

The Heroine of Anthropology and Still Less Known

Petr Skalník

Gaillard, Gérald. 2022. *Françoise Héritier*. New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books, xiv + 193 pp.

Gaillard's book is the third in the series *Anthropology's Ancestors*, edited by Alexandar Bošković. Research on the history of anthropology is a relatively new movement in this discipline that recently celebrated one century since the publication of its iconic monograph, namely Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. To count Françoise Héritier, who died mere six years ago, among anthropology's ancestors is proof of the discipline's fast development as well as the seminal role of women in it.

Héritier (1933-2017) was one of the most outstanding French anthropologists of the post-Lévi-Strauss generation. She did her first fieldwork in late colonial era Upper Volta and continued to work among the Samo until first independent decades of what became Burkina Faso (six years altogether). Françoise Héritier followed Lévi-Strauss by expanding the themes of his *Elementary Systems of Kinship*, by critical assessment of generalized exchange, alliance, incest, and biological aspects of femalehood. She soon realised that a cross-cultural examination of the physical, medical, and legal complexities of women is indispensable. Her deep and innovative dissection of kinship, incest and various aspects of the body is perfectly detailed by Gérald Gaillard's narrative that combines politics in France with politics of French anthropology and the general intellectual atmosphere in the French Fifth Republic. Gaillard's meticulous approach includes the life data of hundreds of protagonists in his very readable story.

Françoise Héritier was a socialist that has a special meaning within the French context. She was married to Michel Izard, another personage of the Lévi-Straussian anthropology. Her West African research was largely carried out as Mme Izard-Héritier. The couple had a daughter. The post-fieldwork period was marked by

her other anthropological marriage, and then she signed her numerous works as Françoise Hérítier-Augé. But her initial, and perhaps the most significant monograph, *L'Exercice de la parenté* (1981) is signed only by her maiden name. Not many of her books were translated into English, an outstanding exception being *Two Sisters and Their Mother: The Anthropology of Incest*, MIT Press, 2000. Hérítier, for example, compared the universal prohibition of incest with the legal prohibition of human cloning. She was active in state committees on AIDS, discussed immigration publicly, as well as fighting for the recognition of equality of women. She criticized Freud for his “blindness to the importance of the feminine” because the Oedipus story, according to her, is rather a “son’s encounter with the father in the body of the mother” and the desire of men to appropriate the power to give life explains “male domination rather than women’s envy of the phallus” (104–105).

In 1982, after serving in various positions in Parisian anthropological establishments, Hérítier was nominated by Lévi-Strauss to be his successor as head of the Laboratoire d’Anthropologie Sociale even though she did not possess the doctor’s degree (she was enrolled for a PhD. but did not present her thesis for defence). Was it the proverbial piston so well-known in French career strategies? Personally, I think she fully deserved her promotion, even though the losers were Izard and Godelier who worked in the laboratory since its inception in 1960. She became the first woman professor at the Collège de France since the 16th century. Her chair received the name “Comparative study of African societies”. She would lead the laboratory until 1999 when she stepped down because of serious and rare illness of which she was diagnosed just before her nomination. The book’s cover is adorned by a photo of professors of Collège de France taken in 1985. The radiant Françoise Hérítier stands in front and among dozens of male colleagues. Hérítier was decorated, among other distinctions, by the knighthood in the *Ordre de la Légion d’Honneur*. While her anthropological research continued, she lectured and supervised student theses. But most significantly, she became a public figure through her contributions to the press and radio. The main topic of her public appearances was the inequality between men and women, the problem she characterised by the expression “differential valence of the sexes”.

Hérítier was well-known in France and in Latin America but not much in the English-speaking world. Gaillard’s detailed obituary in English was published in *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* 6 (1): 7–28 (2018). His book here under review is a milestone in the history of anthropology. The imperishable place of Françoise Hérítier in it is now secured.

Petr Skalník

skalnik.petr@gmail.com

Independent researcher