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**Françoise Héritier (1933–2017): Anthropologist  
of the fourth generation of French Africanists and  
theorist of feminist hope.**

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**OBITUARY**  
**FRANÇOISE HÉRITIER (1933–2017):**  
**Anthropologist of the Fourth Generation of**  
**French Africanists and Theorist of Feminist**  
**Hope**

**Gérald Gaillard**

Françoise Héritier was born on 15 November 1933 in Veauche, not far from Saint-Étienne, in the Loire district in central France. Both her parents were civil servants. When the food restrictions of the Second World War kicked in, they sent their three children to their peasant grandparents' house. The young Françoise learned how to milk goats and put yokes on oxen. Her discoveries were also sociological: she was astonished by a strict division of labour and barbaric customs (her cousin by marriage had to eat standing up while that cousin's husband sat down). In 1946, the family moved to Paris. Françoise, 13, left a religious school for a public one and, in 1954, enrolled for a degree in history and geography. Dreaming to become an Egyptologist, she would have chosen to study history, if not for the fact that at that time girls were not considered to possess the intellectual requirements for specialising in a particular discipline.

At the Sorbonne, Françoise made friends with students close to, or members of, the communist party, feeding themselves with movies and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes*. Félix Guattari (1930–1992), Sonia Flis (1930–2016), Michel Cartry (1931–2008), Michel Izard (1931–2012), Solange Pinton (1932–1986), Claude Baudez (1932–2013), Marc Piault (born in 1933), Colette Benveniste (born in 1933, soon Piault), Alfred Adler (born in 1934), Françoise Flis (born in 1935, soon Zonabend), Lucien Sebag (1934–1965), Pierre Clastres (1934–1977), Jeanne Favret-Saada (born in 1934), Raphaël Pividal (1934–2006), Olivier Herrens Schmidt (born in 1934) were members of the group. With the exceptions of Guattari, soon a literary acolyte of Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), Pividal, who became a writer, and Sonia Flis, founder of the fashion house Sonia Rykiel, they would all become

anthropologists. The “Doctors’ plot” (an anti-Semitic campaign organised by Stalin in 1952–53) moved the group; Khrushchev’s Secret Report from February 1956 surprised it; the crushing of the Budapest insurrection in November 1956 was impossible to swallow. If they refused to listen to the (Marxist) “lesson from Althusser,” the article “The Indians and their Ethnographer” by Claude Lévi-Strauss, published in *Les Temps Modernes* of August 1955, impressed them.

Marxism rejected, the release of *Tristes Tropiques* in October 1955 was timely for a new banner. Rather than the Training Centre for Anthropological Research created by André Leroi-Gourhan in 1945, they studied ethnology through the seminars that Lévi-Strauss held in the section of Religious Studies of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) from 1951 on. Michel Izard took Françoise Hérítier there: “It was the revelation of my life,” she later recalled. Graduating in June 1957, Françoise Hérítier enrolled in a Diplôme Supérieur d’Histoire programme, equivalent to today’s master. However, before letting his audience go for the summer holidays, Lévi-Strauss propitiously announced that the Institute of Applied Human Sciences in Bordeaux was looking for an ethno-sociologist and a geographer, because the hydraulic service of the Upper Volta (from 1984 on, Burkina Faso) planned to build a dam in order to develop the production of rice, provided that Mossi populations settle in the region. Recruited, Michel Izard left for a twelve month mission in July 1957. In August, the agents of the service, not having found the geographer, accepted the candidacy of Françoise Hérítier. After a brief training in land surveys by Jean-Marcel Hurault (1917–2005), she left in September. The two researchers were based at the Ouagadougou Centrifan founded by Guy Le Moal (1924–2010), who was assisted by Jean Capron (1929–2014). This was a local branch of the Institut Français d’Afrique Noire (IFAN), based in Dakar. There, Izard and Hérítier also met Jean Rouch (1917–2004), who judged them as prone “to idolise Lévi-Strauss” (Rouch 1987). Le Moal, Capron and Rouch belong to the third generation of French Africanists, Hérítier and Izard to the fourth (see Gaillard 2017a-b).

