

FATNESS AND CULTURE AMONG THE SOUTHERN MONGO (ZAIRE): THE CASE OF THE PRIMIPAROUS NURSING WOMAN

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ABSTRACT This paper describes the motherhood ritual of the primiparous mother among the Southern Mongo in Zaire, who is secluded from her husband for a long time after the delivery. Various prescriptions are imposed on her in order to confer on her a social status of *molekele*, a real mother. She is not allowed to work in the fields, prepare food, nor have sexual intercourse even with her husband during the seclusion period, and is given good quality food. By improving the nutritional status of the mother and child, these prescriptions result in a plump physique of *molekele*, and show an interesting example of biocultural interaction. The songs sung at the seclusion-ending festival, which is specific to each woman, refer to her story during the seclusion and glorify her fat appearance which is highly valued in the society.

Key Words: Motherhood ritual; Central Africa; Body image; Biocultural interaction.

INTRODUCTION

In traditional and modern societies alike, the biologically active periods of pregnancy and lactation are socially structured by cultural prescriptions. Many of these rules have influences on nutrition, for they concern factors affecting the energy balance, such as diet, physical activity and, at a higher level, birth spacing. Through mother and child interactions, cultural rules applied to the mother are likely to have repercussions on the child's health and thus will affect the physique and nutrition of both of them.

The Southern Mongo in Zaire, who live in the equatorial forest near lake Tumba, have, like many other societies, a set of prescriptions related to birth, the post-partum period and weaning. The Ntomba, Ekonda and Bolia, share very particular rules related to primiparity, which fit an overall adaptive strategy of energy management.

Among the Ntomba, the primiparous nursing women have to follow a greater number of rules than other nursing women, which in turn give them a special social status within the society. These rules occur during a seclusion period which starts just after delivery. In other African societies like the Cameroonesse Massa (Pasquet et de Garine, pers. com.), Bamileke (Pradelles de la Tour, 1984), the Zairian Woyo (Mulinda, 1985) or Yombe (Mwila, 1981) exist periods of confinement for females. There is a special allocation of food and leisure time during this period, but it primarily takes place either before or after puberty. Also the period occurs before the marriage among the Maures, the Touareg or the women living on the

island of Djerba, Tunisia (Laplantine, 1981). These periods never last a very long time, but are likely to affect the female fecundity and health status at the very beginning of the productive and reproductive life.

As regards to the Ntomba, such practices take place at a later time. This can be justified by the fact that marriage is not a simple event but a long sequence of events and by the fact that precocious sexual experiences bring girls into pregnancy within two years after a late puberty. During this period of primary importance, a young primiparous mother observes a long lasting confinement including a nutritional cure which leads to a change in her physique. From the literature, we can find no similar example of biological traits being enhanced by cultural rules. These practices related to primiparity are intergrated to the whole population's productive and reproductive strategy, i.e., the long-lasting rituals of marriage and polygamy. Among the Ntomba, the intercourse taboos that last long after delivery concern the primiparous as well as other nursing women. Such taboos can be facilitated by polygamy, since the intercourse taboo only concerns the mother and not the father. By observing the intercourse taboo, the Ntomba are said to avoid the risk of milk pollution by the male's sperm.

FROM ADOLESCENCE TO PREGNANCY: THE CHANGE IN PHYSIQUE

Menstruating late, as it often happens in developing countries, the young Ntomba adolescent soon experience sexual intercourse. At this time, her body figure changes from a grasshopper's look to a rounder one. Her "newly formed round shape" as well as her "appearance of modesty" are qualities highly praised by boys, who do not like girls "pointing their breast ahead as they walk."

When a boy chooses to marry a particular girl, he informs the parents of the girl of his intention and waits for their approval. (Formely, the couple could marry, if they are not related to each other within four generations.) At this stage, called *yoya ebia* or *yoya belia*⁽¹⁾ the boy is allowed to spend a couple of days at the girl's home chattering with her parents, whereas the girl prepares food and sets up a room for the lovers.

