ought to be!

FAF: When was the GDR formed?

SL In July 1997.

DB At the time when Didier Lett joined us.

SL Another group was "cooking up" ideas on early childhood: Catherine Rollet, an historian specializing in children's institutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and also in demographics. With another colleague, who also worked in demographics, the late Alain Norvez, she formed a sub-group in St Quentin (Yvelines). I came across them in the Sorbonne and I worked alongside them. In fact, it was while I was flicking through a leaflet in the Sorbonne that I realized they were organizing this Seminar. But they had never heard of us and vice versa! They said to me "Come along, but you must give a talk". So, I did something for them about adoption in China at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I got a very cordial reception. Afterwards we decided that we could collaborate. It was very funny because they were working entirely with young people whose theses they were following. I did my talk in front of about five people and afterwards, when I attended, we were sometimes as many as eight! In our Seminars together, we were the well-to-do members!

And then Doris amalgamated the two groups.

DB The history people joined the anthropologists. Thanks to her training in demographics and history, Catherine Rollet had a knack of getting historians down to work.

SL There was also a third historian involved: Danielle Alexandre-Bidon, who co-wrote *L'Enfant à l'ombre des cathédrales*<sup>7</sup>. It must be emphasized that the main point of interest was the fact that people were coming from diverse academic backgrounds.

DB We must also include the psychologist, Blandine Bril and her student Jean Francois Bouville who was working on malnutrition in the Ivory Coast.

SL Her background was of great interest to us: not least because she had started to produce an audio-visual documentary in association with a film-maker. Her training is also two-fold: psychology and ethnology. They formed a real duo - not *Zig and Puce* but rather Bril and Zack! Zack is a girl who knows how to operate a camera! Together they have produced at least half a dozen short films comparing the contacts, practical work, learning processes in mother-child relationships across different countries, how the children are carried, fed, exercised, caressed, etc.

DB Whilst we were more into the anthropology, ethno-psychology and history, Catherine Rollet was concentrating on the demography, the sociology and also the history. When Suzanne placed the Research Group's proposal with the CNRS in 1997, we all met together.

SL Yes, our numbers had been increased by the addition of a few people from Poitiers, some of whom were psychologists.

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<sup>6</sup> D. Lett & M.-F. Morel, *Une Histoire de l'allaitement*, Paris, La Martinière, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> D. Alexandre Bidon & M. Closson, *L'Enfant à l'ombre des cathédrales*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires, 1985.

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DB After its creation, the Research Group directed the areas for research and the Seminar remained as more of a meeting place. It would be interesting to see how the actions of the Seminar group evolved subsequently.

FAF What were the main lines of research? It was from here that your work *Allaitement en Marge* emerged? [Breastfeeding on the fringes of society]<sup>8</sup>.

DB Yes, exactly. It was one of the things that came about because of the Research Group. Thanks to Sylvie Epelboin, we were able to organize days on Breastfeeding and A Woman's Need to Have a Baby in the St Vincent de Paul hospital. There has been no work published on this need to have a baby, but only on breastfeeding itself. Catherine Le Grand-Sébille came on the scene at that moment in time.

SL She was a good product of the history of these institutions. She had written a third-level thesis on a dreadful establishment which had held sway between the 1930s and 1950s. Women were made to breastfeed either because they were poor, or were prostitutes, or were in such a miserable state that they were forced to enter this institution, in a Norman castle, to give birth. Some children often remained there. This establishment, this scandalous establishment, had to close overnight after an inspection in the 1950s. One example of what went on there: these young children were tied up in the dormitories to ensure that none escaped: all this because of a lack of supervisory staff. It was a shameful episode. Catherine Le Grand-Sébille obtained her research information from former warders... they were more or less prison guards... she traced ex-members of staff and it was like a story from the Spanish Inquisition, it was astonishing! All this had been paid for by the Government but the period from the 1930s to the 1950s is not exactly prehistory.

DB I can't remember which year it was that we left the MNHN to move to the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). I think it was in 2000. My wish was to see a greater emphasis on a course called "The Anthropology of Early Childhood" and that students would be able to enroll in studies on early childhood. So Suzanne and I moved to EHESS but remained true to our anthropological roots. Then Catherine Rollet joined us and shortly afterwards, Suzy [SL] retired.

SL That was at the end of 2003.

DB When Suzanne Lallemand retired, I led the seminar group alongside Catherine Rollet and that changed slightly the areas we focused on.