When the couple returned to France in June 1958, Françoise Hérítier had become Mrs. Hérítier-Izard. She thus kept her surname, in line with Denise Paulme-Schaeffner (1909–1998), Simone Dreyfus (Roche then Gamelon) and Ariane Deluz (Chiva-Deluz, 1931–2010). The

couple spent the summer writing: “Bouna, monographie d’un village pana de la vallée du Sourou: Haute-Volta” (1958), “Les Mossi du Yatenga. Étude de la vie économique et sociale” (1958) and “Aspects humains de l’aménagement hydro-agricole de la vallée du Sourou” (1959). While these joint reports are only available in typescript, Izard and Héritier’s first important publication was the chapter “L’enquête ethno-démographique” in the volume *Ethnologie générale* edited by Jean Poirier (1921–1909) (Héritier and Izard 1968).

When Michel Izard performed 27 months of military service, participating in the contingent sent to the Algerian War, Françoise Héritier worked for the Bureau of Analysis of the National Institute of Demographic Studies founded by Alfred Sauvy (1898–1998). She also obtained the certificate of the Institute of Ethnology (1958), conducted a presentation in Lévi-Strauss’ seminar (“Research on Upper Volta”) and, supported by Germaine Dieterlen (1903–1999), the heir of Marcel Griaule (1898–1856), joined the French Society of Africanists. In 1960, she was recruited by the Centre for Documentary Analysis of the archaeologist Jean-Claude Gardin (1925–2013), a diligent listener to Lévi-Strauss’ seminar until 1959.

After some credits allocation, in 1957, the National Centre for Scientific Research (now CNRS) transformed Gardin’s centre in a polyvalent service, which engaged in the analysis of Pueblo mythology. “La Geste d’Asdiwal” [The gesture of Asdiwal]” (Lévi-Strauss 1957; later 1973: 175–235) was the first result of the collaboration between Lévi-Strauss and Gardin. The Documentary Analysis Centre housed a group for the “analysis of myths” the following year. On her part, Françoise Héritier took charge of a mechanographic treatment of ethnographic documentation under the auspices of Gardin. In 1961, the United States government offered Europe a copy of the Human Relations Area Files, which was entrusted to the nascent Laboratory of Social Anthropology, directed by Lévi-Strauss. Françoise Héritier was trained in the use of these files in the United States and then took care of a Centre for the Analysis and Documentary Research on Black Africa (1962). In charge of making an analytical code for political systems, she escaped from the business of analysing myths, for which Lévi-Strauss used to mobilise his students by giving them a paid job.

Michel Izard escaped, too, preferring to participate in the multidisciplinary study of the Breton isolate Plozévet. Mobilising one hundred researchers, this was the largest scientific project of French research in the social sciences of the early 1960s. At the same time, the independence of French West Africa led to the dismemberment of the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire (IFAN). In 1961, an agreement for a Voltaic Research Centre was signed: the independent state took charge of the infrastructure; the CNRS of the researchers. The CNRS could afford it: General de Gaulle's rise to power in 1958 opened a golden age for scientific research and its budget doubled between 1959 and 1962. Other agreements were signed with several other African states, and the CNRS was founded in 1962, its Cooperative Research Programme No. 11 (Rcp.11) joining anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists and archaeologists under the direction of Germaine Dieterlen and Jean Rouch.

The world of higher education in France was also jostled by the decree of April 1958 to create a *doctorat de troisième cycle* (a new postgraduate doctorate),<sup>1</sup> which the École Pratique des Hautes Études was entitled to confer. Françoise Hérítier-Izard registered for this degree under Denise Paulme with a thesis entitled: "Kinship and marriage among Samo of the Matya language." Thus, Michel Izard and Françoise Hérítier-Izard, seconded by the EPHE to the programme Rcp.11, worked in Upper Volta between October 1963 and April 1964. She later stated: "When we [in 1957] crossed the territories [...], I realised there was something weird about the terminological system [...]. I did not know about the existence of a kinship system, whose structure would be so different from ours [...]. This is to say that I was totally disconcerted with my records [...] presenting a terminology that seemed radically absurd." Indeed, their reports of 1958 and 1959 refrain from qualifying Mossi kinship terminology (Hérítier and Izard 1958: 58; Hérítier and Izard 1959: 39 and inset 1). But these "absurd terminologies" raised the interest of Lévi-Strauss.

