

# Individual Identity in African Story Telling

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- Have you heard the story about *nzuzu*? I mean, the mermaid, that beautiful woman who sometimes drags people into her pool?

The man who asked me this question was John Takawira, who was later to become one of the most famous sculptors of Zimbabwe, especially after his premature death in 1990. But when he asked me about the beautiful lady in the pool, he was not yet famous. It was in 1984, and he was still working as an apprentice in the workshop that his elder brother Bernhard Takawira had set up in his courtyard, in the outskirts of Harare. Bernhard was already a well established artist, and had exhibited his stone sculptures in London and New York.

When my conversation with John took place, he was about to finish the carving of a huge piece of stone in his brother's outdoor workshop. A few more stone carvers were working there, among them his younger brother Lazarus. The three brothers were close colleagues and competitors.

The sculpture that John was working on portrayed a beautiful woman with long, undulating hair, which seemed to be floating away from her like waves in a lake. Her head was joined with her torso by a long, narrow neck, that was stretched so as to permit the face to turn sideways. She was looking away - far away from any possible spectator who might be imagined standing in front of her.

I asked John what he thought about this woman, who appeared to be so inaccessible. It was then that he posed the question about *nzuzu*, the mermaid: "Have you heard that story?"

I already had. It was one of the favorite narratives that people wished to tell, when they were gathered in somebody's kitchen in the rural areas in Zimbabwe. I had listened to it many times while doing my anthropological fieldwork among the Manyika in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe. While we had been sitting around the fire in some grandmother's cooking hut, late at night, I had often asked people to choose their favorite *ngano* (= fairy tale). I knew that this time and place was the only possible setting for a *ngano*. Nobody would tell a *ngano* outdoors, in the daylight. And nobody would do it unless there was a relaxed, confidential atmosphere, and a small group of listeners, who could join in the songs that went with almost all the *ngano*. The song text would display the symbolism of the *ngano* in a less disguised form than the prose. In narratives having sexual

connotations, the songs are indispensable, and everybody has to join in the singing, so as to cover up the potential embarrassment of the narrator.

However, the narratives about *nzuzu*, the mermaid, were never told with interruptions for songs. People would just tell the story, but they would often embroider the standard theme with details that seemed to reflect their own attitude to life. And they did not necessarily demand the appropriate setting for story telling. It sometimes happened that some Manyika friend of mine stopped at a certain distance from a pool, and told me that he would not like to approach that pool, because of the dangerous *nzuzu* who lived there. And so I was told the story of *nzuzu* even outdoors, in daylight. Nevertheless, the narrative was always told in a low voice, as if the narrator were sharing a secret with me.

When John Takawira asked me if I knew the story about the beautiful woman in the pool, I pretended that I had never heard it before. I wanted to listen to his version. John left his carving tools, and began to walk slowly toward a little cabin in the court yard. I followed him. When we were out of earshot of the other artists, he began to tell his story, in a low, confidential tone of voice. As usual, it was like sharing a secret. This is how his narrative went:

In some pools there is a very, very beautiful woman. She is called *nzuzu*. This woman can be very dangerous. If there is somebody whom she likes, she will entice him to get close to her pool. And once you get there, she will drag you down into the water. She will then keep you at the bottom of the pool. At first, you believe that she will be nice to you, because she is so beautiful. But once you get down there, she will become very harsh and strict. She will force you to obey her orders, and to eat the kind of food she offers. The food she gives you is black mud, worms, and raw fish. If you refuse to eat that food, she will never let you get up from the pool again. But if you accept her food politely, and if you obey her strict orders, she will change once more. After you have endured her harsh treatment for a couple of weeks, she will become kind. She will now offer you the most wonderful delicacies, such as rice, and sweet things. Then she will give you a basket with medicines (*mushonga* = magic "medicines"), and let you leave the pool. You will find yourself lying on a reed mat on the surface of the water. From there you will be able to reach the shore, and walk away with your basket. Thanks to the gifts in that basket, you will now be able to start a new life, and become successful and famous. You can become a *n'anga* (healer, diviner), or some other kind of artist, and lead a good life.  
*End of the story.*

John Takawira's version of the *nzuzu* story was very close to the standard version. The only alteration consisted in the passage about the artist. Normally, people only mention that you can become a healer after having received the basket with magic gifts. A healer who claims to have visited the lady in the pool will henceforth have a special relationship to her. Her spirit will possess him, or "come out" (*kubuda*) in him, as soon as he takes part in a ritual for spirit possession.

However, there is also another kind of standard version of the *nzuzu* story, in which a snake is introduced: In every *tsime* (= a pool or well with drinking water), there is a *nzuzu*, who is assisted by a python. This snake is the guardian of the well, and will punish anybody who pollutes the water. The punishment results in the drying up of the well. The pollution consists in contamination by a pot that has been in contact with the fire. Therefore, every girl is warned not to use a clay pot with traces of ashes when she goes to fetch water in a well. She must instead use the clean shell of a pumpkin.

Since both these versions are standard versions known by everybody in Manicaland, or in any other part of the Shona-speaking areas of Zimbabwe, it would make little sense to interpret the story against the background of any particular individual's biography. Yet, some people seem to be more affected than others by this story. Some choose it as their favorite fairy tale, while others do not. And some will embroider the story with details that seem to fit their own situation. John Takawira, for instance, chose to introduce the success of an artist into the story. And, as he was telling it, he seemed to take it very seriously. Not only did he believe in the existence of the beautiful lady, but he was also emotionally involved in her. This mild and humble man seemed to be particularly affected by the harshness of the dangerous lady. When I noticed that, it struck me that I had seen this many times before. My male assistant and his brothers seemed to have been affected in the same way while telling the same story.

What this suggests is that the fairy tale about the beautiful lady in the pool is experienced as an inner reality among many adult Manyika men. It would thus be tempting to approach the interpretation of the story from a psychoanalytical angle. However, since I am an anthropologist without any psychoanalytical training, I will not venture an interpretation based on the assumed psychological development of each individual narrator. I would rather like to place the narrative in the social and cultural context that virtually every adult Manyika person has experienced as a child. From there, I wish to proceed to an interpretation guided by Margareth Mahler's findings about the individuation process. In so doing, I am suggesting that the story about the food-giving lady in the pool is not only a description of the traumatic weaning that Manyika children have to go through in their second year of life, but that it can be used as the appropriate setting for people who want to talk about their own identity, in a disguised form. I will demonstrate this secondary interpretation of the *nzuzu* story by presenting two alternative versions of it, where the food plays a minor role, or has been left out of the picture.

Before plunging into the social and cultural setting in which the Manyika children have their early experiences, I would like to say something about psychological generalizations in a traditional society like that of the Shona-speaking peoples.

Robert LeVine has emphasized that "... any connections inferred between one person's early experience and another's adult personality require assumptions

concerning environmental and developmental similarities between those persons that must be supported by empirical evidence" (LeVine 1982: 245).

To assess any development similarities between some particular adult narrators and the children I have seen interacting with their mothers is a task that goes beyond my ability, and beyond my data as well. But it is less difficult to assess the environmental similarities between the children who grow up today, and those who grew up one or two generations ago in the environment of a rural homestead anywhere in the province of Manicaland.

The social system is the same today as it was when Holleman collected his data about 50 years ago (Holleman 1949, 1952). It is a patrilineal system where the collective identity of those who share the same totem is heavily emphasized. In everyday life, it is the people who belong to the same local patrilineage that are considered to be one single unit. The lineage identity is further marked by the norms for personal address. Nobody is ever addressed by his personal name. A term denoting a kinship role is used instead. Even the small child is addressed by reference to his or her future role in the patrilineage, i.e. *baba* (father) for the little boy, and *tete* (paternal aunt) for the little girl. It is only when the child is rebuked, or ordered about, that he may hear his own personal name. As he grows up, he may be addressed by personal name by his peers, but once he (or she) gets married, the term of address will refer to his (or her) role as a father (or a mother): *Baba wa Nicholas* (Nicholas' father), or *Mai wa Nicholas* (Nicholas' mother). The first born child thus gives his parents their identity label, according to a pattern that may have persisted for many centuries.