FAF Why was that?

DB I was more interested in questions of contemporary society whilst Catherine had brought with her students from St Quentin-en-Yvelines who were more into sociology, demography and research concerning France.

SL Exactly.

DB I found that worthwhile as it allowed us to have an anthropology that was set apart from this rather exotic vision. There was a comparative dimension between here and elsewhere and also between nowadays and the past, alongside the mutual desire that Catherine and myself shared of maintaining the historical discipline.

Initially it was interesting as I felt that Catherine Rollet's demography students had a view of anthropology as something rather exotic. They did not really see what benefit they could derive from it in their own areas of research. For them it was interesting while remaining very "different". Little by little, I saw them changing. I would say that after 2 or 3 years, I noticed

<sup>8</sup> D. Bonnet, C. Legrand-Sébille & M.-F. Morel, *Allaitement en marge*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2002.

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a change in their approach which I will define as epistemological: previously they did not dare take part in discussions with anthropologists but later they felt it was okay to wonder “But where is the historical aspect? Is there not a transfer of ideas between the medicine of Hippocrates and anything else?”. The anthropologists did not always agree but at least, there was a debate: it was no longer a case of a polite silence where each side remained entrenched, thinking the other party had nothing to offer. We managed to break that and get into real debates on contemporary issues.

FAF Anthropology of early childhood has generally been a study of “elsewhere” whilst the study of “closer to home” is much more recent.

DB Exactly.

FAF So, at last there were lots of psychologists and sociologists working together?

DB At the start, even for those who were working outside their own field, the interdisciplinary approach did not involve the questioning of others. Each stuck to his own territory whilst politely listening to the dialogue from the other person. I think it took two or three years before attitudes towards the “other side” moved beyond curiosity: straightaway, each person could appreciate someone else’s work and pay attention to their methodology. Previously, no one dared ask anthropologists about their methods. Now, sociologists are questioning us: “What is your methodology in this instance?”. We have succeeded. As an ethnologist, I have some regret that there is less evidence of progress that elsewhere but nevertheless, we are in a particular phase and we have to realize the benefits. But this approach is also altering our choice of themes.

FAF What sort of themes are emerging for example?

DB I think that the Anthropology of Early Childhood incorporates the Anthropology of Reproduction since it represents embryology or the procreation of a child, for example. These are subjects which have existed from the start and are included in the book on pregnancy to which Suzanne referred. Perhaps it is a question for another day, but I believe that the Anthropology of Reproduction crosses over into the field of the Anthropology of Early Childhood. One wonders frequently if it is a one-off by-product of the Anthropology of Relationships and at the crossover point of “gender studies.” What are your thoughts Suzanne?

SL In the area of “new reproductions”, which is widely discussed, there are at least two groups of people who have spoken about it with you. I think that you can lay claim to it 100%. These questions about new relationships are asked by people who want children. It is with regard to the effect on the child that we would like to find out how two individuals find themselves in these quite unusual situations of multi-parentality where no one is quite sure how they could and should be represented. These situations are currently being studied.

DB Anne Cadoret came to share with us her work on parenting involving same-sex parents, the first time this subject has been discussed in such a conference.

SL Moreover, she is also the first ethnologist in France to have worked on the subject of same-sex parenting, to the best of my knowledge.

DB Martine Gross also came to present her work to our seminar. I believe that ours was the first occasion when these new forms of parenting and relationship were discussed.

FAF It is true that these forms of parenting and these relationships raise new questions and it is no surprise that this subject has been dealt with first in the Early Childhood group. Questions are being asked with regard to the child and the parents and, all of a sudden, we are

in the middle of all these new family structures where the child is the center. It is exciting to be at the meeting point of several disciplines, facing up to these subjects since our multi-disciplinary approach forces us to alter our methods. You have opened up new ground and these new discoveries have given us food for thought. In the centre of this multi-disciplinarity, do you now feel that there are new themes for research in the area of childhood, such as parentality for instance?

SL Basically, we are the least disorientated of all the human sciences to answer these questions concerning lots of parents in situations of paternity or maternity towards several children. Particularly ourselves, since we have actually been busy on themes of procreation and similar questions... The fact that the biological mothers and fathers are not, strictly speaking, the people who take on the education of the children they have produced and brought into the world, is one of the things that does not faze us in the slightest. Besides, the sociologists are asking us to understand and point out this type of situation.