In the last third of the nineteenth century, Lewis Henri Morgan (1818–1881) had inaugurated the study of kinship terminology,

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1 Until the promulgation of this decree, the *license* followed a *Diplôme d'études supérieures* and then one enrolled (or not) to a so-called "state thesis" (*thèse d'état*). The *thèse de troisième cycle* (postgraduate thesis) was therefore an intermediate form between the *Diplôme* and the *thèse d'État*.

and anthropologists soon began to look for articulations between terminologies, attitudes, residences and filiations. In 1949, George Murdock (1897–1985) proposed an evolutionary order (Murdock 1949) in the same year that Lévi-Strauss delimited an autonomous field of kinship alliance. An alliance is the way in which groups of men exchange women as a mode of constructing human society, since the prohibition of incest is less a negative rule of prohibition than a positive rule of giving women; and since this rule is universal in its form and realisation, it would be the interface between nature and culture. Lévi-Strauss identified three types of exchange structures: elementary, semi-complex, and complex systems of exchange. In the former, the terminology of kinship positively states the class in which an Ego can find his spouse. Dedicating his thesis *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (The Elementary Structures of Kinship) to their study, Lévi-Strauss subdivided them into symmetrical “restricted exchange” (group A gives its women to group B, which in return provided its own to group A) and asymmetrical “generalised exchange” (group A gives its wives to group B, which gives its wives to group C, which itself gives wives to group A, and so on). Although having defined them, Lévi-Strauss did not deal with the structures he called “complex” and “semi-complex” because, in the absence of prescriptive terminologies, these are governed by prohibition rules. In the case of complex structures, the kinship terminologies define prohibitions of marriage which correlate with degrees of proximity to Ego. Beyond that, Ego marries whom he pleases. In the case of semi-complex structures, terminologies dictate a list of forbidden marriage positions that make up social groups. Thus, their study does not fall under the anthropological analysis of kinship because the choice of spouse is determined by sociological or psychological contingencies. The semi-complex kinship structures present a asymmetric terminology called Crow and Omaha. In the latter system, the children of “mother’s brothers” are for Ego “mother’s brothers” and “mothers or sisters” and the “mothers” of Ego give birth to “brothers” and “sisters.” There are variations in the denomination of “mother’s brothers” and “father’s sisters.” Sometimes, as in the case of the Samo, the latter are designated by the same term as Ego’s female siblings (therefore as “sister”) and the children of the “sisters” are for Ego “nephews and nieces,” whose children are “grandchildren.” That these terminologies merge positions, belonging to several generations, under the same

prohibited term of marriage, induces the appearance of lineages forbidden to alliance because every time an Ego chooses a spouse in a lineage, all its members are automatically excluded, for his descendants, from the number of possibilities for several generations.

Until Hérítier's findings, such "absurd terminologies" were "hitherto ignored in Africa."<sup>2</sup> The Samo case offered the possibility of taking up the problem of alliance at the point where Claude Lévi-Strauss had left it in 1949. During her second period of fieldwork Hérítier began an inventory of Samo prohibitions, counting "all possible situations of cousinage until the 9th degree." She insisted that up to that time (1963–65), anthropologists "registered terminologies to two generations up and two down, and they stopped there." It is undeniably a work of novelty to collect (over several years) "five and nine (in extreme cases) generations in the agnatic line and up to twelve in the uterine line" (Hérítier 1975: 107). At the same time, Michel Izard tried to reconstruct the political history of the region and that of the Mossi settlements. Returning to France for five months, the couple again left for Upper Volta. Between October 1964 and April 1965 and until 1980, Hérítier conducted five years of research in Upper Volta, totaling a period of more than six years of fieldwork in the region.

In 1965, in his Huxley Memorial Lecture on "The Future of Kinship Studies," Lévi-Strauss (1966) indicated that mathematicians had taken up Omaha systems and given the figures of constraints and marriages allowed for an imaginary number of clans (7, 15, 30) and prohibitions (2 prohibitions then 3). However, the theoretical calculation does not produce elementary structures, as the numbers of possible spouses are enormous. He thus wrote in 1967: "In 1947–1948, I proposed to approach the study of complex kinship structures in a second volume that I will never write" (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 24).

Michel Izard organised the first International Symposium on Voltaic Cultures in December 1965, and submitted a 3rd cycle thesis entitled "Introduction à l'histoire des royaumes mossi" in 1967. On her part, Françoise Hérítier, detached by the EPHE to Lévi-Strauss' Laboratory from January 1965 on, presented a paper, "The social organization of the Samo," to Lévi-Strauss' seminar in 1966 and another paper,

2 If apparently in 1957 no one had yet reported an Omaha system in Africa, John Beattie (1915–1990) described its existence among the Nyoro in 1960 (Beattie 1960: 48–60)

“On Samo kinship,” to the Société des Africanistes in January 1967 (Anonymous 1967: 256). This was the beginning of Héritier’s original work.