The cultural values seem to be equally stable, if I compare the early ethnographic reports (Bullock 1913, 1927; Frobenius 1913) with later descriptions (Gelfand 1959, 1962, 1967, 1973), and with my own data. Basic to the cultural values of the Manyika is the insistence on hierarchy and politeness. Everybody in the patrilineal group has a hierarchical position in relation to everybody else, with only one exception. The exception is constituted by the role of the paternal aunt, *tete*, which also means "sister". You may feel equal to anybody whom you call *tete*. But in every social relationship, there is an insistence on politeness, and on the avoidance of anything that might give rise to the feeling of shame (*nyadza*).

The hierarchy between husband and wife forms a central part of the cultural heritage. "A man should always be higher than the woman", is the current saying about gender relationships, with special reference to husband and wife. This idea penetrates the visual symbolism in every homestead, from the body postures to the placement of male and female tools. It is displayed in the spatial organization of the homestead as well. Male and female symbols should be kept in separate places, with the vertical distance well marked. The metaphors used to mark the male/female dichotomy are consistently sexual: phallic forms are displayed as a contrast to compact, round forms.

The culturally established symbolism of the Shona-speaking groups seems to have an equally strong continuity as the social system, both in time and space. Aschwanden's interviews with old Karanga men and women in the 1960s

(Aschwanden 1982) displayed a symbolic universe imbued with sexual connotations, which were confirmed and elaborated about 20 years later, by my own informants among the Manyika. Further, the spatial symbolism displayed in the old cult centers of the ancestors of the Shona has an astounding similarity with the spatial organization of any rural Shona homestead today (Jacobson-Widding 1990, 1992).

Finally, what the old grandmothers have told me about how children should be treated parallels my own observations of mother-child interaction in rural homesteads today, even though I have also noticed that a certain change seems to be under way in the young families living in urban areas. This applies particularly to the developmental period that is being focused in this essay, that is the one between 6 and 24 months. In the rural areas, the children are still breastfed until 18-24 months, at which point they are suddenly weaned. The weaning takes place from one day to the next. In young, urban families, however, the child is nursed for a shorter period, and the weaning is not always that abrupt. But those Manyika who are grown up persons today, and who are the narrators of the nzuzu story, can be assumed to have shared the conditions and experiences that apply to the rural children.

## THE FAMILY SETTING

Most Manyika children grow up in a rural homestead, which is built around the mother's cooking hut. This hut is the center of social life, especially from the child's point of view. This is where he interacts with his parents and siblings, and where he eats all his meals in their company. This is also where he spends his time whenever the mother is there. Before people began to build separate houses to sleep in, the parents used to spend the night in the cooking hut, together with the last born child. Since separate sleeping huts have become a general commodity only in the last 20 years, most adult Manyika men and women have spent the nights of the first three years of their lives in the cooking hut, lying close to their parents.

In the cooking hut, it is the mother who is the boss. That is, she does not show it when other people are around, and, as long as her husband is present, she tends to observe the humble behaviour prescribed for women. She will sit on the floor, keep quiet when the men talk, and demonstrate her supposedly inferior position by the way she holds her body. Huddled on the floor, she will sit with a crouched back and subservient smile. But as soon as the men leave her hut a woman may get up and sit on the men's bench, from where she will order her children about, or chat with other women. Her orders are given in a strict, sometimes even harsh voice, and her chatting with female friends and relatives is often loud and earthy. This is especially the case with many middle-aged mothers, who seem to feel more free than the young women.

As a mother, a woman's prime duty is said to be to teach her children *tsika*. *Tsika* is generally translated as "good manners", "politeness", "correct behaviour", or "respect". It implies formality and distance, and avoidance of eye contact. By observing good manners people are said to show other people respect. This is particularly important if you are in an inferior position. Thus, it is important for women to observe perfect behavior in the presence of men, and to teach their children a perfect behavior in relation to adult people, including their own mother.

An integral part of the *tsika* complex is the unconditional obedience to those who are "bigger" than yourself. You must never ask any why-questions, if a senior person asks you to do something. This applies to children in view of their parents, and to wives in relation to husbands, to daughters-in-law in relation to mothers-in-law, and so on. You just do what you are told to do.

When I have asked mothers what they regard as their prime duty in relation to their children, they have always answered: "To teach them *tsika*". Sometimes, I have phrased the question thus: "Except for food, what do you think is the most important thing that a mother should give her child? Is it love, or something else?" The immediate response has still been: "It is *tsika*." Some women have added: "You cannot give a child love, if he does not show that he loves you. It all depends upon the child himself. If he listens (*kuteera* = to listen, to obey orders), you will love him".

The *tsika* lessons start early in life, but not in a gradual way. A mother begins to teach her child *tsika* on the very day that he is weaned. The weaning takes place when the child is 18 - 30 months old (18 for girls, 24 - 30 months for boys). On a particular day, the mother decides to wean the child by smearing her nipples with chili pepper. She lets the child taste it, and "... after that, the child will not try again".

At the same time as the child is weaned, there are some other major changes in his life. First, his mother will begin to teach him *tsika*. This cannot be done while you have the child on your lap, the mothers hold. "Because if you keep the child in your arms he will not listen (*kuteera*). He will not do what you tell him to do. He will believe that he is still a baby. Therefore, you must put the child down on the ground and let him sit for himself, or stand on his own legs, when you begin to teach him *tsika*."

Beside these dramatic changes in the toddler's life, there is a particular change in the state of affairs that may be assumed to affect the mother's attitude to the child. During the entire period from delivery to weaning, the mother must observe sexual abstinence. The Manyika believe that the man's semen produces a "dirt" in the woman's vagina, which will poison her body fluids, including her milk. The woman's body may survive this poisoning as long as she has regular periods, since she "bleeds out" the poison. But during those phases of her life that she does not have regular periods, she must abstain from sex - thus before puberty, after the menopause, and while she is breast-feeding. The "dirt" produced by the semen is called *tsvina*, which means "ashes". The "ashes" from intercourse are regarded as equally polluted and polluting as the ashes from the fire on the kitchen floor. The

pots that have been cooking on that fire will pollute pure things, like the clean pools and wells where mermaids dwell.

This does not imply that the Manyika regard marital sex in a negative light. On the contrary, they attach enormous importance to satisfying sex - insofar it is performed inside marriage, where the ancestors can witness it in the light of the open fire in the cooking hut. Inside the marriage, it is important that the wife is sexually satisfied, and if she has not learned the art of loving properly when she marries, the husband will send her back to her paternal aunt. The aunt, *tete*, is the one who is supposed to teach her young niece this art when she gets her first period. The teaching consists in the muscular training of her *labia majora*. By daily massage during a couple of weeks, they should be enlarged to the size of "the wings of a bat". An oil mixed with the powder of dried, ground bat wings will be used for this massage, "... in order to make sure that the lips (*matinji*) become like the wings of a bat - pliable and strong. With these wings, the woman will be able to embrace (*kupotera*) the man's 'tree' (*muti*)".

I have been dwelling on the issue of love making in marriage for a particular reason. This is that the married woman's enjoyment of sex is insisted upon, and plays such an important role in the whole conception of married life, that it can be assumed to affect her relationship to the child as well. In particular, it can be assumed to affect her change of attitude to the child in connection with its weaning.

