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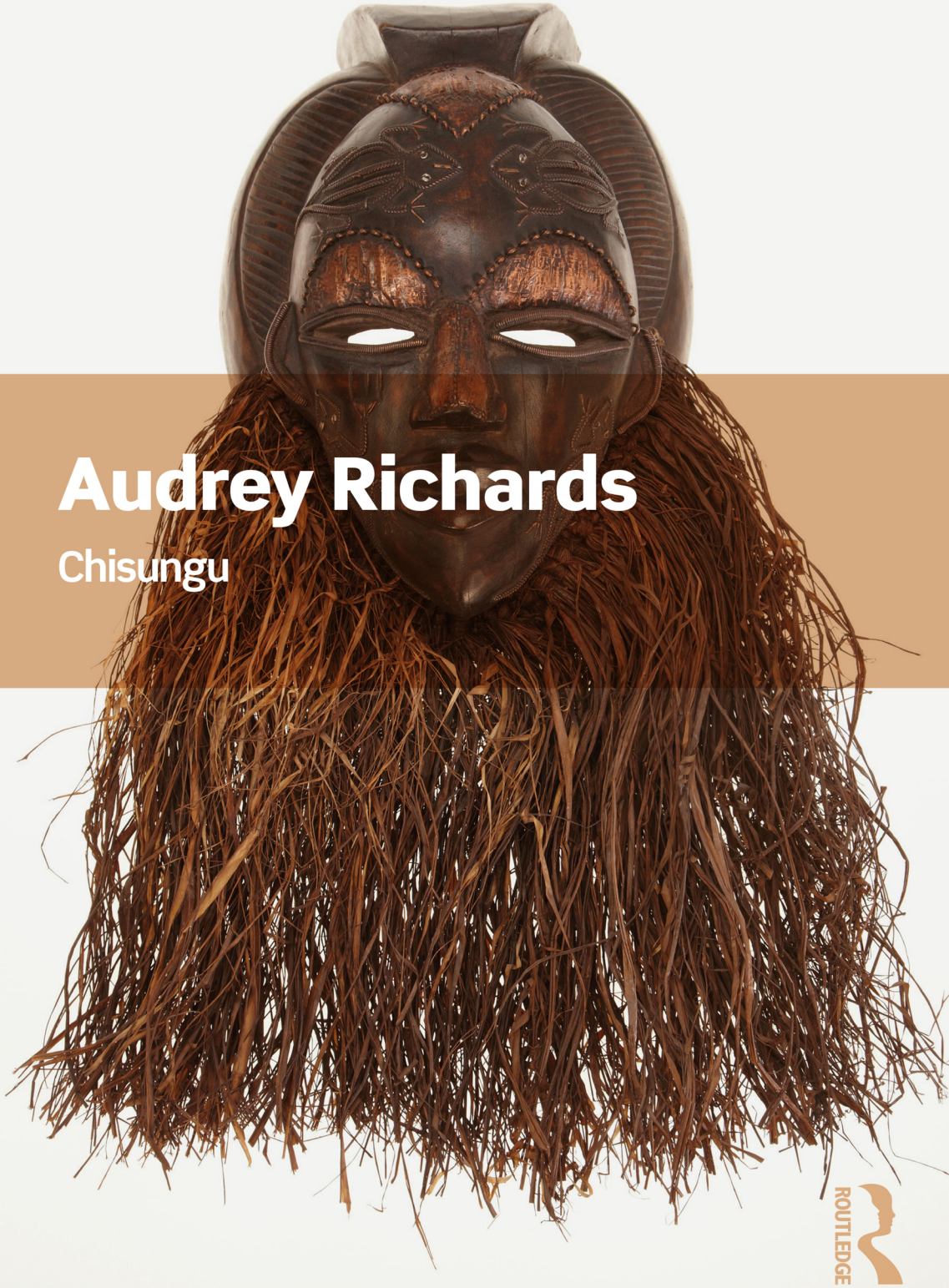

# Audrey Richards

## Chisungu

ROUTLEDGE

# Chisungu

**'...a classic for the study of initiation rites'**

*— American Anthropologist*

**'...a pioneer study of a rite de passage'**

*— African Affairs*

**'For fifty years, Audrey Richards enriched anthropology; her contribution during that time was one of its guiding lights. Throughout her long and fruitful life, as teacher, administrator, and social analyst, she assayed kinship, nutrition, fertility, labor, migration and ritual, in studies that are classics in their field.'**

*— American Ethnologist*

Audrey Richards (1899–1984) was a leading British anthropologist of the twentieth century and the first woman president of the Royal Anthropological Institute. Based on fieldwork conducted at a time when the discipline was dominated by male anthropologists, *Chisungu: A Girl's Initiation Ceremony Among the Bemba of Zambia* is widely hailed as a classic of anthropology and African and gender studies.