In order to bring the girl to his own village at the stage called *ipendia etulu*⁽²⁾, a small amount of money must be given to the girl's parents. Then the boy sets the date when he will return with witnesses. A fortnight to several months after this first-official meeting, depending on the ability to gather money and presents, the gallant man is engaged in the first step into the long process of marriage. He comes back with his father or his paternal uncle to set up both families' union (*nsehe itumba*⁽³⁾). The girl's family prepares *maboke* of game meat, wrapped with leaves. The two families look for a witness called *mononga*. If the couple come from the same village, the *mononga* must be related to both sides. The land owner, *nsom'emboka*, may play this role, if necessary. The other witnesses are the girl's father or his substitute (his brother, father or paternal uncle), the girl's mother who cannot be substituted, and the boy's father or his substitute (his uncle or a friend). The visitors announce the aim of their visit and present some money, a part of which is given to the witnesses.

After the visit by the boy's family, the girl moves to her lover's village, where the couple learn to know each other. At this time, however, they are not yet married, for a complete marriage (*ehenga* in the Ntomba, *ihongi* in the Ekonda) is a social event which takes a very long time, during which the total bridewealth has to be paid. Among the Ntomba, a marriage is usually sealed with closing of the seclusion period when the husband pays for *ehenga* (the intermediate Ekonda's *ikula*⁽⁴⁾ stage is paid before delivery). It may take as long as ten to 20 years (the couple having given birth to five or six children) among the Ekonda who pay large amount of bridewealth called *ihongi*.⁽⁵⁾

If one of the couple feels unhappy, the girl is allowed to go back home. In this case, however, all the payments must be given back to the husband. In fact, the girl's family and witnesses will pressure the girl to remain married until a new suitor comes and pays for her bride wealth.

THE MOLEKELE'S SECLUSION, LEISURE AND TOILETTE

If the union is a happy one, the girl will soon become pregnant. She usually either gives birth at the boy's village or goes back to her family at the 8th month of pregnancy. In the former case, her mother comes with relatives a fortnight after the delivery and takes her back home. The young mother now becomes *molekele* (called *wale* among the Ekonda), the "real mother," which means a nursing woman.

Every aspect of the *molekele*'s prescriptions is relevant to her later productive and reproductive functions in the society and the family. The young mother is kept apart from her husband, sleeping in a seclusion room during three years, sometimes as long as four years if the traditional dance *nsambo i makolo* is performed in the special festival, which marks the end of the confinement of the young mother. In this case, she has to get used to wearing heavy copper arm and footrings.

During the first two to five months, the young mother stays inside the seclusion room. She will then be allowed to go outside the hut, but still she is not allowed to sit under the clan's shelter, *ebanga*.

During this long period, she just eats, sleeps, and engages in a sophisticated toilette. She is not allowed to work in the fields nor to prepare food. Speaking publicly about food, which recalls in a symbolic way her later productive functions in the society, is prohibited. At the same time, a larger and better portion of food consisting of manioc tuber, fish and manioc leaves stewed in palm oil sauce, which have better nutritional value (Pagezy, 1989), is prepared and reserved for her. Her own mother or a related chaperon is in charge of keeping watch during meals. Her husband's visits and presents of valued animal food (of unforbidden species) are highly appreciated. During the seclusion period, she has much time to do simple things such as to weave baskets. Some primiparous mothers are known to have engaged in a local trade of soap, salt and cigarettes. Also they are often asked by their female relatives to look after young children when the mothers are busy.

The traditional *molekele* washes herself many times a day and finishes by

spreading the red powder, *ngola*, extracted from the heart of a giant forest tree (*Pterocarpus soyauxii*) on her body. She chooses for herself a special nickname for this period of confinement and embroiders the name on her short red loincloth. Her helmet-like hair dressing is firmed with a black decoction of sweet potato leaves mixed with palm oil, evolving later into pearl-hanging braids (Fig. 1).

She sleeps in a separate room with other women, usually with her own mother. In old times, she would have slept on an enclosed bed. Another enclosed bed may be put under the clan shelter, *ebanga*, so that she could rest also in the daytime. Also, she has to sit on a stool specially reserved for her, so that she may not be in contact with the sperm possibly left by other people who have engaged in sexual relationships. As long as they live in the confinement room, all menstruating women, especially her own mother, have to observe the intercourse taboo. As the young woman's mother herself may still be young enough to have sexual intercourse, a modern tendency among the Ntomba is that they choose the maternal grandmother as a chaperon. She is in charge of watching the *molekele*, initiating her to her new state of motherhood and to all kinds of taboos related to the nursing period, especially the sexual intercourse taboo, *makeko*. The prestige and power of the young mother is derived from the respect she wins for observing the sexual prohibition, in spite of her attractiveness and youth. The people confer on her the appellation of *nkumu*, a respected powerful traditional chief.