The weaning coincides with a major change in the child's and the mother's life as well. Since the mother must abstain from sexual contact with her husband while she is still nursing, she gives all her affectionate attention to the child. She is holding it close to her body day and night during 18-24 months, and during this period she is showing the baby considerable tenderness. But when husband and wife decide to resume their intimate relationship, the child is moved from the mother's left arm to the right during the night. The father takes the child's place.

This happens the same night as "weaning day". We may perceive the connection between the mother's changed attitude and the resumption of the parent's sexual relationship by looking closer at the expression used for this event. To resume sexual intercourse in connection with the weaning of the child is called "to open the child's ears". This means "to make the child listen", which is the same thing as "to make a child obey" (*kuteera* = listen, obey orders).

To say that the mother now changes her attitude to the child over one night, may seem to be an exaggeration. A westerner would ask how it can be possible to make such a sudden emotional shift. But even if the mother's feeling for her child would be the same, her behavior is supposed to change over night. From now on she is not supposed to take her child on her lap anymore, nor to caress it. Further, she is supposed to avoid eye contact with her child, when she has stopped nursing. According to Manyika custom, those who have a hierarchical relationship must avoid eye contact. The mother and the child will enter into such a relationship on the very day of weaning. Just like John Takawira's beautiful stone lady, who looks away from her admirers, the Manyika mother will become a distant person, whose

attention the child can no longer catch. It is only when he performs well, and "listens" to her orders, that he may recover her attention. When he has obeyed her politely, the mother will turn to him and thank him profusely. She will do so by using his totem name, followed by his future hierarchical title: *Maita Shumba, maita baba* (Thank you Lion, thank you father). The child does not have an individual identity, especially not when he has done something praiseworthy.

Against this background it seems warranted to connect the story about *nzuzu* to the period surrounding the weaning trauma. The black and the white food appears to be directly connected with the event of weaning, while the harsh lady at the bottom of the pool seems to be an apt representation of the mother at this point. It would also be tempting to interpret the snake, who is guarding the well, in a psychoanalytical perspective echoing Freudian ideas: The father, portrayed by a phallic metaphor, will be keeping the mother for himself, from weaning day, and onwards.

But before any hasty conclusions are drawn, I would like to introduce an interpretative perspective that draws upon the culturally embedded symbolism of the Manyika. In the Shona cultural conceptions, snakes and pools are not quite the same as in a Western symbolic idiom. The white rice and the raw fish have their specific symbolic connotations as well. Therefore, we must place the key symbols of the *nzuzu* story in their own cultural context, before we can proceed to define the connections between the narrative and the weaning trauma.

## THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF SYMBOLS

Let us begin with the beautiful lady's setting, which is the *tsime* (pool or well). It is always emphasized that the water in this pool or well is absolutely clean, and that it must not be polluted. Even if we assume that the pool represents the mother's womb, we cannot assume that it has any sexual connotations, as an object of mixed fear and longing. This is clear from the way people define the pollution of the pool. It gets polluted by *tsvina* (= dirt, ashes) from a pot that has previously been in contact with fire. Being a metaphor of a woman's womb, the pot on the fire is a sexually "hot" woman (Aschwanden 1982, Jacobson-Widding 1989). The *tsvina* signifies not only dirt in the form of ashes, but also semen that has been mixed with vaginal fluids. Hence the pool as an object of mixed fear and longing is a woman's chaste womb, which does not receive any semen. A mother's womb has this quality during the entire period of nursing. It is on the very day of weaning that it gets polluted by *tsvina*.

Let us then look at the snake, which appears in the pool once it has dried up (after having been polluted). This snake is generally said to be a python. A Freudian interpretation would of course stress the phallic character of the snake. This was also my own, first reaction, until I had made further research into the snake symbolism in the traditional culture of the Shona-speaking peoples in general, and that of the Manyika in particular.



The snake appears in many ritual contexts. Thus, for instance, it is used as a "sedative". When a married woman wants her husband to be faithful, and to stay at home with her instead of spending his leisure time elsewhere, she is said to use the fat of a python. She will smear it on the lower part of her husband's back, where his potency is believed to have its center. Of course, she will do this secretly, while the husband is asleep. The men fear this treatment very much, and say that "it is dangerous". "You may lose your entire sense of independence, and your lust for life. You might end up just sitting at home with your wife, as if you were her child".

This interpretation of the wife's supposed treatment does not make sense until one has compared it with a whole series of other symbolic manifestations of the snake. One is its appearance as a pattern around the brim of clay pots, and around the wall of the cooking hut as well. A zigzag pattern that the Manyika refer to as "snake" has been found on pots and ruins of former Shona dwellings that are more than 800 years old. Still today, some women like to decorate their cooking hut with a "snake". And, still today, old grandmothers may decorate some of their pots with a very realistic snake, which is sculptured around the neck on the pot. They do this with a special kind of pot that they give to their granddaughters, when these get pregnant. The grandmother will tell her granddaughter, that if she drinks water in this pot every day during her pregnancy, "... the snake will show the way out for the baby". (The snake on these pots is designed so as to form an opening where the head and the tail would otherwise meet.)

What does all this imply? From the point of view of "cultural logic", it does not make sense until one has listened to the women, talking about delivery. Just like women in other parts of the world, the Manyika women like to indulge in vivid descriptions about the delivery of their own children. When describing how the labors began, they will say: "As I felt that the snake began to bite..." After having heard about the biting snake a couple of times, I asked about it. The answer I got was this: "Every woman has a snake surrounding her *chibereko* (= uterus). When the woman is pregnant, the snake's grip gets more and more firm. By the end of the pregnancy, the snake begins to bite the *chibereko*. When the child feels this hard grip, and the biting, it will want to be set free. And that is when the child gets out from the woman's womb."

The word used for "embrace" in this context is *kupotera*. It means "to protect a person with one's arms, or with one's body". The same expression is used for the mother's firm grip, when she holds her baby in her arms, or has it tied in the sling (*chibereko*) on her back. Then, there are two more instances in which the verb *kupotera* is used. One is when a snake is curling its body around a tree. The other is when the woman's "bat wings" are surrounding the man's "tree".

A snake is thus thought of as something that protects, embraces, and keeps a child (or a tree) in a firm grip. But when it gets too firm, the child wants to be set free. The snake is connected with the embracing uterus, and with the mother's arms, especially when they surround the child like a fence that prevents him from moving freely (cf. Jacobson-Widding 1992).

This takes us quite a way from a phallic interpretation of the snake. It would rather represent the "protection" exerted by an overbearing mother, who is using her arms or sling to fence the child in. Maybe one might twist the implications of the word "phallic", and say that it is the "phallic" aspect of the mother that is symbolized by the snake. In the same vein of thought, it would be the "phallic" aspect of the wife that is demonstrated when, by smearing his back with the oil of a python, she forces her husband to stay at home like a child.

The snake in the pool does not seem to represent a male phallus thus, but rather a phallic aspect of the strong mother. We should also note that the snake in the pool is dwelling in an absolutely clean water, or in a *chaste womb*. As long as the water is still clean, the snake does not show up. But when the water has been polluted by *tsvina* (= ashes from the fire, or dirt from intercourse), he will appear. This parallels the mother's change of attitude, once she has resumed her sexual relationship with her husband. She will then become apprehensive and authoritarian, at the very point when her own "pool" has become polluted by the husband's semen.

Although the pool in the *nzuzu* stories is clean like a mother's chaste womb, the narrators have ambiguous feelings about it. They talk about it with a mixture of fear and longing, and seem to be deeply affected when mentioning how dangerous the lady in the pool can be. There is an obvious fear of "engulfment".

