In a foreword to this volume (an abridged version of the author's University of Bristol dissertation), F.B. Welbourn notes that Langley's most important contribution in this study of life crisis rituals among the Nandi people of Kenya is her detailed description of female initiation rites, a contribution only a woman could make. This is in line with an increasing recognition among anthropologists that women are able to research subjects closed to men, and that they can, as a result, provide an understanding of aspects of cultures and societies on which we have often had only second hand information.

The Nandi are an East African people, living in the Western highlands of Kenya. Traditional cattle herders, they are neighbors of the Maasai, who are perhaps better known to non-anthropologists. The Nandi live in scattered homesteads, and before the British established chiefs among them for their own administrative purposes, they were an 'acephalous' society, with little formal political structure. Among them, as among many of their neighboring Nilotic peoples, the main organizational structures were a series of seven named age-sets. This system provided these cattle herders and fighters with a standing army. The three main stages of a man's life were, and are: uninitiated boys, "warriors" and "elders". There are parallel stages of women's lives also. Initiation divides adults from children, preparing them for marriage and, in the case of boys, turning them into warriors. Although nowadays, most Nandi are either Christians or Moslems, today, as formerly, genital operations are the central features of initiation rites for both boys and girls. Langley's
study deals with rituals of marriage and divorce as well as those of initiation. The latter, however, are given most space and clearly are of greatest importance to the people themselves, and of greatest interest to the student of Nandi society. This review will therefore concern itself mainly with the initiation rituals.

In spite of the fact that Christian missionaries in the earlier years of the century vigorously attacked the practice of circumcision, they accommodated, for the most part, to the male rite. They discovered that their initial opposition for a long time deterred the attendance of Nandi youths at Mission schools. And in spite of the missions' unyielding opposition, the female rites have survived as well. Langley's own work is based on extensive interviews and on her own observation of a girls' initiation rite in 1973. Here she discovered, "with enormous interest, that the rite had not only persisted and developed in form and symbolism over the years, but it had become a potent symbol of 'Nandiness', and affirmation of what it meant historically—politically and socio-culturally to be a Nandi, while at the same time having little or no relevance, as an institution, for modern conditions of living." (Langley 1979:15). A notable feature of Nandi initiation rituals, now as well as in the past, is the striking parallelism between male and female rites. They are both collective events, including a group of initiands, they are both given the same term, tundu, and both are carried out annually. They involve major financial outlays to the families and are significant community events. Through the rites, important ties are established between age-mates, between the young people and significant adults in the next older age-sets, who play roles in the rituals, and with a specific relative of the opposite sex—usually a brother for the girl. Women, specifically female relatives, play a much larger role in the male rites, than men play in the female rites. Both rites
consist of about a dozen, mostly parallel, events. A series of steps take place prior to the operations, and another series afterwards, when the candidates have passed through a more or less lengthy seclusion and their wounds have healed. The initiation concerns a transformation from child into adult, although it is not specifically linked to stages of physical maturation. Both boys and girls are likely to have had sexual experience prior to the initiation, and some girls may be pregnant. Both boys and girls are made to confess such illicit sexual relations prior to the operation, under threat of punishment from the ancestors. For the boys, a series of painful ordeals precede the operation which, traditionally, consisted of two parts, the circumcision and the more painful, and more dangerous, incision. Nowadays, the ritual emphasis appears to be more on the ordeals with the first operation, and only that, likely to be carried out in the hospital. For the girls, a traditional betrothal rite, following the clitoridectomy, is still sometimes performed.

The initiation ritual of the Nandi clearly fits the analytic pattern of rites of passage described by A. van Gennep. Initiands are separated from their former lives, pass through a liminal phase and then are reintegrated, as new and transformed persons, into their societies. One of the most interesting elements of the liminal phase, a stage of being neither here nor there, is the transvestiture, in which boys are dressed by women in portions of women's clothing and jewelry, and girls are dressed, nowadays by their sweethearts, in male attire. This portion of the girls' ritual has been much elaborated by the young people themselves, and uses contemporary rather than traditional elements.

Langley stresses the emphasis on transformation of children into adults, of concern with courage for people who hold bravery in high esteem. The young Nandi themselves, she writes, "justify the continuing practice of circumcision by appealing to its success in making a confident and mature adult
out of a child." (P. 121). The ordeals involve teaching of skill, as well as endurance, and are part of a process of schooling in the traditional virtues. The theme of death and rebirth is also of importance for the men, who are—although Langley does not stress this—now reborn of men by means of the ritual. These are only some of the literally hundreds of elements that, as multivocal symbols, cry out for much more detailed and refined analysis. Langley offers us a glimpse at a complex and highly symbolically charged system of rituals.

Langley's very specific description of the Nandi life crisis rituals gains in importance when we remember that this is a single society of literally hundreds in Africa where female circumcision rites, of varying complexity, have been and still are practiced. Indeed, male circumcision rites are practiced more widely, and have had at least two historically independent origins, in the Africa/Near East area, and in aboriginal Australia. For women, the practice appears in only the first of these areas. The sources of such cultural inventions are ancient and complex. Whatever they may be, the parallelism between male and female practices for people such as the Nandi are striking. Also, their operations are quite different from many of the more severe practices found in other parts of Africa, often separated from puberty rites. There is no indication, for the Nandi, of male domination, or of attempts at controlling female sexuality. The central symbols here concern fertility and personal and social identity, for both men and women. These are rites of initiation into adulthood, that is into a life of responsible reproductive sexuality; and the operations constitute an inscription of such a new identity into the sexual organs. For the Nandi, as for the Kikuyu, another Kenyan people, attempts at prohibiting these central rites in the past represented attacks of the very existence of the groups, and became ready-made issues for nationalist leaders.
Langley's highly descriptive study shows the complexity of the rituals and their dense symbolic content. Work such as this indicates how inadequate research techniques are, such as those of Hosken (1979), that consist of asking people "why do you carry on these practices?" A study that approaches the subject of female genital operations from the perspective of a single local society and within the social and cultural context in which the practice functions, provides a picture at considerable variance with one taken at the level of national or continent-wide surveys, encompassing, without differentiation, a whole range of diverse situations. If such operations are to be eliminated, as health hazards from the perspective of modern medicine, as urged by Hosken (1979, cf. review by J. Brittan), then the initiative must come from inside the specific societies and the rules be replaced by functional equivalents.

Given the current trends of modernization, hospital operations and graduation exercises will provide such equivalents for boys. Women's achievement of adulthood, including their reproductive successes, will be devalued, as westernization imposes a lower status on women than did the traditional societies.

Erika Bourguignon
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