The end of the seclusion period is marked by a great festival, during which the *molekele* dances a ballet with the younger girls of her own clan, while the older women sing. The last year of seclusion is consecrated in performing the ballet. If she is to dance with some four or five heavy copper rings on each arm and foot, the seclusion will last up to another year, so that she may get used to wearing them. The rings are added on one by one over a period so that they do not hurt. During this whole confinement period, it should be noted that she is bestowed quite an affective environment.

As soon as the husband's family is ready to welcome her back, the family is advised to prepare a large amount of food. At the same time, the young husband must buy two to five expensive loincloths (real "wax") and a modern costume (heels, a sack dress, glasses) for his new wife.

The *molekele* first comes to her husband's village with her new clothes, her family following her with 20 to 30 chickens, a goat, and two enormous *maboke* (packs) of game. The husband's clan give, in return, the money for the game.

By this time, the primiparous woman is allowed to sit under the shelter of her husband's clan, *ebanga*, which means she is now integrated into her husband's family. In order to finalize the integration of his wife and the child into his own family, the husband pays money to the wife's relatives. It is even a greater amount of money than the initial marriage payment to the wife's family to compensate for the troubles taken for the child since the beginning of mother child seclusion. Only by doing so, can he be the primary person responsible for the child.

The presents given by the girl's family are not consumed, except the *maboke*. The husband has to find food elsewhere for the festival, which is at his own charge. He pays back money and some chicken for the presents. When the festival



Fig. 1. Two *malekele* (primiparous nursing women) covered with red *ngola* powder are assisting a *nsambo i makolo* traditional festival at Biteke (August 1979).

They sit on their own stool to avoid any possible contact with sperm which is supposed to poison milk. The woman on the right, whose hairstyle is a black greasy helmet-shape, starts her seclusion period, whereas the woman on the left, whose hair dressing has evolved into pearl-hanging braids, is near the end of the seclusion period. Her 4-year-old child stands close to her.

starts, guests will come from the neighbouring villages. Some of them will stay three days, during which time they help the new woman plant the manioc in the field newly cleared by her husband.

SECLUSION, FATNESS EXHIBITION AND SOCIAL CONSIDERATION

The long confinement period certainly contributes to fattening the primiparous physique. The primiparous woman is expected to become fat, although one could well expect that the high energy cost of nursing may diminish the fatness of the young mother's body. Indeed, the real extent of fatness attained by these young nursing girls could be assessed by means of anthropometric indicators of body composition. From Table 1, it appears that the primiparous nursing women of the village of Nzalekenga in 1979–80 showed higher adiposity index than the multiparous nursing women in the same stage of lactation or the menstruating nulliparous girls living in the same village (Pagezy, 1983, 1988). This fact is consistent with the physique that this category of women is expected to have (Pagezy, 1987). Never in their life again will they attain the same level of fatness.

Roundness is highly desired by the woman's family, and this exemplified by the daily social approval. The ostentations aspect of the dietetic cure is enhanced in the *molekele's* toilette and above all in the exhibition marking the end of the seclusion period: the *molekele's* figure gives evidence to the quality of the care that she has received daily.

Indeed, the young mother engages daily in a sophisticated toilette: red *ngola* powder mixed with palm oil and a special short red dress. As she lives half-naked, the *molekele* displays her round form to the people passing by. The short red dress neither covering her breast nor her legs, offers her new fatfolds to be contemplated. She becomes the most attractive person as she represents the beautiful plenitude of motherhood. People passing by, especially young men, are so overwhelmed by her that they will never miss an opportunity to stop and chat with her. She often receives presents from such admirers, although they are not supposed to be given anything in return. However, it sometimes represent another chance

Table 1. Comparison of anthropometric measurements of young menstruating girls, with primiparous and multiparous women nursing for more than six months.

