

Touched: Hunter-Gatherers And The Anthropology Of Power

Morna Finnegan

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Morna Finnegan asks how it is possible to 'carry' valuable connecting terms such as 'n/om', ekila or even prana - deep body-thoughts - into theory without losing all but the husk. Touch, one of the human fundamentals (now increasingly under attack) may be where the shared body becomes visible. Morna looks at ways in which African hunter-gatherers in particular offer insight into systems of power and value which are inalienable from the collective body.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFLfW-ItY3E>

Introduction

Chris Knight: This evening we have a rather unusual anthropologist who's done, in my view, absolutely amazing work. And when I say unusual, it's because nobody knows a lot about her, very few people know much about her, and she hasn't done a huge amount to get her extraordinary work published.

So it's Morna Finnegan. Her PhD is called *The Political is Personal, Eros, Ritual Dialogue and the Speaking Body in Central African Hunter-Gatherer Society*. So already we have in that title the idea that women's power in an egalitarian society, it doesn't come from talk, it doesn't come from the head, it comes from the body itself, which speaks, and that body, that female body, is erotic and collective and all the more powerful for being those two things. So Morna did her fieldwork, brief as it was, for reasons of getting pregnant. I think it's about 2003, and she did her fieldwork with Jerome Lewis's support and supervision, and also the supervision of Alan Barnard, more formally from Edinburgh University. But she was working with the same people that Jerome Lewis worked with, the Benjela Yaka at a place called Mumbuli in the Republic of Congo. The central premise of the thesis is that it is through the sensual somatic conversation between male and female ritual collectives that the political pendulum at the heart of community life is animated. So that's one way of putting what Camilla just mentioned there. Morna's brilliant formulation that with egalitarian hunter-gatherers, you don't really have matriarchy, but you don't have patriarchy. You have what she calls communism in motion. And that's a pendulum between a kind of playful matriarchy where women seize power joyfully, collectively, cheekily, I mean, really, you know, with enormous amount of raucous kind of adult humor, directed at the opposite sex. And then after a few days of women's really, raucous rule over the entire camp, the women, as it were, get a bit tired of being on top and more or less think, okay, that was fun. We taught them, we kind of taught the men a playful lesson. Let's surrender power. And after a while, maybe a week or two, the men answer back

with their own ritual. So the women's ritual is called ngoku, and that's a temporary period of women's rule or matriarchy. And then when the men answer back, they do that with a dengue. And that's a patriarchy, but it's a playful patriarchy. And what it means is that you have a kind of revolution, a turning of the world upside down, but instead of just women doing it, okay, we've turned the world upside down and now we've got matriarchy. It's more powerful and actually more sustainable to win the revolution, if you like, and then surrender power in order to let the men have their go, but don't let the men outstay their welcome. And precisely because the male Ijengi could potentially become patriarchy, could potentially become male power going too far, it actually acts to stimulate a new women's revolution. And so you have this, what Morna calls this pendulum of power, or communism in motion. Women rule, then after a while men rule, then women rule, then men rule, and it looks as if from the mythology, of these alternations of power. The clock is not a night day clock. It doesn't all happen in one day, and it certainly doesn't happen during the course of a year. It's much more closely a once a month oscillation or pendulum, although not necessarily these days strictly monthly, but it's close to a monthly pendulum of power. Over to you, Maura.