This is the point where Mahler's study of the individuation process comes into the picture. She noted that some children had fantasies about being engulfed by a woman in a whirlpool. She designates this fantasy as the fear of "reingulfment of the ego into the whirlpool of the primary undifferentiated symbiotic stage" (Mahler 1979:127), and found that this fear is particularly pronounced in children who have been held by their mothers in a "prolonged symbiosis". Further, these children had been deprived of a gradual process of separation from the mother, accompanied with the emotional support that would facilitate the child's individuation (Mahler 1968; Mahler, Pine & Bergman 1975).

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF SYMBOLS

According to Mahler, the separation and individuation are complementary "development tracks" (Mahler, Pine & Bergman 1975:63), which normally succeed the original symbiotic fusion of mother and child in the Western world. The peak of symbiosis is when the child is 4-5 months, while he gradually separates from the mother by perceiving himself as a separate body during the next 12-13 months. This is "the practicing period". This phase reaches its peak at 18 months, when the child is practicing his independence by running back and forth between the mother and the outside world. During the following 12 months, which is called "the rapprochement phase", the child seeks his mother's reassurance and emotional support, until at the age of 30 months, he has developed a sense of full separation and individuation.

Mahler emphasizes the importance of a *gradual* separation process, during which the child gets the mother's emotional support in developing a secure sense of individual identity. When this process is disturbed, or when the symbiosis is prolonged, some more or less severe disturbances in the child's identity formation may be noted. The most severe disturbances showed to be the ones produced by a prolonged, "parasitic symbiosis", whereby the mother extends the symbiosis to satisfy her own needs.

I would not like to characterize the Manyika mother's bond to her child as a "parasitic symbiosis", since while she is keeping her child close to her during the extended nursing period, she does so for customary reasons, rather than because of her own needs. But there is no doubt that the child's relationship to her would qualify as a "prolonged symbiosis", especially as far as the boys are concerned. Not only because of the nursing, but because of the constant body contact, and because of the way the baby is physically tied to her most of the day.

This intense, bodily fusion with the mother, and the child's restricted opportunities to test his own independence during "the practicing period", are factors that should be accounted for in any discussion about African ideas about personal identity. Most African children have experienced the same kind of prolonged symbiosis. Correspondingly, we find that in most African cultures, there is a marked emphasis on collective identity, and on identity ascribed by kinship roles. Personal names are avoided in most societies in sub-Saharan Africa. When presenting their psychoanalytic study of some Anyi patients in West Africa, Parin, Morgenthaler and Parin-Matthey even talked about a "group ego" as typical of their clan conscious informants (1980:x).

But there is one feature of the development conditions of the child that is typical of the Shona culture, but which is not pronounced in many other African cultures. This feature is the abrupt weaning, and its accompanying change of attitude of the mother. This dramatic change can be assumed to affect the child's individuation in a special way, particularly since the change takes place at 18 months. This is the point where the child would begin to need the mother's emotional support for his identity development more than ever. For this reason, I think it is important to place the *nzuzu* stories in a broader context of experience than that of weaning, as such. The change of food (from breast milk to chili pepper), and the change of personality of the mother (from a kind, attentive woman into one who is harsh and unaccessible) are accompanied by the loss of something else. This "something else" might be termed "the sense of selfhood", or the reassurance of a germinating sense of individual identity. It may get lost at the very point when it is supposed to be emotionally supported.

In order to support this hypothesis, I will report two special versions of the *nzuzu* story, where the food is marginal or absent, but where the identity theme seems to be the more important. But before proceeding to these particular variations on the *nzuzu* theme, I would like to dwell for a while on the cultural meanings of the kind of food that the mermaid offers in the standard version of

the *nzuzu* tale. Further, I will also analyse the meaning of the magic gifts and the reed mat, since I think they support my hypothesis about the identity theme.

## MUD AND ANGER, RICE AND REBIRTH

The food offered by the lady in the pool is described as black mud and raw fish, followed by rice, which is called a "delicacy". This description may invite a Freudian interpretation, where black mud would represent feces, while the rice seems to correspond to breast milk. I do not oppose such an interpretation, but there are some cultural meanings that should be taken into consideration as well.

Let us begin with the rice. The Shona in general, and the Manyika in particular, have never cultivated rice. They never saw rice until the Europeans arrived, who served it as a delicacy that was considered better than the staple food of the Manyika. That happens to be an equally white porridge of maize meal. Still today, rice is something that the Manyika serve only at special occasions when they copy European patterns, for instance when they arrange a wedding according to a supposedly European style. Rice does not belong to "the real world". It rather represents "the magic world" of the Europeans. Whether interpreted as a metaphor for breast milk or not, we should thus note the "other-worldly" qualities of rice.

Then we have the black mud and the raw fish. In the symbolic language that the Manyika employ in fairy tales and proverbs, a woman is like a raw fish to those men who try to court her. This is, in fact, how she is supposed to be: difficult to catch, because she is "slippery"; difficult to "eat", because she has scales. The men sometimes say that they use this expression when they are annoyed at a woman's evasive manoeuvres, or at her refusal to give in, when courted. They also say that a virgin is like a raw fish, because she is difficult to penetrate. Raw fish is thus a metaphor representing the inaccessible woman, whether a chaste virgin or a woman who refuses to be adduced.

If the raw fish represents a woman's inaccessibility, it seems to be an appropriate metaphor of the way a little child may experience his mother soon after the weaning. The child can no longer come close to her, or "eat" her. Instead, he has to swallow her hostility, and behave nicely. The black mud may be interpreted along the same lines. If we accept the connection between excrement and anger, the black mud representing the mother's anger seems to be another appropriate metaphor to describe what the child will have to swallow after being weaned. The Manyika themselves make this connection, indirectly. When a woman is about to give birth, the midwife closes her anus. This is because the child should not come out that way. The old midwives assume that the child is surrounded by excrements in the mother's womb, but in order to be happy, they must choose another way out. If they were born through the anus, they would be born with the mother's hatred.

Thus, we might regard the fantasy about eating raw fish and black mud as a disguised, latent memory of having had to accept the mother's inaccessibility and

hostility, along with the new, bitter food that she offers when she has withdrawn her breast. "But if you just endure this nicely, she will become kind again, and give you white, sweet delicacies." You would thus go from hell to paradise.

However, in real life, the child goes from the paradise with white food to a hell with black food. The order of events is reversed, as compared to what happens in the narrative about *nzuzu*. Because of this reversed order, I think it is difficult to interpret the *nzuzu* story in terms of regression, or as if it would just portray a repetition of something that the narrators have experienced at the point of weaning. Rather, I think that the reversed order gives a hint that an entirely new story is about to begin. Thousands of anonymous narrators of the *nzuzu* story have been creating a fantasy about an entirely new kind of existence, which is made possible by the magic gifts that the lady in the pool gives to the visitor. I think that the "other-worldly" rice may be interpreted in a similar vein of thought. The visitor does not get breast milk once again, but something else, that tastes even nicer.

The very point manifesting that the story tellers are talking about a new kind of existence is the end of the narrative. When the excursion to the pool is over, the visitor finds himself lying on a reed mat, on the surface of the water. Lying on a reed mat signifies "to be born". Every child is born on a reed mat, and in one of the creation myths, the first human being is created when God spits through a reed straw on a lump of clay, which is subsequently moulded into a person. Correspondingly, the beginning of a new life after death presupposes a reed mat. When a corpse is to be buried, it is first laid on a reed mat. Swathered in this mat, it is carried out from the cooking hut with the head first. Old mothers are ready to explain why the head must be carried out first, while the corpse is swathered in a reed mat: "It is because that is the way a child is born".