Underpinned by painstaking research carried out by Richards among the Bemba people in northern Zambia in the 1930s, *Chisungu* focuses on the initiation ceremonies for young Bemba girls. Pioneering the study of women's rituals and challenging the prevailing theory that rites of passage served merely to transfer individuals from one status to another, Richards writes about the incredibly rich and diverse aspects of ritual that characterised Chisungu: its concern with matriliny; deference to elders; sex and reproduction; the birth of children; ideas about the continuity between past, present and future; and the centrality of emotional conflict.

On a deeper level, *Chisungu* is a crucial work for the role it accords to the meaning of symbolism in explaining the structure of society, paving the way for much subsequent understanding of the role of symbolic meaning and kinship.

This Routledge Classics edition includes a new Foreword by Jessica Johnson and the Introduction by Jean La Fontaine from the original edition.

**Audrey Richards** (1899–1984) was one of the outstanding ethnographers of her generation. She completed her PhD at the London School of Economics in 1931, under the supervision of Bronisław Malinowski. She was amongst the first anthropologists to carry out fieldwork in Africa and taught at the University of the Witwatersrand from 1937 to 1940. On her return to England she taught at the London School of Economics and was a key member of the Colonial Social Science Research Council, leading to her becoming director of the newly established East Africa Institute at Makerere University, Uganda in 1950. She returned to England again in 1956 as a Fellow of Newnham College, Cambridge, where she later served as vice-principal. She was awarded a CBE in 1955 and became the first woman president of the Royal Anthropological Institute.


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Audrey
# Richards

## Chisungu

### A Girl's Initiation Ceremony Among the Bemba of Zambia

With a new Foreword by Jessica Johnson and the Introduction to the 1982 edition by Jean La Fontaine.


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# Contents

# Foreword to the Routledge Classics Edition

Writing in the 1950s, Audrey Richards was confident that the *chisungu* initiation rituals she was documenting were dying out. The resulting book remains of contemporary interest in large part because she was wrong. *Chisungu* initiation ceremonies, and comparable rites across Southern and Central Africa, have since been described by numerous scholars, all of whom have turned to Richards' account in formulating their own. Her study is a true classic. It is instructive reading for students of anthropology seeking to understand the development of the discipline, functionalism, and ritual; and it continues to provide inspiration for research on gender relations, marriage, and social maturation. What it is not, is a record of lost tradition.

## THE AUTHOR

Audrey Richards (1899–1984) had a privileged upbringing. Born to parents who were well connected in British and colonial Indian society, she spent much of her childhood in Kolkata (then Calcutta) before the family relocated to Oxford and she was sent to boarding school. A Natural Sciences degree at the University of Cambridge might have marked the end of her formal education. However, following a stint as a medical relief worker in post WW1 Germany, she found her way to social anthropology by means of

a PhD at the London School of Economics, where began her close relationship with Bronislaw Malinowski.[1]

Richards' doctoral research combined her scientific training with the interest she had developed in diet and nutrition while in Germany. It was after the completion of her library-based dissertation that she began fieldwork in Zambia, then Northern Rhodesia. Her early field research maintained her focus on the management of food and culminated in the publication of *Land, Labour and Diet* in 1939. During the same period of fieldwork, in the early 1930s, Richards observed the initiation rites that generations of anthropologists have come to know through the present volume, published two decades later.

