



Ewa Opałka talks to Youssouf Dara, a sculptor from the Dogon Tribe and co-author of the Toguna in Bródno, from a feminist perspective.

Ewa Opałka: We meet in a Toguna – a place in a Dogon village used for resolving conflicts. I heard about a specific type of greeting used by Dogons – the greeting parties talk in detail about the latest news regarding the individual members of their families. Can we greet each other this way?

Youssouf Dara: Yes, we tend to greet this way. Everyone in my family is perfectly fine.

And how large is your family?

There are seven family members. I am the head of the family composed of persons with whom I spend my time on a daily basis. A man is the head of every family, even if there is an older woman in the family, respected for her experience. I myself live together with my mother, a very wise and experienced woman, but the final decision is always taken by me.

Can you explain to me why in the Dogon culture it is a man who always decides?

The Dogon culture is characterised by its lack of confidence in women – it is the woman who leaves the village after the wedding. The man stays behind – he maintains traditions, he is responsible for their continuation. You could say that Dogon men are quite “macho”. For instance, we have a strict division of marital property, and family assets are only those which have been contributed by the man. Even during the marriage relationship, the material contribution of the woman remains the property of the family that she comes from. Children do not inherit from their mother but only their father. If the woman dies, her property is taken over by her brothers. Children (understood in our culture as boys) always stay with their father. Girls can decide for themselves if they want to stay with him or their mother’s family.

In the Dogon culture, a huge role is played by the original mythology – the cosmogony explaining the way in which the universe was created and the way it functions now. Is there any evidence for the relationship between women and men presented by you in the Dogon mythology? Are there any mythological reasons for the lack of confidence in women, except for economic ones?

Yes. The mythological element manifests itself in the strong belief in the communion of souls. At night, souls visit the house of the family that they come from in order to have a drink of water. At the same time, they decide about family problems and punish family members who have contributed to the conflicts within it. A visible effect of such intervention is vomiting with blood – it shows that souls have intervened with family life.

Before we expatiate on that, I would like to ask you if and how the mythology accounts for the gender structure itself, and in what way does it characterise it?

In the Dogon cosmogony, women are considered to be strangers. Men are real Dogons, whereas women constitute a separate group, not “purely Dogon in its origin”. Because mixed marriages are allowed in our culture, the woman may come from a completely different tribe. There is a historical explanation for it as well: Dogons come from the country of Mande, which is located on the border between Guinea and Mali. After the Great War, they had to leave the country and settle in the area currently occupied by the Dogons, which was previously inhabited by different tribes whose members started to mix with the Dogons. Women from other tribes became wives of Dogon men and that is why the concept of the woman as an external element became more and more established in our culture.

These explanations verge on the border between history and myth. However, in the Dogon mythology itself, the main god is called Nommo. Could you tell us about it and answer the question if the god has a gender?

Nommo has no definite gender – it can turn into anything it wants, both a woman and a man.

But I read that when Nommo fell into many pieces, one of them, the penis, was eaten by the fish.

Yes, this is when gender ceased to exist. It is then that Nommo crossed the gender division.

Why don't we move on to the manner in which gender is clarified ritually and how it is related to the ritual of circumcision? I have heard this is exactly when the element of the other gender is removed from the body – in case of women it is the clitoris, in case of boys – the foreskin.

In my village, female circumcision stopped being practiced a long time ago. I have never met a single woman after circumcision. I have even tried to find out more about the subject from some older women, but they refused to give me any answers. I was interested why it used to be practiced and why the ritual ceased to exist. But these women found the subject too shameful to talk about. Circumcision is a totemic act, something that you simply do not talk about. From my own observations, I have only heard about a girl whose father used to be our neighbour and mother came from a neighbouring village. On one occasion, the mother visited the village and took her daughter with her. After she returned, the girl died as a consequence of circumcision she had undergone in that village.

If we were talking to a Dogon woman right now, do you think she would be equally tacit on the subject of circumcision?

As a man, I have no right to talk about female circumcision. If a woman from my tribe were present here and now, of course, she could tell you about her experience in this respect and the subject of female circumcision at large.

And would you be able to reconstruct the reasons why the ritual of female circumcision was abandoned in your village? Do you think this decision could have been influenced by the women from your tribe themselves?

There are no spontaneous changes in our culture. The change came from the outside, i.e. the World Health Organisation, which, in the cooperation with the government of Mali, organised training on the dangers involved in the procedure. Emissaries travelled to villages, advising the representatives of local communities on the influence of circumcision on women and their health.

And what is your personal attitude to female circumcision?

My attitude changed – at first I considered it to be perfectly normal, and even occasionally lost my temper when I heard critique from the outside. My approach changed dramatically after my trip to Europe and meetings with people who explained to me why the ritual should be perceived as something negative and a source of a lot of unnecessary pain. However, I think that male circumcision is a perfectly beneficial and proper practice.

In my opinion, this change is certainly positive, however, I have been wondering to what extent transformation coming from the outside could destroy your cultural identity. Do you have a vision of compromise between the expansive impact of Western culture and at least partial preservation of a certain cultural independence?