The person who has visited the dangerous lady in the pool is thus reborn into a new life when leaving the water. The gifts that the visitor has received will help him to lead this new life successfully. The change comes only after he has accepted the bitter food, and shown that he can behave nicely, and accepted the black mud and the raw fish as well. Interpreted in this way, the story is not only a regression into the weaning trauma, but also a story about how to create a new kind of personal existence. That this new life is connected with identity development is illustrated by the two variations on the *nzuzu* theme that I will now present.

## The Girl Who Lost Her Doll

Long, long ago, there were five girls who had dolls whom they regarded as their own children. All the girls were good friends. While they were bathing, they played with their dolls in the water. One of the girls lost her doll, and it was taken down the river by the water. The four other girls noticed that her doll disappeared, but did not tell her about it. It was only after a while that the girl discovered that her child was gone. She began to

walk along the river to look for her doll. When she had been walking for a while, she met a mouse, and it was getting dark. The mouse asked her: "Muzukuru (grandchild), where are you going?" The girl answered: "I am looking for my child, sekuru (grandfather)". The mouse answered: "Your child just passed. I would have stopped it, if I had been able to." Then the mouse said: "You may go on searching for your doll, but you should be aware of and see the big things that are accompanying you." The girl walked along the river, and she met a snake. The snake said: "Good evening, grandchild". The girl answered: "How are you, grandfather? I am looking for my doll." "Ah, if I had known it was yours, I would have stopped it. Your child just passed." The girl continued to walk along the river. All the way, she met all the wild animals. At last, she met an old woman (*mbuya*, which means "old woman", or grandmother). The old woman said to the girl: "Grandchild, let us go home to my house, it is dark by now. You can continue to look for your child tomorrow." The old woman had a pot that was made from a human skull, and a snake serving as support for the pot on her head. The girl was given the pot with the snake, in order to carry them home. When they had arrived in the woman's home, the girl was surprised to see all the wild animals whom she had met along the river, while she was looking for her lost doll. All the wild animals, like the lion, the elephant, the zebra, the giraffe, the hyena, the snake, and the eagle. They all lived in a big house. The woman was the mother of all the animals. Then the woman said: "Grandchild, will you cook porridge for my children?" The girl cooked porridge in a big clay pot. When the porridge was ready, she told the woman, but the woman said: "Take the porridge to my children, but be careful not to talk to them. If they ask you something, don't answer!" The girl opened the door, and put the porridge on the floor. Some of the animals touched her, and said: "Meat!" Then the eagle said: "Don't eat her!" The eagle (*chapungu*) was the king of all the animals in the house. After this, the girl returned to the woman. The woman said to her: "Here is your porridge, with worms and raw fish." The girl ate everything silently, while sitting outside the house. She stayed with the woman for many days, and made porridge for the animals. One day the woman said: "Grandchild, I want you to go home now." The girl received a beautiful doll as a gift, and a basket to keep its clothes in. Then the woman said: "You may go home to your village now. But the hyena, the giraffe, and the eagle will take care of you until you reach your parents. The eagle will be flying to check that the hyena does not eat you on your way home." The animals accompanied the girl nicely to her village. The parents did not believe that their child was still alive. They thought she had died. The parents killed an ox to welcome their daughter. They had porridge together, and the animals got some meat to bring to the old woman. The parents said to the animals: "Thank you very much, you may now go back to your village". When the other four girls saw the beautiful doll, they became

jealous. They decided to go to the same pool and bathe with their dolls. The purpose of going there was that they should be given beautiful dolls as gifts. While they were in the pool, one of the girls let her doll be taken by the water on purpose, so that she would meet the old woman and get a beautiful doll. The girl began to walk along the river to search for her doll. While she was walking, she met some of the animals, but she was quarrelling with them, instead of being polite. When she had arrived at the old woman's place, she was asked to carry the pot. She was given the skull and the snake to put on her head. The girl had to carry the pot, but was unwilling to do it. After a while, the girl was asked to cook porridge for the woman's children, thus the animals who lived in a single, big house. At first, the girl complained, and said: "Do you want me to be eaten by the animals?" The girl was forced to cook porridge, and to take it to the house of the animals, where they lived together. Then the woman said: "Grandchild, here is your porridge, with worms and raw fish." "I will not eat this", the girl said, "at home, I get meat and rice and delicious food." The woman said: "I do not have any of the things you have mentioned, but I will give you the hyena, the giraffe and the eagle to accompany you home." The woman then made a doll and a basket for the girl to bring home. First, the hyena carried the girl, because the woman did not want her to walk by herself. The hyena and the giraffe would take turns in carrying the girl on their backs, while the eagle was flying above them. When they crossed the river before arriving to the girl's village, the hyena began to touch the girl's body and said: "This is nice." And he touched her all over the body. The eagle saw him doing this. He said to the hyena: "Don't do that! I will tell our mother about it." But the eagle was also upset because the girl had been quarrelling with their mother earlier. When the eagle had flown away, the hyena stopped, and ate the girl, before she had arrived home. *End of the story.*

In this version of the *nzuzu* story, we find a few key metaphors that it has in common with the standard version. These are the worms and the raw fish, and the basket with gifts. This time, however, the gifts are constituted by a doll with new clothes, rather than the equipment for a healer. Being signs of putrefaction, the worms may be compared to the black mud in the standard version. The food that the woman offers the girl to eat is thus setting the scene of the story: the weaning trauma. But the rest of the fairy tale develops around the theme of a lost doll, and the gift of a new one. This is where the identity problem is most clearly pronounced, whereas the relationship to the animals represents the solution of this problem, at least according to the way a properly raised and well behaved Manyika girl might see it.

The opening scene is crucial to understand what the story is all about. It shows five girls playing with their dolls at the river, where one of them lets her doll be taken away by the water. She feels that she has lost her "child", which is an

obvious representation of her own self. The girl who loses her doll is number five beside the group of four girls, who exclude her. The four girls even collude against her. These figures are important clues to any Manyika listener.

Number four is a sacred number. It is the symbol of completeness. Over and over, it comes back as the sign of whatever is complete: there are four days of the work week, four phases of the moon, four advisors of the king, four episodes in most fairy tales, and so on. The round hut is supported by four poles, the ground nuts should be planted in groups of four, and the roots for the baby's supplementary food should all be cut in four pieces.

Whenever there is a fifth element added, it is said to be "one too much", or else something "dead". Thus, the fifth phase of the moon (when it is not visible) is a "dead" phase, and the fifth day of the week, which is called the chisi day, is a "dead" day, when nobody is allowed to work.

The group of four is called *murongomuna* (=the perfect order). Whenever I have used this expression during my field work, instead of the "profane" word for number four, people have either burst into laughter, or looked embarrassed. *Murongomuna* refers to the particular kind of completeness formed when a man and a woman are making love. This was revealed to me when an old woman showed me the pot she had made for her brother's daughter. The girl had just had her first period, and been staying for some weeks with her paternal aunt in order to learn the special secrets (the secrets of the bat wings). Now, she had finished her preparation for married life, and was about to leave her aunt's home, in order to go back to her parents. She was supposed to bring the pot her aunt had made, and present it to her parents, filled to the brim with water. This would be silent message that she had now finished her preparations for her future married life.

This pot had four pairs of parallel lines sculptured around the neck. Each pair represented the *matinji*, that is, the *labia majora* which by now would have the size of bat wings, I was told. I then asked why there were four of them. The woman looked embarrassed. I suggested: "Is it the completeness of two plus two, man plus woman, testicles plus *matinji*?" "The woman and her two friends who were present burst into a wild laughter, smashed the palms of their hands against mine, and exclaimed: "She knows everything, everything about our secrets!"