It has been suggested that Richards' interpretation of the rites was already 'dated' by the time it appeared in print (Kuper 1999: 128). Her critics take issue with the functionalist bent of Richards' analysis, evident in her emphasis on the varied purposes of the ritual. Casual dismissal of Richards' work is characteristic of the way in which she has been 'underestimated as an anthropologist' (La Fontaine 1985: 202), however. It is all too easy to lump Richards with Malinowski and the Functionalist school and assume that, while her publications may be interesting landmarks in the history of the discipline, they are of little direct relevance to contemporary anthropologists. Such a view does Richards and her work a great disservice. Functionalist, perhaps, but never ahistorical, Richards was directly concerned with the impact of colonialism on the societies she studied (Bank 2016: 151–188). Shining through her discussion of the *chisungu* rites is a clear sense of transformation over time, in the rites themselves and the lives of those they concerned, not least as a result of the rise in mine migrancy for the men the young initiates were expected to marry. Moreover, this is accompanied by concerns with the polyvalence of ritual symbols, the emotional tenor of proceedings, and the differential attitudes of the participants. Richards certainly did not shy away from the complexities of Bemba life in the service of a dominant theoretical model or neat argument. In these respects, the book can be said to have been ahead of its time.

The publication of *Chisungu* long predated the emergence of feminist anthropology, and when feminist anthropologists began their search for proto-feminist work in the discipline, they rarely turned to Richards' texts. The writings of those who knew Audrey do not depict her as directly engaged with matters of women's emancipation (Gladstone 1986). Yet they

do recall her as a generous mentor and 'a champion of younger women scholars' (Bank 2016: 184). She also provided, in *Chisungu*, one of the first full-length studies to focus on women's lives and rituals. Her influence on subsequent generations of feminist anthropologists, notably Marilyn Strathern and Henrietta Moore, is evident in their later engagement with her work.[2]

Richards is known for her belief in the potential usefulness of research for governance and administration. This concern was evident in the energy with which she took on the position of Director of the East African Institute of Social Research at Makerere University in Uganda (1950–1956), and it was during her time in Uganda that *Chisungu* was finally completed. Nevertheless, *Chisungu* does not directly reflect her practical agenda. Instead it brims with Richards' interest in the nature of ritual and the possibilities for its interpretation, and overflows with ethnographic curiosity about the workings of a matrilineal society under conditions of colonial rule and in the context of significant male out-migration.

## THE RITES

The *chisungu* ceremony Richards observed took place over the course of a month in 1931. A senior woman led the rites as *nacimbusa* (mistress of the ceremonies) and was assisted by many other women, themselves already initiated, whose singing, dancing, play acting, and pottery skills were crucial to the ritual's success. The women's efforts were directed towards the preparation of two young initiates for adult womanhood and marriage. Richards provided the millet for the beer, and thus secured the status of 'owner' (*mwine*) of the ceremony with full rights of access. Her account makes clear that the rites were felt to be very important, as were the various sacred emblems (*mbusa*) that were employed throughout, the meanings of which were secret and not always clearly or consistently articulated. Male and female villagers Richards spoke to were in agreement that the *chisungu* was vital. Without it, men pointed out, a girl would not make an attractive bride. She would not share in the knowledge of other women, and she would be excluded from future *chisungu* ceremonies. Moreover, '[s]he would just be a piece of rubbish (*cipele*); an uncultivated weed (*cangwe*); an unfired pot (*citongo*); a fool (*cipumba*) or just "not a woman"' (111). Women's view on the matter were more detailed and varied, but Richards divides them into three types: *chisungu* was necessary 'to make the girl grow (*ukumukushya*); to teach

her (*ukumufunda*); and "to make her a woman as we are"' (111). Essential as they were, the rites were also hugely enjoyable for those assisting the *nacimbusa*, and a great deal of laughter and merriment accompanied the sometimes arduous tasks involved in 'dancing' the girls.

Fearing that there would be no further opportunities to observe *chisungu* rites, Richards provided an incredibly rich account, packed full of empirical detail, in support of her interpretation of the purposes, symbols, local explanations, and experiential dimensions of the ceremony. This level of detail was not perhaps necessary in the sense of providing a fulsome account of a historical relic, but it is nevertheless where considerable ongoing interest lies. Subsequent researchers have been able to compare their own observations with her account, and to revisit and reinterpret the rites through her description according to their own theoretical perspectives.