DB We are also working on the contemporary life of societies in the South: issues such as non-nuclear family units, teenage pregnancies, young women living in difficult circumstances, where does AIDS fit in... All these situations which before were associated with big cities, are now being seen much more widely. Our students are exploring these sorts of issues. Sets of problems which are challenging both our relationships and our new methods of reproduction.

SL We can lay claim to the Anthropology of Relationships for a very simple reason. Our own generation or the one before, in order to judge the best among them and especially so here in France, was interested in the relationship in terms of the husband and wife basis: who could and could not marry whom? In fact, the relationship was only worth studying if there were instances of incest or a blood connection. What interests us is the total content of relationships, something not envisaged by people who formerly studied systems of kinship. In relation to the child, the question we asked was: who has the right to what? It is evident that in other societies the responsibilities are different to those in western culture, though this is changing in recent times.

DB Our goal was to demonstrate that the child has an active social role whereas, in the study of relationships, he or she is often seen as having no role to play on a social level.

SL Another field which has seldom been studied and which is quite fun to look at is that of childcare. It could be studied more as there are lots of differences and quite large ones at that.

FAF No one is continuing the work on this subject?

DB At the end of October, 2007 we are producing a work, edited by Éres Editors, on the care and customs in childhood, where you will come across all the people who make up, more or less, the CNRS research group. What is equally interesting, from the health viewpoint, is to see the inter-family relationships for example, between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, the power struggles as each tries to impose her own childcare rules. These differences can exist between modern-day healthcare systems and traditional ones. For instance, a young woman may wish to embrace different childcare techniques and will find herself at odds with her mother-in-law as a result. Generally, it can be said that childcare practices involve not only social issues but also political ones. The work done by Suzanne Lallemand and Geneviève Delaisi de Parceval<sup>9</sup> for Europe and France highlighted the presence of political issues and it is the same story in Africa and elsewhere. The customs of childcare are not the

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<sup>9</sup> G. de Parseval & S. Lallemand, *L'Art d'accueillir les bébés*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2001.

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traditional practices that would be handed down in an everyday way, solely from mother to daughter. There are also the political issues and the relationship issues that our work has allowed us to evaluate. The Anthropology of Childhood is not merely the life stories of all these women, but rather it explores the social and political aspects which also merit analysis.

FAF Is the GDR Research Group finished?

SL & DB Yes, in 2003 it will have been in existence for five years.

FAF Seminars are continuing with your students and those of Catherine Rollet, but the research group is no more. It was a driving force...

SL Certainly there have been several books.

DB But it was no longer supported by the CNRS.

FAF All of a sudden there was a power cut...

SL Which is a pity.

DB When there is no support from the establishment, something that has been dynamic will fall away. All research needs an institutional back up.

FAF Do you know why?

SL When you look at it from the quite narrow viewpoint of anthropology, University recruitment and Research are not very big - it is shared out between three or four institutions at most and then a few universities, the IRD, the CNRS and perhaps UNESCO on an ad-hoc basis. At the end of the day, it all adds up to a tiny amount. So anthropologists, when they opt for a specific theme, do not necessarily use Madina Querre's mad technique which consists of saying, "Ah, I think I'll do something on THE CHILD". Rather, they sniff the air, trying to spot what will be worthwhile financially.

When I started in this field, there were two subjects which French anthropologists considered worthy of study with regard to Africa - their old economic systems, production methods, their forms of redistribution or monopoly... and secondly, the rebuilding of political systems of power before colonization, kingdoms and empires... and how these functioned. When you got there...

DB There were also the works of Françoise Héritier...

SL Yes, there was the male-female divide, themes on incest, themes which were strictly speaking about families, but which have struck notes elsewhere. Besides, all of this somewhat historical stuff was also a bit macho: Power! Power! The justification of power, the land.

The laboratory that I joined showed an interest in a main thing - traditional sacred customs and religious rites. It was boring because the rituals and funerals are only moments in time and there is no point in only reporting that, with its myths of foundation! For me, it was a waste of time! And also, I hated the idea of spending years and years ignoring oral contributions from all and sundry waiting to find "the right informant." For me, it was exactly the opposite: I questioned little old ladies and young girls, in fact anyone and everyone, about any subject matter. In short, there were themes to deal with in the "here and now" which seemed out-of-date.

Unfortunately, to choose "modern" topics such as examples of sterility, childcare... that was not on. From now on, in relation to ethnology, we will witness a request which has taken a long time to see the light of day: requests from the medical profession, from psychologists, psychoanalysts, teachers, hospital staff...