Measurements	menstruating girls		primiparous women		multiparous women	
QUETELET (W/H^2 , kg/m ²)	x	18.98	a	21.77	NS	20.02
	sd	1.27		2.41		1.90
SUM of SKINFOLDS (mm)	x	13.0	a	17.3	a	12.3
	sd	2.6		7.4		4.4
SUBSCAP. SKINFOLD (mm)	x	8.6	a	11.2	b	8.1
	sd	2.1		2.7		2.6
LEAN ARM CIRC. (cm)	x	21.8	NS	22.5	a	23.8
	sd	1.3		2.1		1.6

Note: the research was made in the end of the major dry seasons, 1979 and 1980.

Non-parametric U test of Mann-Whitney is used to compare menstruating nulliparous girls with primiparous women and primiparous with multiparous women.

a: $P \leq 0.05$; b: $P \leq 0.01$ (From Pagezy, 1983); NS: non significant.

for marriage, if the firstborn's father does not fulfill his obligations or disappears.

Another occasion to exhibit a *molekele*'s fat body and the quality of care devoted to her, is the final exhibition in which she performs, with the other females of her clan, the tradition dance, *nsambo i makolo*. Her external appearance, and the quality of her toilette give her the appearance of the traditional chief, *nkumu*. Her head is covered with a real feather cap and skins of spotted animals like genets, ordinarily strictly reserved to males, hang from a belt of *bongo* antelope skin. The copper of the anklerings and armrings glitter.

The celebration of the motherhood plenitude reaches a climax when married males show obscene gestures while dancing in front of her. They show their excitement by giving money to the best dancers. First young nulliparous girls of her clan dance, then married experienced women follow. The symbol of fecundity, the fat body of the primiparous woman, is celebrated by the obscene gestures addressed to her by the married males. Obscene gestures are also performed if the newborns were twins, also a symbol of fecundity. The people first visiting the newborn twins sing specific twin songs and dance, using obscene words and gestures. Obscene gestures are again performed at the end of the period when the twins' mother returns to her husband after a period of rest with her own family.

The words sung by the *molekele*, express not only the quality of the care devoted to her, but also the inmost thoughts of the young mother. The closing festival performance begins in the early afternoon, and lasts for three to four hours. The young unmarried girls of her clan open the dance in glorifying their "older sister" hidden in the house. The primiparous woman, first hidden from the guests, is then called by the elder women of her clan. For one hour, the women call to her using different and various names to try to make her come out from hiding. She will finally appear and dance with the married women. As she answers, she tells with humour the ups and downs of the passed seclusion. Every sentence of the song refers to her own seclusion's story, i.e., how she experienced this particular period from the very beginning. Her father is the one who decides the modalities of the seclusion (the duration, whether traditional or modern dance is performed). He may not be in agreement with the preferences of his son-in-law, who seldom has the last word. Most often the girl is expected to respect her father's decision, sometimes against her own preference. But the pride in being respected by everybody, the conviction of being able to bring luck to her clan, and the pleasure of singing and dancing with other girls and women of her clan converge to make the past difficulties seem trivial.

An example is given in the following account of the ending festival of *Wale Inyele* (meaning sunshine, because of her bright skin) (Butela, July 1979). It was reported by the Ekonda research assistant Boilo working at the IMNZ (Institut des Musées Nationaux du Zaïre). He recorded the call of the elder mothers to the hiding *wale* (meaning primiparous nursing mother in the *lokonda* language). It referred to:

1) The family's devotion to protect her:

"The tree *bokungu* (designating the *molekele* or *wale*) which emerges above the other trees is protected by smaller trees (her family) which make an enclosure."

"Ma *Wale Inyele*, you are carried with as much attention as the clay pot *ikengo*."

You have taken your clothes off, and your naked body demands great attention (because of the risk taken by the child when his mother transgresses the taboos)."

- 2) The power that emerges from her, due to the respect of taboos, primarily of the sexual intercourse taboo.

"The cocks (designating the molekele or wale) go to sleep with their spur (the spur gives strength to the wale so that she can endure solitude during the night)."

"Ma Wale Inyele (designating the molekele or wale) you are as solid as a house built by a bricklayer, who makes our home respectful."

"Ma Wale Inyele, people must call you by clapping their hands (traditional chiefs are greeted in this manner).

The nkumu (the chief, i.e., wale) has been given a power (seclusion gives power, because of rules to respect). Clap your hands three times. Here I am, a supernatural being."