In 1967 she changed status from detached to the CNRS (which means, still employed and getting paid by the École Pratique des Hautes Études while working at the CNRS in a position where she was a full member and recruited by the CNRS and therefore able to progress and to rapidly become “master of research”). From January 1968 on, Michel Izard and Michel Cartry were responsible for the direction and sub-direction of the Centre Voltaïque de la Recherche Scientifique; the publication series *Recherches voltaïques* and *Notes et documents* were entrusted to Françoise Héritier-Izard. The researchers were not affected by the student protests of May 1968, when they spent time in Upper Volta to share the progress of their work. Héritier explains that Cartry provided “point by point” (Héritier 2011: 20) “remarks on the wording of the marriage prohibitions” (Héritier 1968). She had not yet completed the genealogical survey of the three Samo villages she worked in and the article presented only an analysis of Samo marriage rules (Héritier 1968: 5). It is accounting for the rules by observing whether they cover all prohibited marriages. And when in the 1958 texts, Izard-Héritier explained to the reader that “the kinship ties outlined below, are defined from a person called Ego, of indeterminate sex” (Héritier and Izard 1958: 58), she now asked: “Is there a symmetry between the case of a masculine Ego and a feminine Ego?” (Héritier 1968: 6). This highly technical article concluded that the type of Ego is not without effect on the prohibitions of marriage because “the male and female plans alternate” (Héritier 1968: 20) and that “Exogamous prohibitions are not only related to the system of descent but also cut within a set of descendants counted bilaterally, where the allies are consanguineous” (Héritier 1968: 21).

In December 1969, Freetown (Sierra Leone) held a symposium on Trade and Markets in West Africa, which the African International Institute under the directorship of Daryll Forde had proposed Claude Meillassoux (1925–2005) would organise (Meillassoux 1971). Among the French attendants were: Michel Izard, Emmanuel Terray (born in 1934) and Marc Augé (born in 1935), who all arrived on the professional scene in 1963 and 1964. Absent from this important moment of developing French Africanism, Françoise Héritier



participated in the conference “la Notion de personne en Afrique noire,” convened by Germaine Dieterlen in October 1971. There, she focused on the side of the women (Héritier-Izard 1973). The Samo recognise the presence of nine components in a person: the body, provided by the mother; the blood, provided by the father; the shadow; the breath, penetrating into the foetus with maternal respiration; etc. The rite of birth goes through the use of a “medicine dish [...] a feminine relay of fertility conveyed by plants” to which both sexes make an annual worship. A man worships the dish of his mother’s wife, or the one belonging to his own mother. There is, therefore, a “properly feminine universe, with its own rules of transmission [...] cut off from the agnatic filiation” (Héritier-Izard 1973: 251; 254). She also noticed a re-duplication of female secondary marriage for the same village residence, which manifests a “feminine solidarity” exceeding the uterine lineage (Héritier-Izard 1973: 252).

The same ideas were developed during Lévi-Strauss’ seminar on identity in 1974 (Héritier 1977): “if the women do not have a subversive ideology, their conscious search for a duplication of the matrimonial destinies is a subversive action” (Héritier 1977: 79). Two years earlier, when taking part in Meillassoux’ seminar on “slavery in pre-colonial Africa” (1971–1972) (Héritier-Izard 1975), Françoise Héritier, no longer Héritier-Izard, bonded with Marc Augé, whom she encountered for the first time at the Dieterlen symposium of 1971: “We sat side by side and continued the conversation at the café. Then our lives have gone on together for over 20 years” (Héritier, 2008: 45). Their marriage followed his divorce, and Françoise Héritier adopted the name Héritier-Augé.

In 1973, she published a second article in *L’Homme*: “La paix et la pluie. Rapports d’autorité et rapport au sacré chez les Samo” (Héritier-Izard 1973a) which, while focusing on the figure on whom depends the rain and the common good (Héritier-Izard 1973a: 127), emphasises that endogamy is the central factor of social cohesion in village communities. The problem is that it seems to be extremely difficult for Ego to find authorised spouses as the entire feminine population has turned into a prohibited space after an initial series of endogamous unions. Thus, how could the standards be respected in such a small matrimonial area?