Research has demonstrated the continuing importance of *chisungu* rites in Zambian contexts (Haynes 2015; Rasing 2001, 2004), as well as the contemporary significance of similar rites elsewhere in South-Central Africa's 'matrilineal belt' (Arnfred 2011; Johnson 2018a) and beyond (Kratz 2010 [1994]; Werbner 2009). Such work has built upon Richards' insights, and even where the resulting engagement is critical, it is greatly facilitated by the richness of her study. Richards' detailed descriptions have enabled comparisons across time and space; her incorporation of heterogeneous voices in the interpretation of the rituals (the analyst's as well as participants' live commentary, and the more considered reflections she gathered from key informants after the fact) have inspired further efforts to move beyond homogenised analyses of ritual meanings; and the space she gives to Bemba men and women's own answers to the question of why *chisungu* is important have prompted fruitful reflection on what it means to be a fully adult woman in a given society.

In an influential reassessment of *Chisungu*, Malcolm Ruel delved into the nuances of Richards' ethnographic material in order to highlight broader patterns of Bemba ritual symbolism and practice and thereby situate the *chisungu* rites at the heart of a wider cosmology (1997). Ruel's interest lay in the 'longer-term, larger, cultural and social order that the ritual fits into' (Ruel 1997: 84). Bringing together material from *Chisungu* and aspects of Richards' Bemba ethnography published elsewhere, he highlighted an overarching concern with sex and fire in Bemba society, evident in the ritual spheres identified and described by Richards. Ruel argued that *chisungu* is pivotal in this respect

because of the vital importance of women's responsibilities for the proper treatment of fire in relation to sex, which is emphasised and indeed taught, during the puberty rituals. Chieftaincy is another key ritual domain, particularly in relation to the chief's duty to 'warm the land' through his sexual vigour (fire), which he can only do with the assistance of his wife, who subsequently carries out the required rites of purification. As Ruel suggests, 'this ritual control and direction of the chief's sexual vigour is integrally dependent upon the wife's use of procedures, including especially the "marriage pot", that derive from chisungu' (Ruel 1997: 85). He concludes that 'Chisungu is then not *just* about the transition of a girl to adulthood: it is about the larger and more significant issue of containing biological growth processes within a cultural and social order in a way that will uphold that order' (Ruel 1997: 84, original emphasis). Ruel's efforts to situate the ceremony in a broader cosmological milieu stand testament to the fecundity of Richards' descriptions.

Marilyn Strathern's theoretical engagement with *Chisungu* is titled 'Making Incomplete' (1993). It is a play on the notion of making persons (in this case women) complete through educative rituals of initiation which transform those who undergo them into full (complete) members of society. Applying her relational theory of gender to *chisungu*, Strathern turns this equation on its head and suggests instead that 'far from completing a person, it is as though initiation practices gender the person as an incomplete being' (Strathern 1993: 42; and see Strathern 1988). She thus suggests that initiation rituals might be better thought of as 'rites of decomposition' (Strathern 1993: 48) that see 'androgynous' children (composed of their relations with both parents) emerge as 'single-sex' persons, ready for marriage and a different form of completeness that comes from the union of male and female persons. Initiation rituals, then, make young women visible as future brides in relation to those among whom they will live as wives and daughters-in-law, while obscuring their connections to their natal kin.

Strathern's argument is against a view of initiation rites as primarily educative. As she acknowledges, Richards was aware of the limitations of seeing *chisungu* as a form of knowledge transmission, observing that much of what the rites seemed to teach was already known to the girls, and that little emphasis was placed on communicating clearly to the initiates who spent much of the time with their heads covered. As Richards put it, with characteristic humour, 'If any useful information was handed out during the chisungu one would be inclined to think that the candidates themselves would be the last

people to have a chance of acquiring it' (116). But Strathern's real target is not so much Richards' analysis as certain Western assumptions that might underlie readings of it. Namely, assumptions about education as a crucial tool for socialisation with the aim of turning out completed persons. Strathern's theoretical insights are compatible with the kind of complex, esoteric, and allusive instruction Bemba initiates receive. The latter is, after all, aimed at forming gendered persons who will not be 'complete' as individuals but only through new relationships with others, as wives, affines, and mothers. Nevertheless, Richards leaves us in no doubt that the idea of the rites as a form of 'teaching' (*ukufunda*) was of central importance to the women who performed them.