Lecture Begins

Morna Finnegan: Okay, thanks, Chris. So I have said, you asked me for a subject for the talk and the first thing that came to mind was this idea of touch and the theme of touched, being touched and the ways that people, cultures based on the principle of touch. and I said in the abstract that theories of power and value are always just that. They're theories, they're frameworks that let us share empirical patterns and connections, but that real power and real value is always first in the body. It's located in the body. And how you carry these valuable terms, things like Nom, the Jun Tuan Nom, or Aquila as Jerome describes it, where it's so earthy and tangible into theory, into communicable frameworks without losing everything but the husk. And so I kind of, I'm continuing thinking that I have been doing for a while on what I call corporeal morality. So, you know, the idea that were offered insight into systems of power and value by societies where power is never detached from the collective body. It never becomes privatized. Okay, so I wanted to start by thinking about the fact that in moments of crisis, moments of extremist People come together and you touch one another. So, you put a hand on a bereaved person's arm or you kiss a forehead or a cheek. if you're comforting kids, the first thing you do is you put your arms around them. You press your palm against somebody's spine. or you put your chin on somebody's shoulder, you breathe in their skin and their hair. And so much is happening on a chemical level, that whole complex kind of topography of the hug. And the fact that so many of us recently have either lost that connection, that ability to actually physically, viscerally touch another person. And the fact that in this moment of crisis, in a moment

where there was this big kind of global stagger, people were being instructed not to touch. And I thought recently about, you know, all the people who died in care homes during lockdown. who were completely without contact, who were not allowed to be touched. And an Irish writer I really like called Kevin Tullis, who writes about death and the wake process in Irish society. And the fact that, you know, it's really at the heart of what makes us human, that we come around someone at that moment of exit and hold them in all kinds of ways, whether physically or ritually, communally. And so I was thinking about that response that we made as a society, much of it based on fear and how it sat with the anthropology of hunter-gatherers. You were talking just now, Chris, about this fact that women, have such a powerful presence in their communities among the Benjele or the Mbuti or the Baka or the F peoples, that the fact that you have this collective female body that keeps everything very kind of tangible and literally fuses people together. And I want to come to a beautiful description of Jerome's about women sitting together and singing. And so I started to think that this existential conviction that there was and that I've seen recently of illness or health as individual, so my illness, my health, like as in my house, my car, my career, my children, individual contagiousness or individual safety, And I saw some amazing stuff happen. People making a big effort, despite all the restrictions to connect in different ways, but I also saw people recoil from one another, quite literally. friends of my children, good friends who suddenly wouldn't touch them, and children full of fear about touch and what would happen if they were to touch another person. And so everyone lost in their own mortality and this terror, that they would catch something. And my good friend Tony in Derry, when he raised objections, which he did, was told again and again, you know, but Tony, people are dying. And he always said the same thing. He said, are you not going to die? He said, don't get lost in this fear. It's, you know, it's not about being reckless or irresponsible. Because of course, adhering to all the measures were also about, you know, being respectful of others, taking care of others. But there's such a fine line there in the belief that our illness or our health was up to us. It was individual. And we would either live or die, for ourselves. And Tony said, it's more really about how you live. It's about how you are able to connect and about how you're able to find ways to touch or hold. in moments of crisis. So that's a long-winded way of getting to something that happened when I was at Mbula in Congo and living next door to this family where there were two small babies. And I don't know if I've spoken about this, Chris, but I've just been there a few weeks when one day After these two three-month-old twin girls had a very fractious night, I noticed everybody wearing the same arc of red paste over their forehead. And the baby's mother, Mugonia, had painted her own face with crescent of white dots. And she was also wearing this arc over her head. And as the morning went on, she sat outside her door with an aloe mother. and each of them cradled a baby as a stream of people passed. And Mugonia had a big vat of red paste. And I have lots of photos of what she was doing. So she was dipping her, putting her hand in this paste, this thick red stuff, and she would draw with her thumb an arc on the brow of everybody going