Genealogies should talk. The resources of the Interregional Computing Center of Orsay (CNRS) are put to use and Marion Laurière<sup>3</sup> programs the data from 1973 on. Methods of computer genealogy analysis are set out in Héritier (1974). The description of relatedness, procedures, complexity and the extent of the coding,<sup>4</sup> form the subject of three papers published in 1975 and 1976 (Héritier 1975; 1976; 1976a). In 1976, the Italian promoters of the *Enciclopedia Einaudi* commission the writing of kinship entries to Françoise Héritier. She writes seventy-five large-format texts, distributed over five entries including the one titled “Maschile/Femminile,” which gives her the opportunity to insist on the appropriation of women (by men) for their reproductive abilities.<sup>5</sup>

Approximately at this date Michel Cartry succeeded Germaine Dieterlen to the chair of the “Religions of Black Africa” in the 5th section of the CNRS and he created, with Luc de Heusch (1927–2012), the CNRS laboratory “Systèmes de pensée en Afrique noire.” Other laboratories and ethnological research groups spring up, as do teaching positions and even, since a decade, departments. French ethnology is at its peak.

Françoise Héritier won the CNRS silver medal for the humanities in 1978. She came out of her domain to speak on Samo cosmology in honour of Germaine Dieterlen (Héritier 1978) and addressed the issue of sterility from the perspective of local explanations as a melting of fluids (Héritier 1978a; Héritier 1984). Her participation the following year in *La Fonction symbolique*, a book published by Izard and Pierre Smith (1939–2001) (Héritier 1979) was the occasion to deliver some of the ideas later presented in her book, *Les deux sœurs et leur mère. Anthropologie de l'inceste* (1994). In 1980, she was elected director of studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) and her book *L'Exercice de la parenté* was released in 1981. This book is primarily based on the discovery (made in 1968) that the norms

3 Marion Laurière became the computer scientist of the anthropologists: Pierre Lamaison, Paul Jorion, Pierre Bonte, Maurice Godelier, etc. all used her services.

4 Thus, “01, 07, 1, 05, M1, 1, 01, 0, 02, 0, 03, 0, 04” has to be read in this way: “Dalo (name of the village), lineage Sanlé, first line, fifth siblings of the lined, resulting from a primary legal marriage contracted in the first position by the mother, bringing together in the order of birth a son and three daughters” (Héritier 1976: 240).

5 Claude Meillassoux was the first to insist on this aspect and, in a Marxist economic perspective, called women “producers of the producer,” that is to say, in terms of the mode of production: the producers of the labour force, thus being conceived as “production tools.”

of the prohibitions formulated by the appellations do not reflect the reality of the system but an image, since Ego is prohibited to marry a parent with whom he is related for three generations and with whom he shares the same maternal lineage: exogamous interdictions are thus split into bilateral descent. To this essential fact Héritier added that by treating in a different way the pairs of successive candidates for marriage according to whether they are parallel (composed of individuals of the same sex) or crossed (composed of individuals of the opposite sex), the system opens for Ego a field of unions consistent with a high degree of endogamy. And a computer analysis shows that Ego marries immediately beyond the border traced by the prohibitions. Thus, the choice of a spouse, assumed to be hazardous in semi-complex structures, exhibits positive regularities!

Héritier proposed a model involving continuous exchanges alternating between patrilineages, and cycles similar to those of the elementary systems with the closure of consanguineous marriages as soon as possible. This is the book that Lévi-Strauss had “planned to write” and an undeniable scientific discovery in the strong sense of the term. But even more: Lévi-Strauss predicted in 1967, that “Crow-Omaha systems would form a bridge between elementary kinship structures and complex kinship structures” (Lévi-Strauss 1967). Is this a sliding bridge from one system to another? Although Françoise Héritier uses the same terms, her conclusions point out that an elementary structure evolves towards one or the other: semi-complex and complex systems do not succeed each other, they are alternatives. Finally, a third major contribution was the concept of the “differential valence of the sexes” (*la valence différentielle des sexes*) (Héritier 1981: 50). Lévi-Strauss had postulated the prohibition of incest to be the first cultural universal. With the “differential valence,” Héritier highlighted a second cultural universal: “the different place of the two sexes on a table of values, more generally the dominance of the masculine principle on the feminine principle,” qualified as a “fundamental law of kinship.” This “differential valence” marks everything including the terminological systems. Given that kinship terminologies are ideological constructs, why the absence of a logically possible combination: the assimilation of cross-cousins to siblings and not of the parallel cousins? This marks a male dominance which is universal. When Héritier specified that she “will not discuss the reasons underlying the dominance,” she nevertheless referred to Lévi-Strauss: it is clearly men who exchange