The completeness of number four is thus associated with the completeness formed when a man and a woman form a pair. Man and woman as two partners are seen as the complete unit. Anything or anybody beside this "group of four", is "one too much", or something "dead" that does not count.

It is in this perspective we should regard the description of the initial scene in the fairy tale about the doll. Since the perfect union is one of a man and a woman as sexual partners, the child is "one too much" in this particular context. And since the story is dealing with problems that appear in connection with the weaning of a child, which happens when the parents resume their sexual intercourse, it seems warranted to regard the opening scene as corresponding to "the primary scene", when the parents decide to "open the ears of the child".



In the story, there are first five girls. Then, four of them exclude the heroine. What happens at this moment, is that the little girl loses her doll, that is, "her own child", or her own Self. At first, she is not aware of the loss, but when she begins to notice that she has lost her doll, she starts to search for it along a river.

A river is something different from a pool. In the Manyika conceptions of "clean" and "dirty" waters, the pools are clean, while the rivers are dirty. People wash dirty things in the rivers, but not in the pools. Young boys test their virility in the rivers, but absolutely not in the pools. A river is connected with *tsvina* (= ashes, dirt, semen), while pools are as pure as a chaste womb.

The girl is thus aware of that her "child" has been washed away by a dirty river. And everybody she meets has actually seen the lost doll floating there. In order to find it again, the girl has to endure some difficult tests. First, she must carry a snake and a pot on her head. Pots are wombs, in the symbolic world of the Manyika (Jacobson-Widding 1992). A pot constituted by a skull is a container of something that used to be alive, but which is now dead. It is not a life-giving womb, as the clay pot is. It is a womb that has been emptied of life, or emptied of any nurturing, life-sustaining content. This "dead womb" is supported by a snake. Whether we interpret the snake as a male or a female symbol (= the "phallic", bossy mother), it has those particular phallic connotations that are relevant in this context: The snake has taken over the womb or "killed" it, and the child cannot expect any kind, life-giving attention from this womb any more. This is a fate that she has to bear, or to carry on her own head, without any complaints.

She will then have to continue to endure the difficult treatment by the woman, who calls her "granddaughter". This woman cannot, of course, be called "mother" in the fairy tale, since she is not a good woman, as mothers are supposed to be. But this substitute mother will offer the little girl all the horrible food that represents the mother's distance, harshness, and refusal to be adduced by the child. It is only when the girl accepts this food politely, and eats it without complaint, that she will be compensated. The compensation consists in a *new doll*, which is even more beautiful than the lost "child". It seems as if this new doll would represent the new identity, that the girl has found by adapting to the situation in a new way. She has become "the perfect person", like the doll, with clothes. The clothes imply that she may dress decently, thus behave according to what the situation demands. She may cover her own Self.

The last phase of the girl's long search for a new identity gives her ample opportunity to show how perfect she is, and how well protected she is by showing that she knows how to behave well, that is, to observe *tsika*. It is her *tsika* that protects her from being eaten by the hyena, although it is the king of the animals (the father) who assists her. The bad girl, who complains, and who does not accept the "mother's" treatment is not being protected, though. When she does the worst of all things, that is, to ride the hyena and the giraffe in turns, the father will abandon her, and she dies.

The last passage must be understood in the light of what "riding a hyena" or a giraffe means in the Manyika context. A woman who rides a hyena is the standard

image of a witch, who is driven by her sexual appetite. To ride the hyena and the giraffe in turns is the same thing as being completely promiscuous. If there is anything that destroys a woman's reputation in the eyes of both Manyika men and women, it is promiscuity. What defines "the perfect woman" is above all two things: that she observes *tsika*, and that she never has sex with anybody but the man she is legally married to.

This story is thus a story about female identity, rather than a story about oral, anal, or genital problems. It is a story about how a girl may develop an identity that makes her accepted and praiseworthy, even if she has lost her own, inner self. Instead of her lost self, she acquires a generally accepted *pseudo identity*, which is considered to protect her from evil, and to obtain the father's blessing. She becomes a "perfect girl".

This story was told by a young woman, who was a rather reticent person. Her behaviour was irreproachable, according to the Manyika standards for young women. When approached by a man or an elder person, she would look down, and I never saw her chatting in the free and easy way of older women. She seemed to keep her secrets for herself, behind a passive, polite smile. She was a "perfect girl".

The next story was told by a woman, who represents the opposite character. She was in her mid-forties, a widow since about five years, and a very open, lively kind of person. She showed a great deal of entrepreneurial capacity, and had, for instance, begun to raise chickens which she took to town to sell about two or three times a month. Before these town trips, she would dress up with high heels, and look like a townswoman. She would always go alone on these trips, instead of joining some other women, as most market women do. She was well respected, though, especially by her middle-aged, female friends, with whom she socialized actively. But she would often take unconventional initiatives, like offering to clean the local school, when she saw that it was needed. Or, she might surprise her neighbour with a special dish of chicken, which she would bring in a basket, for no apparent reason. Warm and generous, unconventional and independent - that is the way I would like to describe her. Her name is Mrs. Sauramba. This is her story:

## The Girl Who Got Gold

Long, long ago, there was a sacred river. In that river there was a dangerous pool. All the people in this country were warned not to go close to the pool. Nobody was allowed to take smelling things to this pool, such as soap. In the pool there was a beautiful mermaid, who was dwelling there. But she was very selfish. The mermaid was looking for somebody whom she would turn into a *n'anga* (healer, diviner, doctor). Many people tried to go down into the pool, but nobody came out again. The people were killed, and were then seen floating in the water. One day, there was a

girl who had a dream. She dreamed about a mermaid who wanted a person in order to make a doctor of him. She also dreamed that many people tried, but made mistakes, and thus did not succeed, and got killed instead. The girl had no parents. She lived with her *tete* (=paternal aunt), who had taken care of her. One day, she said: "*Tete*, I have been dreaming something, and now I want to visit a foreign country. I might stay away for a week or a month, but don't cry while I am away! I will not die there, but I will show you what I have dreamt of when I come back." The aunt quarrelled a little. The girl said: "*Tete*, it is impossible for me to stay, because what I have dreamed about is so great. But if you cry, I will be killed, and will not come back. I intend to travel very far away, and I will travel under the water." The aunt prepared a chicken and rice. The girl went off, and travelled and travelled, until she arrived at a big pool. The journey took her three nights, until the fourth day. At the pool, she began to wash clothes, together with some other girls. They told her: "You must be careful. This place is dangerous. People use to be taken away from here". Soon after the conversation, she slipped into the water. The other girls ran home to tell their parents what had happened at the pool. The parents said: "It is her own fault. Besides, we don't know her, she does not belong to our country." After one week, the girls went back to the pool, and saw a reed mat floating on the surface of the water, with a *mutundu* (the basket of a doctor), gold, and medicines. The girls went back to their parents: "Ah, guess what we have seen in the pool! There is a basket, medicines, and gold." "Let us go and take it," the parents said. They arrived at the pool. One man wanted the gold, so he went into the pool, and did not come up again. Then there was a woman who said: "But how about the girl who went down into the pool?" After a short while, they saw the girl sitting there. She collected all her things, and began to walk toward her country. Some of the people in the foreign country followed her. They travelled for three days, but could not reach her. Some people who had not brought any food died on the way. But those who had food continued. Then, on the fourth day, they saw the girl arrive in a village, and her aunt came out and ululated for the girl. The girl became very popular and successful in her work (that is, in her work as a *n'ganga*). People came there to be treated. Every month, the girl was brought to the pool by the mermaid. The girl had great success already from the beginning, and lived well until her aunt died. Thereafter she lived well with the people. *End of the story.*

The woman who told this story, Mrs. Sauramba, said that she had learned the story from her maternal grandmother, whom she grew up with. The grandmother had lived on the other side of the border of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. She was a legendary *n'anga*, her granddaughter said: "A very popular doctor" (just as the girl in the fairy tale).