past, from toddlers to old women. And her wee girls were wearing this paint as well. And I, Mongolia paste, I think, is used in a variety of contexts to signal danger, either to the person or from them. So moments of birth, bereavement, initiation, illness. And so, you know, different things happen through the day. A group of women came and sat with the babies and the mum and they sang this very kind of slow, unusually slow and ponderous all. And then a man and woman I didn't recognise came down from the farthest part of the camp and they stopped in front of the babies, almost kind of formally, a few yards away. And they started to speak directly to these babies, like reasoning with them, remonstrating, you know, delivering a kind of this long speech to the babies and they took turns to speak. And looking for a way to register concern without intruding or without making things worse, I remembered I had these tiny little bracelets I bought in the marketplace before we came up to Mbula. And I separated them out into two sets and just held them in my palm for a moment. And then I offered them to Mgonya, and she took them. And later again, I saw a boy of nine or 10 walking past with one of the girls in a sling against his chest, and he was crooning and kind of jiggling her. Everybody now, apart from us, wearing this red arc over their brow. And later, still in Goku, I heard the women singing away out in the forest. And then they charged through camp. They suddenly just arrived in camp en masse and charged up and down the main thoroughfare, clapping and shouting and lashing out at people before they stopped again in front of Mongonya and the babies. And they sang for a while before it all petered out. So what it felt like is as though there was this kind of rope being woven from these girls to all the other bodies in camp. as though those who were better able for it, those who were stronger, were actually sharing the sickness. And the community itself was holding on to these babies, using this ritual statement. and the red, among all the other things it signifies, is almost like a statement of shared blood, shared essence. And so I kind of, over the last year, I've been reflecting on that fact, that illness wasn't a private or an individual affliction. It was a community problem and you didn't have to carry it alone. Just as, in Benjele society or F society or Juntos society traditionally, you didn't have to carry your personhood alone, your identity alone. You know, everything that people had to carry through life was shared. It's not just meat, it's not just dancing and singing and all the good stuff. When there was a moment of need, people also shared illness. They took the illness and carried it together. And so it speaks to a whole different understanding of what the body is and of our place in a collective body. And so what this has to do with the anthropology of power really is that at Imboule and places like it, we find society premised on the principle of the sensuous. So the principle of touch, the protection and the connection of the young or the vulnerable within this really tactile community body. And that's where you find mothers publicly and culturally vocal. and really fused to such an extent that they're shaping the possibilities available to everyone. And also this is where you see the techniques used to keep people touching, to keep touch open. And I'm not just talking about physical touch, but also the precursor to any really kind of sophisticated social community is the ability to be touched, to be affected by the pain of others or

the illness of others, what we call empathy. And touch here is really another word for empathy or connection. But to me, it's less abstract. It's more fleshy and warm and immediate. And there's something of a challenge as well in touch. and our capacity to do that. Okay, so I want to look at a few of the ways that community premised on that notion of a shared body expands out. And I don't want to talk for a really long time because I know people were waiting around and there'd be questions, but I want to take this idea of touch and sharing the body and sharing personhood almost as a kind of political thing. And start by looking at the very early work of Richard Katz. I'm not going to go into his research, but I want to look at his findings about what was happening when Juntwa healers were going into this trance-like state, Ayah, probably I'm not pronouncing that right, Camilla will know the right pronunciation. During big community dances, where none, this energy or heat that rose out of the bodies of healers was then shared with everybody present as a kind of medicine, and also as a protector of well-being. So rifts in the community or conflicts between individuals were addressed during the healing dance. And if you listen to Katz's description, Nam expands, he says, as it boils in the stomachs of individual healers who then distribute it throughout the dance circle and using hands-on healing They touch one another. And boiling numb, he says, is likened to the sparks that break out into the night in all directions when the burning coals in a fire are stirred with a stick. So Jeuntoisie healers, very similar to Central African healers that I've read of or healing ceremonies and rituals. are kind of working on behalf of the community to lure sickness in various forms out of the social body and out of individuals. And Katz says that a major part of that process is the ability to see properly. And when you read his ethnography and the way he writes about Nom, and especially in his later work with Beasley and Saint Denis, you get this understanding of the body almost, the whole body as an instrument for seeing. I don't know if you're familiar with Weber's lovely description of the body as a complete instrument. And so when people are working in these healing dances to generate norm, You see the body as a complete instrument. The whole body is working as an eye almost to see what needs to be healed in the community. And here's a description from a healer himself talking about Nom. He says, you dance, dance, dance. Then Nom lifts you up in your belly. and lifts you up in your back and you start to shiver. None makes you tremble. It's hot. Your eyes are open, but you don't look around because you see everything. So the idioms surrounding the healing dance are visceral. Heat building and expanding in the stomach and the spine, vibrating the arms and hands, sometimes exiting the top of the head, And healers, as they're drawing sickness out of the bodies of others, experience this intense abdominal pain that they externalize through loud moaning or wailing. So the voice, we have the voice coming in here as well. And I've talked before about how it's interesting, given the parallels with the process of labour, intense abdominal pain, back pain, heat, uncontrollable trembling, you know, expelling pain through crying out. It's interesting that Juntwa women curb their norm during their reproductive years because they're already known to be full of heat. They're full of norm, they're full of power. And so they better not