Richards would likely have been intrigued by recent studies showing adaptations to initiation teachings in the shadow of HIV/AIDS. Naomi Haynes, for example, has engaged closely with Richards' descriptions of the obscure modes of communication employed during *chisungu* to argue that there has been a shift towards more open and 'straight' speech, both within the rites themselves and within the marital relationships for which the girls are being prepared (2015). Haynes' work demonstrates the retooling of *chisungu* in an ethnically diverse urban setting among Zambian Pentecostal Christians. My own research in rural Malawi has shown how comparable initiation rites there, known as *chinamwali*, are considered indispensable for the challenges of life in the twenty-first century (Johnson 2018a). Although it is their likely fate, marriage has been de-centred as the immediate goal for initiated girls, who instead are encouraged to focus on formal education. Advice of this nature may be given very directly, but the girls are also exposed to highly prized and jealously guarded seeming 'mumbo-jumbo', to use Richards' phrase (117) for the kinds of riddles and allusive phrases that the girls must memorise. Familiarity with these indirect linguistic forms serves to confirm women's status as initiated. In these otherwise contrasting contemporary contexts, initiation rites remain essential preparation for adult life and a source of female solidarity, not to mention a great deal of fun.

## MATRILINEAL SOCIETIES

As Richards shows, matriliny is common to many of the societies in which *chisungu*-type rites are practised. Since Richards' research was published,

understandings of matriliny have developed considerably (e.g. Arnfred 2011; Brantley 1997; Johnson 2018b; Peters 1997b). Matriliny has been shown to be resilient and of ongoing significance to the lives of men and women across a large area of Central–Southern Africa (and elsewhere in the world). For Richards, *chisungu* 'might be regarded as an extreme expression of the dilemma of a matrilineal society in which men are dominant but the line goes through women' (44). However, it is no longer considered to be the case that matrilineal norms of descent and inheritance constitute a "puzzle" (Richards 1950: 246), because the androcentric assumptions that underlie such a reading of gender relations have been examined and challenged. Where Richards saw women 'robbing fathers of their children' (144), contemporary ethnographers are more likely to see a configuration of kinship relations that is as 'natural' as any other to those whose belonging it defines. A certain degree of conflict, contestation, and individual variation is thus to be expected, as it is in patrilineal societies, against a backdrop of shared norms and practices.

While men's roles within matrilineal societies remain of interest to anthropologists, they are no longer assumed to be systematically "galling" (35). Men may be prominent and command considerable respect in their roles as mothers' brothers and lineage elders. They are also often cherished as fathers and valued as husbands. Their heirs are their sisters' children, while their own children belong to their mothers' matrilineages. Notwithstanding her structural assessment of matriliny, Richards provides valuable insight into the quotidian experience of marriage and the expectations of men as husbands. Through her description, we see how, in the early years of marriage, the interdependence of husbands and wives and the importance of the wife's kin are evident in the labour the groom provides his parents-in-law in exchange for food. Gifts which pass in both directions express 'respect' and hospitality, as the groom moves to live with his bride among her kin and begins to establish a homestead. It is through the provision of food that the bride's family welcomes the groom and signals their growing acceptance of the union. It is only after some time that the son-in-law is given his own granary and garden in his wife's village. Until then, he is dependent upon his in-laws for whom he must labour. This exchange of labour and food underpins the formation of kinship: it demonstrates respect and mutual obligation, and establishes men as husbands and fathers in the villages of their wives.

Richards makes clear that the Bemba women she knew had 'a high status' (41), as compared with patrilineal women elsewhere in the region. She related this to matriliny: to the relative ease with which divorce could be obtained; to the value placed on female children as those who will enhance the village by attracting husbands to it and founding new lines of descent; to the fact that, unlike their husbands who are 'strangers' in their marital villages, they are 'at home' as wives, surrounded by their own kin; and to the growing status that accrues as they become mothers and eventually grandmothers. Indeed, it has since been argued that matriliny accords 'greater social and political space to women' (Peters 1997a: 133). Elaborate initiation rites for young women, in which the importance of women's bodies, fertility, and knowledge is affirmed, can be seen as indicative of this. That women are vital to the reproduction of the community and the health and wellbeing of adults and children is clear from both the content of the rites and the significance accorded them. The ceremony Richards observed took place over an extended period of time, during which a large number of women were occupied with the rites, generally to the exclusion of men. It involved the consumption of significant and scarce resources. It brought women together to sing, laugh, share in the sacred symbols, and advise members of the younger generation, with the acknowledged aim of producing fully adult women, ready for marriage and the serious responsibilities entailed therein. It did so because women, and women's knowledge, were (and remain) important domestically, politically, economically, and religiously.