women and not the other way around, and she concluded that men “seize women” for their reproductive abilities (Héritier 1981: 70). This concept of “differential valence” is more appropriate, according to her, than the expression “male domination” used by Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) and Maurice Godelier (born in 1934), which induces a conflict relationship, similar to the one between opposing classes. Not only that the latter transposition ignores the practice of reproduction, but “differential valence” is ontologically prior to masculine domination. Barely touched in 1981, the concept takes an increasing importance throughout her work.

Lévi-Strauss, whose retirement was planned for 1983, enthroned Françoise Héritier to his succession. She served as his successor at the Collège de France from 1982 to 1998. Lévi-Strauss achieved this by imposing on the assembly of the Collège de France, in 1982, the creation of a Chair of Comparative Studies of African Societies (*d'étude comparée des sociétés africaines*). Françoise Héritier delivered her inaugural lecture on 25 February 1983. She was almost fifty years old and the second woman to be elected in this prestigious establishment since 1530. She took the lead of the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale and cumulated it with her director of studies position at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), which Marc Augé presided over between 1985 and 1995. However, her first year of teaching was shortened by a pericarditis requiring two months of hospitalisation. She suffered from an “evolutionary atrophic polychondritis.”<sup>6</sup> The prognosis was that she had five more years to live but she worked even more.

Between 1983 and 1987, the seminar she conducted was dedicated to marriage alliances. Four volumes of contributions on the “complexities of alliance” were published thanks to the invaluable help of Elisabeth Copet-Rougier (1949–1998). Héritier’s monograph *L'Exercice de la parenté* from 1981 stimulated young researchers and led to contributions of the first volume on semi-complex systems. The model Héritier had developed worked in other fields as well. It shows, with variations, the same regularities: the accumulation of prohibitions does not prohibit endogamy and the spouse’s choice is as short as possible. “La Parenté de lait” (1994) and the edition of *La*

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6 Françoise Héritier named the cause of her illness many times, and therefore I allow myself to do so too.

*Parenté spirituelle* (1995) closed the cycle of her works on the theme of alliance (Héritier 1994; Héritier-Augé and Copet-Rougier 1995). The following seminars (1995–1997) led to the two volumes titled *De la violence* (Héritier 1996; Héritier 1999).

When François Mitterrand (1916–1996) was elected to the French presidency in May 1981, the generation of the fight against the Algerian War came to power. Lionel Jospin (born in 1937), who served as Minister of Education between 1988 and 1992, installed a commission to “study and reflect” on the museums of his ministry in October 1988. With the creation of a Ministry of Cultural Affairs (by André Malraux), the museums of art left the Ministry of Education in 1959, but preserved were 187 regional museums and four major institutions including the Musée de l’Homme. Françoise Héritier-Augé was entrusted with this commission, of which Maurice Godelier was a member. The report concluded that these museums suffered from a glaring situation of abandonment (Héritier-Augé 1990/1991). In 2006, the ethnographic collections of the Musée de l’Homme were removed to inaugurate the Musée des Arts Premiers (or Musée du Quai Branly) belonging to the Ministry of Culture.

Françoise Héritier-Augé was required for a task no less important. The first cases of AIDS were reported in the United States in June 1981. Confronted with the ensuing plague, a presidential decree created in France a National Council on the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome in February 1989, charged “to make any useful proposal to the Government.” Mitterrand appointed Héritier-Augé as chair. The council formulated some twenty recommendations under a presidency she held until 1994. These deal with problems such as insurance (seeking to identify individuals with risk factors), drug addiction, and prisons. According to Héritier, her greatest pride was to have obtained the transfer of the prisoner’s health’ records from the Ministry of Justice to that of Health.