DB My arrival took place just after I left Linguistic Anthropology under Denise Paulme and signed up to write my thesis with Marc Augé. It was during the good old days of the Anthropology of Illness and then of Health. I had joined a CNRS team, led by Anne Retel-Laurentin, who was working on women's fertility problems. I was leading investigations alongside demographers and doctors, so I was quickly thrown into the interdisciplinary experience and the Anthropology of Illness. In this context, I moved towards the Anthropology of Children's Health, everything that happened to the infant between birth and weaning. I realized that it was a coherent period in terms of discussion, but theoretical anthropology was still the order of the day, even though we were working on a practical level. It was Cultural Anthropology: this Anthropology of Illness in children has been taken up again, for example, by Charles-Édouard de Suremain with his work on diet and by others who have worked on the Anthropology of Caring, but more in relation to children's illnesses, since you notice that the illnesses in the populations where work was being done, attitudes differ depending on whether the child was 6 months old, 2 years or 15 years of age. It was interesting to notice that in their thought processes, there was a differentiation in interpretation, depending on the age of the child. The child is not a man in miniature, but is representative of each stage of development. These studies help us understand how the child is seen in these societies. A little bit like the historians of attitudes have done as regards Europe. We have been able to show how the child was perceived, firstly through the works of Jacqueline Rabain: how is the child's development viewed in family situations? What are the developmental criteria for the child? This also takes us back to the studies of Charles-Édouard de Suremain. There were these two approaches on the health of the child and since that, there have been the works concerning AIDS. But, initially, the health of the child was not really spoken about from an anthropological point of view.

FAF Lastly, this is recent.

DB My thesis came out in 1983 and was published in 1988, but there were very few studies trying to make sense of the whole issue of children's illnesses. Very few things were available. Later, there were some studies from the US on breastfeeding, a few works such as those done by Dettwiller in Mali and several pieces from other places than Africa, namely Latin America - I am thinking of Lestage. But looking solely at the French-speaking world, there was precious little on children's diseases. So that meant another line of research which tied in with the Anthropology of Illnesses. It was a bit like being thrown in at the deep end in a way.

FAF That would seem to me to be necessary in terms of research projects and themes. All the more so because there are now so many questions being asked here in France: relationships, who pays for medical care, etc. There are so many changes, so many new developments. Fortunately, the Seminars are still taking place thanks to you, but, for the moment, the establishment is no longer supporting this work.

DB Even though there is a social need for instance with regard to migrants. The French are increasingly seeing migrants as a problem in terms of medical care: a social problem but also the need to examine, to treat... So, they turn to an anthropologist, who may be wary of being asked to give lessons and advice. That is always the fear and dread for any anthropologist. I believe that we have roles to play as ordinary citizens to avoid a "hyperculturalism" of the migrant. In my opinion, there is a danger which is due partly to a certain section of "hyperculturalist" ethno-psychiatry, which views migrants solely as products of their original culture. I think this is also due to the fact that the people working with these migrants are not acquainted with the population they come from.

I had the opportunity of working on drepanocytosis [sickle cell disease] and doing this, you notice that the movements of migrants into France has to be put into perspective alongside the movements of Africans from the countryside to the city and even elsewhere. The moving from one place to another depends on the individual person and is not peculiar to migration from country to country. It is here that the anthropologist has to avoid these pitfalls so that teachers, doctors, etc. do not categorize all migrants with one set-in-stone label. We have a role to play with regards to childcare if we want to avoid living under the Rousseau-inspired vision: “The practices of the Bororo people, it’s a marvel!”. It is an idealistic outlook... and similarly, the opposite is also the case. Other people see these as savage customs that must be changed and which border on ill-treatment. When you idealize one side, you often stigmatize the other. Our job is to try and show that certainly there are harmful practices such as excision, but there are also people who are asking for help, who want to integrate socially or alter their lifestyle, who are prepared to change... that things are not set in stone.

The best example is polygamy in Africa. Polygamy was said to be on the way out and then later that was not the case. Finally, it was demographic studies which showed that various forms of marriage can co-exist and that things cannot be caricatured as people tend to do if they do not know the subject. Thus, new forms of marriage, new husband-wife relationships are posing questions about what is happening in relation to the other person. What is required from the other person is no longer the same when it is not an arranged marriage and when more and more people are choosing their partner. We always have a role to play, here as well as elsewhere.

SL Yes, yes... Very true!