- 3) As nothing is ever perfect, a *Wale's* inmost thoughts is expressed as she answers. This particular *wale* loudly voices how painful and boring she felt during her very long seclusion period, which lasted 3 years and 6 months.

"Inyele (designating the molekele or wale), laws have not changed, you have been hooked by them," sing the elder mothers.

Wale expresses later as:

"You my uncles Besele and Mbanga, you hooked me as fish."

Nevertheless, she took pleasure in looking after other babies, as their mothers went working in the fields:

"Ma Wale Inyele you stay all the day long under the ebanga. Nursing mothers entrust you with their infants.... You are called Wale Inyele sitting under the clan's shelter for such a long time."

And the mothers say:

"You are not scooping fry (in the flooded forest). You are not scratched by the palm tree bokiki. You rest at home and eat the fry bokaka."

She replies:

"I am the greatest beggar, who remains at home."

Later:

"Oyo elele, pack my things up, for I am going to marry. I am bored of seclusion."

- 4) Now she sings to her husband's wailing, who has failed to wait the end of the seclusion. She criticizes the modern behavior of her husband (because her husband considers himself to be modern for he had attended the secondary school) and contrasts it to the traditional way of life of the *Wale's* father:

"When Bonsei, her husband, comes to visit me, we chat during the daytime. At night, I have to confine myself in the tree's hole where I am locked in by the watchwomen."

Wailings (of the husband).

- 5) She also had felt herself to be socially regressing in the beginning, for she also attended the secondary school of Bikoro:

"I was called Wale Inyele, who made herself ridiculous with the red ngola painting."

Later:

"My husband, proud of himself, laughed at me in the White people language because of my being secluded. He ordered me to stop talking. 'Wale, if you stay here for dancing, I will go away and take four wives.'"

6) She nevertheless sings how proud she is of being compared to a traditional chief *nkumu*:

"I wear the chief's Ilanga Botende name now."

of the good-luck charm,

"I am an engetele (good luck charm; also denoting the copper ring given as bridewealth) which is not buried in the yard, but is hidden in the room (under the bed)."

of not being pregnant:

"Ma Wale Inyele will not be pregnant during her seclusion."

of having a pretty and healthy baby:

"Inside the room, I am proud of my son.... I will rock Ekoko, ... who has the male's beauty."

and of dancing and singing in the best traditional manner:

"Ma Wale Inyele, you became a cock who sings at the top of its voice inside the Ipumba clan. Ma Wale Inyele you became the crowned eagle (prestigious animal reserved to chiefs)"

"Feeling proud, my mother drew me to dance. So did the other women, and I did my best" ... "Other Wale dance to modern music. I do not show regard for his kind of performance." And "my ballet dancers are the best" ... "Wait, I will show you how I move my feather cap, and these wretched arm and footrings.... Audience, have a look on these rings that I am wearing on my arms and feet.... Do you not see how I am moving my hips? Don't you see how I'm rowing with my arms?"

The elder mothers' reply:

"Wale, would you show us how the Bolia's nkumu walks. Inyele, would you show us how your ballet-dancers move in waving the feather's cap? Wale, would you imitate the lame walking of the infirm...? Wale, would you imitate the genet coming to fetch hens at night?"

Another primiparous Oto woman, Mangu (whose nickname is *wale magistrate*) from Biteke, sings in her modern *inio* festival for the special care devoted to her when she received valuable game food:

Wale magistrate used to eat meat from big strong animals (antelopes), but do not eat intestines, because they look like lianas.

She also sings how proud she is of having avoided preparing food and having respected the sexual intercourse taboo. Thus she singles herself out from other modern discredited primiparous women who are supposedly misbehaving:

Other confined girls (of the neighbouring Itonga village), listen; your behavior does not concern the village of Mpangi.

The confined woman (me) looks like a traditional chief, but you wale from Itonga, you discredit yourselves.

You, wale from Itonga, you grill fish (they prepare food, which is strictly forbidden).

*You, wale from Itonga, you bring on miscarriages,
You, wale from Itonga, you walk during the night.*

In fact every traditional song includes an individualized verse praising the *wale's* behavior during her seclusion period, and discrediting the other neighboring rival girls. This song, acts as a surprise as *Wale* speaks out what people think under their breaths.