Héritier also agreed to be a member (in 1982) and later chair (1985–1988) of the Human Sciences and Society Commission of the National Advisory Committee on Ethics for Life Sciences – set up as a result of the birth of the first French baby conceived by in vitro fertilisation in 1982. She joined the High Council for Francophonie at its creation (1984), chaired the inter-commission of the Human and Social

Sciences of the National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM), chaired the Commission of Social Sciences of the National Centre for Arts and Letters (1986–1989) and, in 1986, was appointed to the High Council of Population and Family, jostled by technological developments, such as a genetic map, ante-natal diagnostics, etc.<sup>7</sup>

These responsibilities forced her to think about new modes of procreation (Héritier 1985; Héritier-Augé 1985a; Héritier-Augé 1985b). From 1982 on, she devoted her lectures to the symbolic anthropology of the body as an extension of her research on semi-complex systems, since the non-formulated marriage prohibitions “are lifted when a child has lost the part that comes from a female ancestor” (Héritier-Augé 1986: 532). The problem was to determine why and how “the melting of two identical is prohibited” (Héritier-Augé 1986: 532). The question of procreation required to dig deep into the way in which human societies explain body substrates (flesh, bone, fat) and body substances (blood, sperm, saliva, lymph, milk), which led to a long census about representations. This research was soon expanded to foods (including aromatics, minerals, alcohol, oils, balsams) that manufacture substances and body fluids.<sup>8</sup> First published in 1987, the article “Les logiques du social. Systématiques de parenté et représentations symboliques,” insists that in Omaha systems “the structural inequality is the strongest” (since the sister is assimilated to a junior “for all men”) and whereas we should find a mirror in Crow systems, “the system does not go to the end of its own logic,” because “it is impossible for all men to be treated as juniors by the women” (Héritier 1996: 66–67).

7 She also served as Scientific Advisor of the Programme Committee of the Seven (national television that became ARTE) and a member of its “supervisory board”, of the Scientific Board of several universities, of the EHESS Historical Centre, of the following three CNRS Laboratories: for Languages and Civilizations with Oral Tradition, of Ethnology of France, and of Thought in Black Africa, a member of Editorial Boards of several journals, of the Scientific Council of the National Library of France, etc. A list of honorary memberships from, for instance, the Academy Europaea, the Council of the United Nations University, and honorary doctorates would be long.

8 And even the lineage identity with the Samo case of the first born child of a woman was the work of a man outside the lineage of the husband whom she then joins. Françoise Héritier commented: “in a recent issue of a popular weekly, a comparative table presents the actions to be performed to have a boy or a girl. Dairy products, egg yolks, leeks, salad, are considered good for producing girls, like the diets advocated by Hippocrates, but also in Native American or African societies” (Héritier 1996: 10).

In 1990 Françoise Héritier stated for the first time that “the mechanisms of thought are based on a certain number of fundamental abstract entities, the first of which results from the observation of the radical difference between the sexes, which opposes the identical to the different” (Héritier-Augé 1990). And she continued: “It is therefore necessary to regulate the circulation of flows [...] according to the two archaic conceptual poles and the attribution for this purpose of characters drawn from qualities of a concrete nature, which are presented under the fundamental form of a dualistic opposition (cold/hot, dry/wet, light/dark, right/left, etc.)” (Héritier-Augé 1990: 499). She added the expression “ultimate bumper of thought,” implied by her hypothesis, and revived the concept of the “differential valence of the sexes.” The latter was “not a fact of nature” but of culture, as societies are based on the prohibition of incest, the sexual separation of tasks, a recognised form of a stable sexual union (Levi-Strauss’ three pillars) and finally the “differential valence.” The whole being logically linked by “cognitive categories,” Héritier was “pessimistic” about real change (Héritier-Augé 1991: 70).

Her seminar of 1993–94 was attended by practitioners, such as a neuropsychiatrist, a pediatrician, and a juvenile judge, which led to a joint book on incest (*De l’inceste*, Héritier, Cyrulnik, Naouri, Vrignaud and Xanthakou 1994). Héritier also summarised the theses in her book *Les deux soeurs et leur mère. Anthropologie de l’inceste* (1994), which was translated into English as *Two Sisters and Their Mother: The Anthropology of Incest* (2000). She stated that Lévi-Strauss had only reported on the prohibition of incest among members of the exogamic group of Ego, without taking into account the interdictions affecting persons outside this group with which a relationship is forbidden (the wife of a brother, the sister of a wife, etc.) which she calls “incest of the second type.” The prohibition of the second type subsumes the first, and accounts for the true nature of prohibition, which consists in avoiding bringing “identical substances” into contact.