## A TRUE CLASSIC

*Chisungu* sheds valuable light on life in a matrilineal society: in relation to how marriage and residence are experienced, and how obligations between kin are discharged. Indeed, as much as *Chisungu* holds interest today as a study of ritual, it is also as a study of lives lived in a matrilineal context that Richards' book ought to be read, and re-read. In that re-reading, scholars of the twenty-first century will find that they are not only learning about the history of their discipline and the work of a pioneering woman anthropologist. *Chisungu* maintains the potential to generate fresh questions and new insights.

*Jessica Johnson*
2020

## NOTES

1 For more on Richards' early life, see Kuper (1999) and Gladstone (1986).
2 Henrietta Moore and Megan Vaughan dedicated their study of gender, nutrition, and agricultural practices in Northern Zambia to Richards (1994). The book revisits the themes of Richards' *Land, Labour and Diet*. For more on how Marilyn Strathern took up Richards' work, see Strathern (1984) and below.

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# INTRODUCTION

*J. S. La Fontaine*

This book is a study of girls' initiation ritual from the woman's point of view. When it was published in 1956 there were few accounts of single rituals and fewer still of women's rites. In the twenty-five years since its publication there have been important developments in anthropological thinking about ritual but *Chisungu* has not been superseded. Most of the detailed studies of initiation have been of male rites; those that deal with the initiation of girls are either brief or unpublished. *Chisungu* itself has been out of print for several years, though the stimulus of Richards's ideas has been acknowledged by more than one author.[1] It seemed appropriate to introduce this welcome new edition with a brief survey of the interpretations of ritual that have appeared since the first publication. Today, religion is once more a focal issue in anthropology and the interpretation of ritual the centre of theoretical controversy. It will become apparent that many of these subsequent works develop ideas which appear in this pioneer book. Yet the topic of girls' initiation remains curiously neglected; to provide fresh stimulus for new work in the field is yet another reason for publishing a new edition.

The analysis of religion and in particular religious action, or ritual, raises central issues for anthropology. In 1956, British social anthropology had for some decades been focused on the study of social organization, to which the understanding of religion had been subordinated. As Richards herself noted in the Introduction to the first edition, anthropologists had long accepted Van Gennep's thesis that rituals such as *chisungu* were Rites of Passage that served to transfer individuals from one status to another. However, they used an impoverished version of his ideas, shorn of the original concern with the

details of ritual (see La Fontaine 1978). By contrast Richards emphasizes these elements and the cultural values they evoke. Chisungu is shown to involve human concerns with sex and reproduction, the birth and health of children involving, also, ideas about the continuity between past, present and future.

To Richards, such ideas are 'social' in origin, inculcated in the individual, however 'emotionally tinged' they may be.[2] Even though she writes of the 'function of religious rites in relation to the individual's needs and emotions' (p. 107) and insists on the necessity to record the 'feeling-tone of the actors engaged in ritual' (p. 49) she is referring to generalized sentiments in the Durkheimian sense, rather than the raw feelings of individual human beings. They relate to common and practical concerns, such as, for example, Bemba women's anxiety for the health of their children in an area where infant mortality is very high. Ritual, she argues, reflects these concerns, and 'It is for this reason that an analysis of the *chisungu* ritual should take into account facts and relationships that were omitted in the more straightforward institutional descriptions' (Introduction to first edition, p. 22).

As a pupil of Malinowski Audrey Richards is working from a basic concept of culture as a tradition that distinguishes a people and which includes the norms and values that constitute the framework of group organization and interpersonal relations. It also includes all that which is described in this book under the heading 'Ideology and Dogma'. The majority of anthropologists at that time, using the concept of structure derived from the work of Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, labelled such material cosmology and ignored it. Their interpretations of ritual do not take into account details of ritual costumes, objects and behaviour since a sociological approach concerns a different range of data. Gough's article on girls' initiation rites among the Nayar of Malabar (Gough 1955) is concerned with the nature of marriage and its connection with descent and affinity; it concentrates on those details that relate to the structure of Nayar society. Gluckman's discussion of ritual as a means of expressing social conflict[3] disregards much of the detail he sets out in his description. Part III of this book discusses sociological approaches to ritual and offers acute criticism of their deficiencies.