dance because, you know, it would explode. And so the motion of a nom in the body is believed to endanger the health of babies, actually, because the idea is that both nom and children materialize out of this activated body power. Okay, so I mean, going back to the idea of how you take individual physicality, the individual person, and put them into the plural person. how I, Michael Jackson says, the anthropologist Michael Jackson says, how do we bridge the gap from I to we? How is that actually done in practice? And he says that, for the Kuranku people that he worked with, it's really about moving constantly together. So moving a lot and keeping everything moving, very like the Benjeli, for example, where everything is constantly circulating, but also in synchrony. So using your voice, using your body synchronistically, moving together. And that idea of the we replacing the I becomes very important and actually becomes a kind of a, it becomes a principle that sits at the heart of the social economy. The belief in a shared body and the power of keeping things open. And Jackson says we're embodied social beings before we're anything else. Okay, so I had this description from Jerome, and I know that he's here tonight because I saw his passport photograph among some others when I came on. He gives this beautiful description of Benjele women. And I remember when I was first reading Jerome's thesis way back a long time ago, being struck by this description, because you can feel the event itself, and you can also feel the way that he was feeling it. So he says, Benjele women were lying across each other. legs resting on each other, shoulders touching, arms lying in their neighbour's lap, melting into one another, physically and acoustically. And certain women may begin to sing anti-faunal duets in nasal voices like seal barks, making reference to their hunger or others' hunger, since this event, this ritual malobe opens the camp for meat. They might even go into trance and begin mystical conversations with the moon, women's other husband. And that really sums up perfectly one of the first things that I noticed after arriving to Mbula was this fact that it would be very hard to separate women out into individual people, because they moved so consistently in that way, woven through one another, whether they were singing and dancing, or just sitting around outside their doors, preparing food. And the fact that in these performances, in these The description that I gave, that I quoted from Jerome of Malobe, in these moments, from the smallest kind of most spontaneous eruptions of ritual dance or ritual songs to the biggest kind of big Boca celebrations, you know, might go on for days at a time. The parallel with descriptions of Juntwa healing dances is that nothing is individually owned. So you can't claim this power for yourself. You know, even the fact that a lot of the spirits and the individual dances will come through dreams, through the individual dreams of someone, don't allow them to be claimed. They're never the preserve of any one individual. And if you're familiar with Drone's writing on Masana, you see that constant negotiation between 2 possibilities. One is, you know, the individual expression and the fact that people are always strategizing and kind of, you know, doing what they can to to express themselves. And then the community constantly kind of expanding back. And there's always this kind of back and forth motion, very like what happens with women's and men's groups when they