In 1996, she joined articles published between 1979 and 1993 in a volume titled *Masculin/Féminin. La pensée de la différence* (1996). Thanks to this book, Héritier rose from a status of professor addressing an academic public to that of a public personality. Of course, we find in this book what had already been advanced: freeing himself from animality, the human being takes an anatomical substratum as

material for his reflection, the difference of the sexes represents the ultimate cut-off point of human thinking. The first binary difference mutes into a hierarchical difference, called “differential valence of the sexes,” which legitimises the exchange of women that Lévi-Strauss “took as natural.” Héritier offered the hypothesis of a “kind of contract between men” to preserve the hierarchy, “because the men do not give birth with their own body, whereas the women do this for both girls and boys.” The body and its fluids serve as a basis for the social construction of sexual difference, specific to each society, but marked by a cognitive hierarchy in favour of the masculine.

Françoise Héritier retired in 1999 and became an intellectual figure, acting in multiple public interventions and firmly committed against what is generally called “sexist domination.” In 2002, she published the second volume of *Masculin/Féminin. Dissoudre la hiérarchie*, mainly comprising contributions to conferences. We find the same assumptions and conclusions as in the previous volume, but now the expressions and vocabulary are harder. She insists on the idea that women began to free themselves when contraceptives allowed them to regain control of their fertility, but adds: “the granting was allowed with unconsciousness” as “the authors of the law did not perceive that it touched the heart of the differential valence of the sexes founding male power” (Héritier 1996: 278). Yet, “the model is not eternal.”

In 2007, she was among two hundred intellectuals calling to vote for Ségolène Royal (born in 1953). Despite this popular action to elect a woman as the president of France for the first time, Nicolas Sarkozy (born in 1955) received 53.06% of the popular vote to succeed Jacques Chirac on 16 May. Françoise Héritier also joined the fight against the creation of a Ministry of Immigration, Integration and National Identity.

For Marc Augé’s new series she wrote *Retour aux sources* (2010), which she saw as a “return to ethnology, the return to myself” (Héritier 2010: 13). An ethnographic monograph of extraordinary precision and the celebration of the ethnologist’s distant view “enables [...] to bring to light the general philosophy of a coordinated whole” (Héritier 2010: 183). At the same time, her commitment to the feminist cause did not end and she edited the volume *Hommes, femmes. La construction de la différence* (2010), questioning Simone de Beauvoir’s affirmation, “One



is not born, but rather becomes a woman” in the light of genetics, social anthropology and symbolism. Published in a collection for teenagers, “La différence des sexes” (Héritier 2010a) was a militant summary and like her participation in *La Plus Belle Histoire des femmes* (2011) aimed at a wide audience. On 13 May 2011, Françoise Héritier was decorated by President Sarkozy with the Grand Cross of the National Order of Merit, a rank to which only 137 French citizens had been raised since its creation in 1963.

When the “Sofitel case” broke out, Dominique Strauss-Kahn (born in 1949) was removed from the race for the presidential election of 2012 (for which he was a favourite candidate) and Martine Aubry (born in 1950) announced her candidacy. Although Françoise Héritier’s illness forced her to spend long periods of time in the hospital, she joined Aubry’s campaign team and finally the collective supporting François Hollande (born in 1954) when the primaries of the Socialist Party selected him. Hollande, president between 2012 and 2017, would raise her to the rank of Grand Officier of the Légion d’honneur (2014).

She multiplied audio-visual and media appearances, expressed herself about the future of the world, the Israeli policy, the marriage for all, about cinema, etc. And the feminist combat called her to at least one intervention per month. The trilogy: *Le Sel de la vie* (2012), *Le Goût des mots* (2013) and *Au Gré des jours* (2017) added a personal touch to her work. They are collections of snippets of memories, sensations and happy moments in which images from childhood and adulthood merged. The first book sold more than 250,000 copies.

In November 2017 the Prix Femina jury awarded Héritier a special prize for her work. When the Harvey Weinstein affair broke out in 2017, she was pleased “that now shame changes sites.”

She died in the night of 14–15 November 2017 at the Hospital Pitié-Salpêtrière (Paris) – a few hours before her eighty-fourth birthday. The City of Paris announced that a public institution will bear her name. Since the diagnosis that, in 1983, gave her only five years of life, Françoise Héritier published more than twenty books and had multiple moments of happiness. A great lesson in life and work.

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