Richards's own study is intended to display the social context within which *chisungu* is set. She introduced the first edition of the book with a brief

discussion of the force of blood, in particular menstrual blood, as a symbolic complex, but went on to write:

> Political and economic values are also 'taught' at puberty ceremonies and for this reason it is necessary, in order to understand their meaning, to have a background of knowledge of the social structure of the tribe concerned and of its dominant social values. This is particularly the case with regard to the Bemba chisungu, which is one of the tribe's two major sequences of ritual, and expresses many fundamental beliefs and values...

Unlike her teacher, Malinowski, she makes use of the concept of social structure, introduced into British anthropology by Radcliffe-Brown. A section of Part I is devoted to it and concludes with the hypothesis: '… the chisungu… might be regarded as an extreme expression of the dilemma of a matrilineal society in which men are dominant but the line goes through the woman' (p. 44).[4] Nevertheless, this sociological aspect is subordinated to the cultural interpretation of *chisungit*. It was the original contribution of this book to relate the meaning of symbols to the structure of society.

The definition of symbols offered here has clear antecedents in Malinowski's description of myth as charter for institutions, but it goes much further than a mere analogy with myth and implies a theory of ritual. She writes: 'It is in the nature of symbols, whether they occur in dreams, speech or action, to become the centre of a cluster of different associations. The efficacy of ritual as a social mechanism depends on this very phenomenon of central and peripheral meanings and on their allusive and evocative powers' (p. 149), for 'All symbolic objects make it possible to combine fixity of form with multiple meanings, of which some arc standardized and some highly individual' (p. 150). Turner writing on the Ndembu, another, similar, Central African people, uses a very similar approach to symbolism in the work that began to appear shortly after *Chisungu* was published. He defines a symbol as the basic constituent unit of ritual and presents it as unifying two poles of meaning: social and bio/psychological. Public structural meanings such as the identity of the Ndembu people or matriliny lie at one pole; at the other are such emotive concepts as mother's milk and the suckling of children, while in the middle can be found concepts of motherhood and womanhood. This 'fan' of meanings can be seen to underlie one of the central symbols Turner discusses, the *mudyi* tree whose sap is white latex. The similarity with the analysis in *Chisungu* is striking.

Yet the differences between the approaches of Richards and Turner are equally clear. Both Turner and Monica Wilson, who published her accounts of yet another Central African people, the Nyakyusa, in 1957 and 1959, make direct use of psycho-analytic insights. Wilson explicitly borrows from Freudian psychology while Turner's view is less specific, merely stating that the 'sensory pole' of symbolic meaning refers to the 'gross emotions' (Turner 1964). He and Wilson build individual emotions directly into symbolism, drawing on another discipline for meanings where these are not available to sociological analysis. Part of their interpretation of symbolism thus stands or falls on the assumption of the appropriate emotions in their informants and the actors. These assumptions are unverified; indeed the procedure by which public acts are interpreted in terms of the observer's attribution of emotional significance to the actors has long been regarded by anthropologists as unsound (see p. 110).

While Audrey Richards acknowledges her use of psychological assumptions and points to emotions such as those aroused by human blood or the uncertainties of 'growing up', she uses an approach in which the interpretation does not depend directly on these assumptions. Her description of the ritual gives an account of behaviour that indicates emotional states, a record of how the people looked, danced and spoke, 'which parts of the ceremony seemed to fill them with fear, excitement, boredom or a feeling of awe' (pp. 48–9). She uses this material to indicate the critical moments of the ritual (see p. 126) but also to offer as data for the analysis that is the province of other specialists. She writes, 'Puberty ritual is of interest to different types of scientists… The psychologist studying symbolic behaviour, or the linguist interested in the ritual use of language, needs to know the whole system of symbols used if he is to draw deductions from the material' (p. 48). It is clear that the full interpretation of ritual requires the co-operation of several disciplines, and she argues, 'Single explanations of ritual behaviour, however satisfying to the observer, seem to me to deny the nature of symbolism itself…' (p. 153). As a result we have a wonderfully rich description, which includes the feelings, desires, and wishes of the actors, however ambivalent and confused they might be, but which segregates them from the aspect with which the anthropologist is concerned.