act on each other ritually. And so collective song and dance is the focal point of communal life. Things like initiations are collective events, and songs and dances are medicine for the whole community. They're maintaining or restoring well-being and balance. And Sawada, in particular, describing F hunter-gatherers dance sequences and their sensitivity to sound brings out the fact that, again, from, you know, the smallest moments to the biggest celebrations, it's very hard to pinpoint where one person ends and another begins. And he talks about this in the context of polyphony. Sometimes he says the interval was so little, I wondered who sang first or who called first. And he believes that high level of vocal kinesis is reflective of what's happening on a physical level. And again, this idea of the body as a complete instrument. Okay, so I suppose what I'm trying to say, and I have a lot of ideas about this, what I'm trying to really impress is the fact that the whole body operates as an instrument in cultures where touch is fundamental and has remained fundamental to the ways that we socialize and the ways that we connect. And we can only really imagine what it's like on a chemical level, on a sensuous level to be held in this kind of basket of auditory, kinetic, rhythmic, physical flow that Embinjele babies will grow up in, and what it's like to be personified in a world where all the major lines of being are being sung and danced, and the collective space kind of reverberates with the music of the body. And one of the reasons that that's so, and I've talked about this before, I really believe, one of the reasons that, the collective space at Embula was so resonant, was so full of music, chatter and laughter, is that it has to be continually kept open. It has to be continually negotiated. Because there's no guarantee that 5 minutes from now, there won't be an opportunity for someone to grab or clutch or privatize or close things down. And so this is one of the, probably one of the most important qualities of the collective body. And one of the things that insists on is that things not be closed down, that things not be privatized. and that we not be broken apart into separate individuals who will then take care of ourselves and our own needs over and above everything and everyone around us. And there are implications of this way of being in the world, way of knowing yourself and others for the whole kind of ecosystem, the way that we engage with everything around us, the other than human community as well. And that's a point that David Graeber made again and again, that there's this constant reiteration of power. You know, even in situations where stratification, hierarchy, closure isn't a reality, you act constantly against it. You maintain the vigilance. And actually, it becomes a source of feeling good and a source of joy. And I mean, what I've been building here, I suppose, is an appeal for deepening our understanding of things like hunter-gatherer corporeal morality and how that gets wed against. the long history of Western philosophical and epistemological silencing, that we're familiar with. And I think following the literature on hunter-gatherers, looking at episodes like those sick babies at the start, from the perspective of the collective self means paying attention to all the other conversations being played out through dance, through song, that are flagging up the power of shared blood. of sexual solidarity, but also of the ability to transcend that using dance performance. And I've talked before about the fact that

you have female procreative physiology and fluids being particularly kind of pushed out into the cultural space. It's like keeping the maternal body public. And by doing that, access to everything the maternal body offers is kept public. It's accessible to everyone. Nobody gets diminished by the loss of that. And it's the same with, you know, the child element. The child element is very strong in Benjele or Abaka or even in Juntao culture. You can feel that playful, spontaneous, kind of fusing something that kids bring when they're allowed to remain socially central. So I was thinking that the body in all my writing from the thesis on is really this body in motion, this body that's perennially moving and full of this kind of jouissance that Barthes would have understood. But that in trying to bring it into an academic framework, wanting to be serious and be taken seriously, sometimes the reality gets distorted and sometimes you leave behind the things that are actually most important. And I had wanted to mention as well Colin Turnbull and his interest in what's happening when in booty infants are melded into the social body is an action against the possibility of Akami, so the possibility of intersexual conflict, particularly male aggression, that by weaving kids into this collective body early on, you work against that from the beginning. So Performance of bodily power or counter power is always acting in response to the possibility of its opposite. And I want to close with Bakhtin's insight because I love Bakhtin's work. I think it's very pertinent to the literature. I think it deepens a lot of what I find on hunter-gatherers. His insight that medieval parodies and feasts performed this kind of alchemy on scholarly wisdom. He said, these moments bring scholarly wisdom back inside laughter to the positive material bodily sphere. Everything they touched was transformed into flesh and matter. And at the same time, given a lighter tone. And that's a flip of the conventional process where flesh becomes word and abstraction, the kind of the dominance of the word in so much of the history that we're familiar with.