Before I proceed to interpret this special version of the *nzuzu* theme, I would like to describe what a *n'anga* is like in the Manyika context. A *n'anga* may be a man or a woman, who acts as a diviner and healer. He/she is generally considered to have a special relationship with one or two particular spirits. One of these spirits may be that of a dead relative - grandmother, a grandfather, a father, or a paternal aunt (but never a mother).

All the *n'anga* I have talked to have emphasized that they were very much loved by the particular person whom they had subsequently become connected with after his or her death. As a general rule, the *n'anga* becomes possessed by this spirit, when he or she takes part in a possession ritual, or whenever he or she is consulted by a patient. It is the spirit of the dead relative who tells the *n'anga* what roots or herbs to collect for healing, and what to do in various situations in life.

However, there are many people who say that they "have" a spirit (that is, a spirit who possesses them now and then), without being a *n'anga*. In order to be a real *n'anga* you should preferably have at least one additional spirit. This spirit may be that of the *nzuzu*, or that of a mythical warrior. Most *n'anga* who "have" a *nzuzu* say that they have "inherited" the *nzuzu* from the dead relative with whom they communicate. The *nzuzu* will inform her medium about medicines, via the spirit of the dead relative. Some *n'anga* "have" other anonymous spirits, beside those of dead relatives. Thus, for instance, some "have" a spirit called "the white lady", who is supposed to be a woman of European origin, who has died far away from home. Those who "have" this spirit will dress like European women used to do by the turn of the century, and only eat with knife and fork on European china. Their staple food is rice, instead of maize.

Whatever spirits the *n'anga* "has", and communicates with, the person who "has" a spirit is very much respected, especially if these mediumistic talents are combined with efficient healing. However, the kind of respect that a *n'anga* enjoys is very different from the one afforded to ordinary people on account of their hierarchical position or social behaviour. The *n'anga* may be respected regardless of his or her position in the normal social hierarchy (based on kinship, gender, seniority, the number of dependents, and so on), and regardless of whether he or she observes a perfect behaviour or not. In fact, a *n'anga* does not have to observe *tsika*, at least not to the same extent as other people have to do. Nor does a *n'anga* have to wash or shave or dress like other people. A female *n'anga* may visit the men's beer halls, and have liquor and cigarettes, without being regarded as a *fambi* (whore). People will just surround her with affection and respectful friendship. She can do as she likes, socialise with anybody, or withdraw, if that is what she prefers to do. In sum, the *n'anga* is a marginal person, who enjoys pretty much the same freedom and attention as a famous artist in Paris or New York. This implies that a *n'anga* can be just himself (herself), rather than trying to fulfill the cultural standards of any social role.

When approaching the story about the girl who got gold, I think it is important to bear these particular aspects on personal identity in mind. It is also important to

remember that the story was first told by a female *n'anga*, who was Mrs. Sauramba's grandmother. Equally important is the fact that Mrs. Sauramba herself is a quite unconventional lady (although not a *n'anga*), and that this is the story she chose as her favorite. Whether the golden girl is the *alter ego* of any of these women or not, the main theme of the story seems to be important to them.

The main theme is centered around alienation and closeness. The girl's estrangement in the foreign country is focussed on a whole bunch of anonymous "parents", who say: "She does not belong to our country". When she slips into the pool, they abandon her, and when she has received her gift of gold, they want to deprive her of it. It is especially the fathers who want to deprive her of her gold. As against this picture of alienation and abandonment by greedy "fathers", the story portrays the paternal aunt's care and generosity. She gives the girl chicken and rice, and cares about her wellbeing. But she also represents something else, which is opposed to "the parents" in the foreign country. Being a paternal aunt, she represents closeness.

The term for paternal aunt is *tete*, which also connotes "sister". The essence of a *tete* relationship is that the aunt and the niece are on equal footing, and thus supposed to dispense with the distancing behaviour characteristic of any other relationship in the hierarchically constructed patrilineage. The *tete* is the most intimate friend of her niece, and the only person she can confide in. She gives sisterly support and advice, and acts as the mediator in any conflict between her brother's children and their father.

Being a "sister", the *tete* is never chosen as a substitute mother. Grandmothers are often asked to be substitute mothers when the child has been weaned, but never paternal aunts. This implies that there is a special meaning inferred by the introduction of a *tete* as a substitute mother. I suggest that it is in order to stress the closeness in their egalitarian relationship, in contrast to the distance implied in the authoritarian relations represented by "the parents".

In this context, I would also like to add a note about the Manyika's interpretation of gifts. If you give somebody a gift, it is supposed to be a sign of love. Or rather, people say that "a gift evokes love". In fact, in a society where people do not show affection by touching or caressing, nor by eye contact or verbal statements, gifts are apt symbols of love. Whether constituted by magic medicines, gold, or chicken and rice, they are always vehicles of emotional attachment. All gifts are thus "magic".

But medicines and gold have a particular kind of magic. With the help of medicines (*mushonga*) you can make miracles as a healer, and with the help of gold you may surpass the power of kings and fathers. In this narrative, gold appears to be significant, since, in contradistinction to the medicines, it does not belong to the standard version of the *nzuzu* story.

In the cultural symbolism of the Manyika, gold has a special magic power, *mapipi*. So has any other metal, since metal is produced by a smelting process that requires excessive heat. Everything that is hot, in the literal or figurative sense, is considered to have magic power - for good or for worse. But the heat of gold

exceeds the heat of other metals, because it shines brightly, and makes people rich. It was the gold that made the kings rich, when Arab and Portuguese traders began to visit the country.

The heat of gold is so strong that it can neutralize other kinds of heat, such as the heat of witchcraft, or the heat of death. That is why you are not allowed to wear anything of gold when you approach a graveyard. The heat of gold you wear may "kill" the power of the dead. Correspondingly, you must take off any bright buttons, or spectacles with a golden frame, if you walk on a mountain that is "owned" by those ancestors (former kings or chiefs) who are buried there. The heat of the ancestors may be neutralized by gold.

Ancestors are invariably defined as "fathers". According to the official religious doctrines of the Manyika, there are two prerequisites for ancestorhood. One is that a person is a father when he dies. The other is that he is potent at the point of dying. Potency is the very point of ancestorhood, since it is the ancestors dwelling in the sky who fertilize the female earth with their rain. Fatherhood and potency are thus the two factors that define a person's value in the face of eternity. The same qualities are considered to be necessary if a person is to have a value on earth. Or, if you are a woman, you may be regarded as a person of value, if you submit to "the order of the fathers". That is, if you support the social system that gives preeminence to fatherhood, and to the hierarchy inscribed in the patrilineal system.

This is the "official" truth, which is presented in public contexts, and when the order of the world is outlined as a matter of principle. But behind the surface of conventional truth, people may express alternative versions of this father-centered world view. That is what they do in rituals of spirit possession, where also grandmothers and aunts may show to have a life after death. That is also what people do when preferring to indulge in fantasies about a female spirit in the water, rather than telling stories about male ancestors in the sky. The power of female spirits belongs to the domain of "muted truths", that are told in fairy tales, or acted out in semi-clandestine rituals. To share muted truths is to share private secrets.

Among the muted truths, we find a special connection between women and gold. This is not only a connection that is manifested in the fact that women were found to be those who collected the gold in the mines in Manicaland, when the Europeans first arrived. There is also a ritual connection between women and all kinds of metal. This is implicitly symbolised by the traditional smelting process, which was a ritual procedure carried out in a secret place. The smelting furnace had the shape of a female torso, which was built so as to show an opening between two thighs that were set widely apart. The male blacksmith used to blow air into this opening with a pair of phallic bellows. The place inside the woman's womb, "where the blown-in air meets the fire", is called *chido* (Hannan 1981:63). *Chido* means "love".