Conclusions about the social significance of the ritual and the objects used in it draw on the interpretations of informants, some of whom are specialists; the interpretations are not always consistent or clear. These variations are recorded, so that the observer's deductions may be distinguished from

the actors' own interpretations. From the latter the anthropologist obtains understanding of the actors' intentions or expressed purposes, while the functions, or practical effects of the ritual, may be clear only to the observer. She thus avoids the methodological pitfalls that result in the circular explanations she criticizes.

Richards demonstrates the falsity of some earlier ideas about initiation. As she remarks, it was common to find anthropologists describing rites of initiation in terms of education; a common feature of such rites was the seclusion of candidates for a period under the authority of seniors. Such groups were often described as initiation 'schools'. Richards states that 'Most of the accounts of girls' puberty ceremonies in Central Africa contain such phrases as "the girls are then given *instruction* in sex and motherhood".' (p. 116, italics in the original). Bemba women described *chisungu* in terms that make such an interpretation plausible: they emphasized, with repetition, that the rites 'teach' the girl, using the same verb *ukufunda* that they employed for teaching in European schools. Richards's own observation led her to the conclusion that 'the chisungu rite neither gives additional knowledge or skill nor the right to use it' (p. 116). What the girls learn, in fact, are songs, with their associated moral referents and secret meanings, and some secret terms. Some of these will not be fully learned until they have witnessed the *chisungu* of other girls, when as newly initiated women they fulfil their duties to their mistress of ceremonies by helping her in subsequent rituals. The *chisungu* gives them access to secret knowledge that defines them as women.

A further expressed purpose of the *chisungu* is that it makes the girl 'grow'. Detailed consideration of the meaning of this phrase leads Richards to the conclusion that

> The women in charge of this ceremony were convinced that they were causing supernatural changes to take place in the girls under their care, as well as marking those changes . . . securing the transition from a calm but unproductive girlhood to a potentially dangerous but fertile womanhood. (p. 115)

She calls this the 'magic' aspects of the rite, following Malinowski's definition of magic, which is based, she states, on a distinction between magic and religion in terms of short- and long-term objectives (p. 153 fn1). Her interpretation of the statements by Bemba women brings out the complexity

of the cultural associations that lie behind their words, and supports her argument that ritual is multidimensional and admits of no single explanation.

A major part of what is revealed to the candidates consists of the *mbusa*, which Richards calls 'sacred emblems'. The word is glossed as 'things handed down'; they are 'referred to specifically in this way and this is said to be their value' (p. 133). The mistress of ceremonies is *nacimbusa*, mistress of the matters of *mbusa*, or of tradition. The emblems are objects or drawings that embody tradition; great care and labour are expended on their construction but they are ephemeral, symbolic objects, which are destroyed soon after. They seem to act as mnemonics for the moral 'lessons' of *chisungu* but they are more than this, they are an integral part of the ritual, for their names, and the songs associated with them, are part of the secret lore of womanhood. They and the songs, dances, and mimes range widely over the important values of Bemba culture. Richards sets out these values in synoptic form (pp. 128–33) to examine 'how far the values and beliefs [the anthropologist] believes to govern the activities and relations of a particular group are actually expressed or symbolized in their rites'. The chart shows that *chisungu* is the pivot of the ritual system and is the foundation for both the rituals of chiefship and the cycle of agriculture ritual which was one of the most important tasks of the chiefs.

Yet Richards indicates a difficulty in this kind of interpretation of ritual. She states: 'anthropologists are still without a useful method of classifying tribal values in a way which would make systematic examination easy' (p. 108). This theoretical problem has still not found a solution. Both 'culture' and 'social structure' are insufficient as basic concepts from which to approach the analysis of ritual. As I have indicated, the concept of culture permits the anthropologist to comprehend within a single framework a range of different values; this allows for the interpretation of ritual details. Thus a single perspective can include: the roles of men and women and the value of children, ideals of marriage and chiefship, fertility and the respect owed to authority, whose interrelations and representation in ritual can be set out. The *chisungu* ritual can be shown to be linked to the institutions of matriliny and chiefship, through the central ideas of the dangerous power of fire, sex and blood. Yet these values cannot be ordered in a logical system, whereby certain values entail others in a logical hierarchy. The association between the ideals of marriage and those of hereditary chiefship can be shown to lie in the concern with the powers of the sacred trilogy, but logical priority cannot be given to any item in the cluster. Nor, and this is