The primiparous woman's song is very instructive. It recounts in a very personal and humorous way all the events and feelings experienced by a particular woman during her long confinement period. The physique of the *molekele*, exhibited to everybody, is the primordial factor in controlling the quality of care devoted to the *molekele*. Her fat body is highly appreciated. A family whose *molekele* remains too lean will be socially disapproved. This often happens when the husband has disappeared, leaving the mother and the child under their own family's support.

The primiparous nursing woman's long seclusion can be considered as a model of cultural practices enhancing the physiology of mother and child. Indeed, we could show from a longitudinal corpus of monthly weight measurements (Pagezy & de Garine, 1989) that the *molekeles'* babies of both sexes born with low birthweight catch up within three months with the median weights of the local references (Pagezy & Hauspie, 1985), and surpasses the median from six months on.

Nowadays, primiparous women have to deal with both traditional and modern cultures. We could see that the young mother had to face internal conflicts even in the best psychosocial environment. One can imagine that some of these conflicts increase as modernity comes up against tradition. If there are changes in the diet, physical activity and sometimes the sexual intercourse taboo, the nutritional status of the mother and child will in turn be affected. The lean body is associated with a high level of physical work, as often happens in rural societies. Due to economic factors, there are many young fathers who cannot sustain the family's demands for supporting *molekele*. Increasing number of such men do not accept the traditionally long period of separation. More common are *malekele* who are abandoned by the baby's father or whose seclusion fees have to be totally supported by their own parents. Finding a new husband is likely to take time. Families do not find it urgent any more to support a daughter who will not have to dance public; for the exhibition at the closing festival is a very important moment in the *Ntomba* woman's life. It sanctions fecundity and motherhood through the plump body of the picturesque "red women."

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NOTES

- (1) *Yo ya belia* (stage of "presentation" concerning the girl's nuclear family, no witnesses) payment average 150–1,000 zaires (in 1989, equivalent to US\$ 0.20–0.25, or one to ten soaps), even less if the girl is pregnant, plus 400 zaires as *biongela* (heat of the hearth) to compensate for the girl's mother's pain when taking care of her growing daughter, and a case of beer or local alcohol to her father so as to "open his eyes," for it seems necessary to be clear-headed (*i yumbola maiho*) before talking.
- (2) *Ipendia itulu*: averages stage payment 1,500–2,000 zaires (US\$ 6–8) and is given to the girl's father to be shared with the witnesses.
- (3) *Nsehe e itumba* stage: derives its name from the fern leaves at the porch of the house, that the new mother finally enters. As payment, girl's mother receives a hen, a cooking pot, a lamp or the money to buy it, whereas the girl's father receives one or two packs of cigarettes (*bingili-bingili*=the sister's part), two cases of beer or some bottles of local alcohol *lotoko* (to give to each family's relatives), a matchet, a lime, a blanket and an unfixed amount of cash depending on the boy's means. Nowadays the period of trial may be reduced and the three stages condensed into a single stage called *nsehe itumba* or "présentation."
- (4) *Ikula* means arrow, i.e. a symbolic tool specific to males, and symbolizes the husband's obligation to protect his wife and his future family. An arrow had to be presented in the past. *Ikula* is the middle stage for the Ekonda, but is sometimes resumed with the ultimate stage of *ehenga* among the Ntomba. The husband gives the girl's mother two soaps, one pack of salt, one bottle of paraffin and a piece of cloth and a certain amount of money, which had been decided by the girl's father, averaging 5,000 to 10,000 zaires (US\$ 20 to US\$ 50). He also pays *biongela* (100 zaires, US\$ 0.50) to the mother of the wife in compensation for the inconvenience caused by heat and smoke when she prepared food during the girl's confinement; he also pays *bonyemba* (500 zaires) to the girl's father in compensation for the nuisance caused by the long sexual abstinence between him and his wife when she slept in the seclusion room with her daughter. The Ntomba pay the complete bridewealth (*ehenga*) at the end of seclusion which reaches up to 17,000 zaires (US\$ 68). A boy uses his sister's bridewealth to marry.
- (5) *Ihongi*, the Ekonda's bridewealth, it reaches from 30,000 to 150,000 zaires (US\$ 120 to US\$ 600). It is usually paid later, after the couple has given birth to four or five children. The excessive amount of the Ekonda's bridewealth serves as a prevention against divorce.

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