Of course, there could be many answers here. There are a lot of areas in which the negative effects of external influence can be observed. We are aware of our own exceptionality, but the exceptionality plays a crucial role in the tourist industry, which in

turn, is of major importance for economic reasons. We are trying to prevent cultural homogenisation, renouncement of our own identity for the sake of globalisation. Indeed, this is a very tricky issue.

I am trying to ask you if emancipation of women, as an external phenomenon (manifesting itself in the abandonment of the ritual of female circumcision), could be regarded as an interference from the outside, endangering the Dogon culture?

In my opinion, the structure of the law in force is not only in the human domain. Certain obligations and prohibitions come from the divine element, are associated with the communion of souls, have not changed for thousands of years. If you step outside the law represented by guardian spirits, then, e.g., a woman may be touched by some misfortune for crossing certain cultural frames.

But is the abandonment of circumcision not such a step outside?

It was a type of social experiment, it turned out that the spirits had nothing against it.

Could you tell us about the ritual of male circumcision, is this a sort of initiation? What do you remember about your own circumcision?

There is no specific age at which the procedure is to be performed – once there is a group of boys in the village, usually aged 15-20, a decision is made about performing the procedure. And if you are asking about the experience and the difference it makes, then the main difference is the change in sexual life, the increase of satisfaction from sexual intercourse. There are also a lot of taboos concerning boys who have not been circumcised. They are not allowed to perform certain activities, visit certain places or touch certain objects. Once circumcised, they become fully-fledged men.

What is the procedure of the ritual?

It depends on the village and the region. My village is located on a cliff – there is a special cave there where the ritual is performed. Women are not allowed in there. The boys are taken to the cave. During this time, they learn a lot of useful and practical things. The procedure is performed with the use of an axe, similar to the one used to make sculptures. It is sharpened by the most skilful blacksmith from the village. Next, a cut is made with the help of a stone. Each boy is held by a man blinding his eyes in order to minimise his fear. The procedure itself is painless. Afterwards, the boys stay in the cave for about 20-25 days, waiting for all the wounds to heal – special ointments for healing wounds are used as well.

I wish I could learn more about the female experience in this regard. We are having our conversation in a Toguna, which apart from serving the purpose of conflict resolution is a place that women are not allowed into. This leads to my next question,

namely, why the only building from the traditionally shaped space of a Dogon village which found its way to Bródno, is the building symbolising harmony? What about the space associated with disharmony, negativity, or even pain?

In my opinion, there would be no point moving here any elements which are totally incompatible with the Polish culture. The laws preventing women from entering a Toguna are not oppressive towards them. They are to protect women from a curse of infertility. However, this does not concern white women because they were not taken into account when the law was created. White people are referred to as “anan sara”, i.e. “people without land”.

If you think that a Toguna fits well into European culture, which elements of the traditional Dogon space would you consider totally incompatible?

In fact, there are a lot of buildings that would fit into the landscape here, for instance “gina”, a house of women, a place for older persons. Toguna was chosen by Paweł Althamer, who decided it was perfect for the purposes of Bródno-Dogon cultural exchange.

Could you please describe the appearance and the location of the house of women in a Dogon village?

It is constructed in accordance with the principles of Dogon craft. Women stay there during their menstruation. They spend a week there, i.e. five days according to the Dogon calendar.

Is the fact that women have to spend their time in a separate building during their periods somehow justified by your laws or mythology?

According to the mythology, family is a sacred unit, and people keep some fetish objects at home. The presence of a woman in a house full of fetish objects counteracts their power. When the woman changes its status during the period – she is no longer perceived as a woman, but rather an impure creature. This type of perception is strongly rooted in our culture and even if a Dogon changes his religion, he continues to believe in it. It manifests itself, for example, in the prohibition to sleep with a menstruating woman in the same bed.

Could you please describe the custom related to women staying at the ‘menstruation house’ in more detail?

Yes. It is worth noting that a woman during her period does not have to stay at the house all the time, she can move freely around the village, and only spends her nights there. She cannot, however, ease herself in the field, because this could have a negative impact on the crops.

Is there a specifically defined spot in the village where such a building should be located?

It is usually situated opposite the Toguna, so that the men from the village can observe the menstruation cycles of the women and see which of them has entered and which has left the building.

Why is it so important?

If a man from the village marries a woman from another village and they move in together, the elders will be able to notice if she does not stay in the menstruation house, which means that she was already pregnant when she moved to the village. They are able to inform her husband that she is going to have a baby by some other man.

Does it also help to establish which of the girls living in the village started menstruating?

Yes, and it is the commencement of menstruation, and not the age or the general physical development of the girl, that determines the moment of her sexual initiation. Unmarried girls, who have never had a period yet, live with older women who introduce them into all secrets of life. The decision about sexual initiation is made by the girl herself, who decides when and with whom she will have her first intercourse. Sex before marriage is not a taboo question to the Dogons. If a girl likes a boy, she communicates it to her family, who in turn decide if she can get married.

This is quite an optimistic piece of information. Perhaps we should stop here. Thank you.