The woman's womb is thus the container of heat and fire, of love and melted iron, and the place from where gold derives. Her interior hosts an ambiguous

power, which may create new life, or nullify the power of men and ancestors, as well as the social system that they have defined. Her heat is a threat to the hierarchical system that sustains the patrilineal order, with its inherent insistence on formality and distance.

To keep the formal distance between people representing different social categories is what is implied in perfect *tsika* (good manners, respect). By conforming to this order, people accept the identities that are ascribed to them on account of gender and kinship roles. This order is defined as "cool". To transgress the distancing boundaries is dangerous, because there is a risk that the heat thus created would fuse the distinct social categories that keep people apart. But in relation to a "sister", or paternal aunt (*tete*), there is no such risk. You belong to the same category as your "sister", anyway. Hence, the closeness between a person and his or her *tete* is a safe ground, where you can be just yourself.

In the narrative about the girl who got gold, it was a *tete* who permitted the girl to go to the pool, and who then let her keep the gift of gold that she got there. It was the same gold that the anonymous fathers tried to take away from her. Since gold has a symbolic connection with the power coming from a female womb, the gold that the girl brought from the pool may be taken to represent her inner resources, or her own Self. It was with that gold she was able to start a new life, after having been reborn on the reed mat. It helped her to attract other people, and to live well with them. We might even define this "gold" as charisma, since it is noted that "the girl had great success already from the beginning", without having to prove that she deserved other people's respect.

It should also be noted that the girl brought medicines from the pool, along with the gold. The medicines define the girl as a *n'anga*, and thus as a person beyond the conventional roles implied in the hierarchical system. This means that she could dispense with any ascribed identity, and have an individual identity based on her own resources. The gift of gold defines the identity derived from these inner resources as something of supreme value.

We may compare the golden girl's rebirth with that of the doll girl. The girl who got a doll with new clothes in the pool found a new identity "with clothes". These clothes, and her perfect behaviour, made it possible for her to conceal her inner Self. This gave her the father's (the eagle's) approval, which she needed in order to survive. By contrast, the girl who got gold brought a gift that comes from within the female body, rather than a gift that is supposed to be put on the outside. She did not need any father's approval to survive, but "lived well" with her sisterly aunt, and other people, while displaying the "golden charisma" of an inner Self that had been defined as something of supreme value.

## CONCLUSIONS

The fairy tale about the lady in the pool is basically a story about identity problems. The core issue is that of how to attain a sense of value as an individual.

The standard version of the story suggests a perfect behaviour, and submission to authority. The reward will be a "second birth", which will give magic means to escape the authoritarian system. By a gift of magic medicines, the reborn individual will establish himself/herself as a person beyond society's rules, and thus acquire a fame as a healer (or artist).

The fact that the new identity is found in the mermaid's pool points to a connection with the process of separation and individuation, whereas the centrality of black and white food suggests a connection with the weaning trauma. However, in some versions of the mermaid story, the issue of food is either subordinated to the main theme of how to construct a personal identity, or else completely missing. This indicates that the connection between identity and weaning does not have to be intrinsic, but rather one of temporal simultaneity.

The point of time that connects the weaning trauma with the issue of identity is when the child is 18 months. That is when the Manyika children are weaned, in a very abrupt way, while at the same time being exposed to a sudden change in the mother's behaviour. This very point of time happens to coincide with a vulnerable peak in the child's identity development, or in his "separation and individuation process". What happens at this time has a vital importance for the child's individuation. If emotionally supported by a mother who is available during the rapprochement phase (beginning at 18 months), the child has greater chances to develop a secure sense of individual identity. But if, as among the Manyika, the mother suddenly withdraws her emotional support from the child, the individuation can be assumed to be negatively affected. Since the kinship system is constructed so as to further suppress the idea of individual value, and since fatherhood epitomizes the value of a person, most children may be assumed to get difficulties in feeling that they have an individual value in their own right.

The issue of how to attain a sense of value is particularly elaborated in the two female versions of the *nzuzu* theme that have been presented in this essay. Both stories deal with problems of female identity. In one of the stories, the girl chooses to assume an identity conferred to her by the official social system. By submitting to authority, and becoming "the perfect girl" (a new doll with clothes), she conceals her inner Self, and thereby obtains paternal approval. In the other story, the girl finds her identity by relying on her own, inner resources. These were fostered in an egalitarian and trustful relationship to a female, significant Other. The sense of individual value (symbolised by gold) that she thus found helped her to develop close relations with other people, while, at the same time, she was challenging the hierarchical social system. A representative of this system (one of several anonymous fathers) tried to deprive her of the gold (the value) that she had found.

In the standard version of the *nzuzu* tale, the problem of how to attain a personal value is subordinated to the issue of accepting or rejecting "black food". Further, the standard version emphasizes the mermaid's dangerous ambiguity much more than the two female versions reported. It may be a coincidence that the standard version of the *nzuzu* story has been reported to me by men. But it may



also be significant, since boys are generally weaned much later than girls (around 24-30 months), and would thus be more exposed to what Mahler calls a prolonged, or even "parasitic" symbiosis. Mahler found that, in severe cases, such a prolonged symbiosis was connected with fantasies about reingulfment by a female figure in a whirlpool.

These stories may thus very well be interpreted in a psychoanalytical perspective, if Mahler's theory of the separation/individuation process is taken into account. One might also interpret the role of the magic gifts as a sign of a failure to adopt the reality principle, and thus connect to mainstream psychoanalytic theories. Yet, I am not sure that a psychoanalytic interpretation would stand for itself. Nor am I sure that everybody who seems to be preoccupied with these fairy tales are necessarily talking about unresolved conflicts stemming from their own early childhood.

These stories are also dealing with a theme that has a vital importance in a society where everybody is supposed to suppress the value of individual identity, in favour of the socially constructed identities implied in the kinship system. Further, since everybody is supposed to conceal the inner Self behind a mask of *tsika* (good manners, respect), and to observe a formal distance to other people, while at the same time paying lip service to the idea of a collective identity, it might be important to ponder about the issue of identity. Questions likely to be asked by anybody would be: "Who am I?", or "What gives me a value as an individual?", or "How can I be an individual, and yet share the identity of other people?"

The women in particular would have reasons to pose such questions, since they are living in a male-oriented world, where fatherhood and potency are considered essential for a person's value. But they cannot discuss such issues openly, and they would never articulate such questions in the abstract idiom of Western academic concepts. They would rather choose the symbolic idiom of fairy tales, which provide a medium for sharing problems in the "muted" domains of their lives.

The *nzuzu* story provides the perfect framework for such a "muted" discussion about identity, since the story is dealing with the problems that coincide with the process of separation and individuation. That is to say, the mermaid's pool is the appropriate setting for such a discussion, because its symbolic connections will direct the attention of both the narrator and the listener to the temporal and associational context where the issue of identity was first raised in their lives. The cues to the relevant context will be provided by the culturally shared symbols in the story, and by the maybe universally valid symbol of the pool as well. With this implicit understanding as a common ground, the narrator and the listener will meet, and share their muted feelings. These feelings may be related to unresolved conflicts stemming from their early childhood. But they may just as well relate to existential problems that virtually everyone has to deal with at some point in life. These problems might be phrased as two questions: "Why do I sometimes have to

protect my own Self by not being myself?" "Under what conditions can I keep my individuality while sharing my own Self with the selves of other people?"

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