Lecture Epilogue

Morna: Okay. So I thought, I've been thinking about touch a lot, and I thought the human hand is made-up of 27 individual bones, carpal bones, metacarpal bones, finger bones, all connected by joints and ligaments. So 1/4 of our body's bones are found in our hands. The radial nerve carries sensations from the skin on the back of the hand and thumb directly to the brain. And there are 17,000 touch receptors and free nerve endings in your palm. They pick up sensations of pressure, movement, heat and vibration. And the skin on your fingertips is particularly sensitive to touch. So what happens when the main focus of your touch on any given day is a phone screen, a keyboard, a mouse, a Chromebook, a smart board? And I want to use what I've said about touch to reflect on the fact that we are increasingly being herded deeper and deeper into this idea of virtual contact, virtual connection. And it's, you know, it's really rife on social media and other powerful digital platforms. And yet as a society, we're getting lonelier. what happens to all of that 17,000 nerve receptors

that are supposed to be stroking, touching, feeling, pressing. And this process kind of sweeping us off the streets and out of the marketplace and away now from each other's hearths. Nobody's allowed to come in my house anymore and set up my fire, out of each other's arms. It started a long time ago. But it seems to be reaching a critical point. And I'm not just talking here about the virus. I know that there are extraordinary circumstances there. But I think our global dissociation from the rest of existence is happening because we forgot about touch. And we evolved because we touched. We evolved because we shared each other's babies, each other's blood, each other's fire, each other's meat. And then, we came to share each other's dreams and imaginations and songs and stories. We learned shared mind. it didn't just pop up out of nowhere. It happened because we touched and we risked touch. I think about those women beside me at Mbula, Mgonya and Sape, one of them feeding the other's baby, you know, and those babies, every second of their lives in contact with another body. And the fact that when they got ill, everyone carried the illness. Yet we've arrived at the point where we have actually managed to convince ourselves that mind is the relevant bit and that we can use these virtual pathways and instruments to continue to share our dreams and convey deep meaning to develop, synchrony, to create relationship. And you hear that kind of rhetoric coming a lot out of Silicon Valley these days. it's all about connection. So my question really is, why are we all so lonely? And watching the social dilemma, this documentary on Netflix at the moment with my teenager, Recently, I was really struck by someone saying, we're all lab rats now. And he said, we're all users. And what I thought is, okay, but they are also using, they're using, this is what's ingenious. They're using our ancient evolutionary need to touch against us. They're using it to create a dependency on this pacifier, this kind of virtual dummy that we get in place of real touch, real holding, real heat, real embodied joy. And our bodies have adapted over hundreds of thousands of years to expect to be touched. And babies are still born with that impulse every day because nobody told them that we're all brain now. They're born expecting to be rocked. and stroked and licked and groomed. And later on, as they progress through the life cycle, to be oiled and painted and danced. so the old brain, the body's expectations are the same. But it's as if the tech comes and steps in with this virtual hug, which turns out, if you look at a teenager at the mercy of it, as I often do, to be the kiss of death, really. The virtual hug is not the real hug. It's not a salve for that emptiness in the air around us. That, you know, that absent collective body that our brains and skins develop through. And I think a lot about the fact that the Benjoli aren't exceptional. You know, the Jeuntois aren't exceptional. We're exceptional. Technology is very clever and efficient and convenient. And I'm not denying it's a useful way to communicate. But what it is not is connection. It's not tenderness. It's not a hand on your shoulder. It's not arms around you when you feel desolate. It can't smell your hair. It can't pick up on your electricity or your pheromonal state. And if it ever does achieve that level of sophistication, it will probably be in order to manipulate you in some way because it has arisen directly out of that military industrial capitalist complex. And so that's just

a kind of a, I suppose, ending on an appeal to really begin to bring the insights that were being offered by people, like Jerome and many others, long-term ethnographers who are, from the Benjele, bringing us these concepts and these practices and these techniques for how to touch in ways that are healthy and in ways that challenge the current kind of drive to move everything into an increasingly disembodied state. Yeah, okay. So I think that's, I'm not going to talk anymore.

The Ted K Archive

Morna Finnegan

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Radical Anthropology. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFLfW-ItY3E>

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