Death is a part of life and life is intrinsically eternal. Life does not die: it cannot do so, because for every person that dies today, others will be born, into the same family or the same community, and will therefore live in communion and synergy with the deceased. They may even be born the very same day, like the daughter of Louis Mulandu whose wife Musamu was at the end of her pregnancy on the morning when, after a long and agonising night – hours of severe and distressing dyspnoea –, he breathed his last. She had remained at his side right to the end. Perhaps partly from the shock of what had happened, she went into labour as soon as her husband died and that very same evening their child, baby Louise, was born.

A similar thing happened with maman Angel who died from childbirth (struck by a pulmonary embolism in the hours immediately following the birth of her sixth child), maman Léonie, who had worked to the very last day of her pregnancy, preferring to save up her entire allowance of maternity leave in order to be able to enjoy time with her child in the two months following the birth, having assisted her to the end, went into labour in tears and little Angel was born well before nightfall. Life goes on. And procreation is the viaticum for achieving eternal life. This is why the first thing my AIDS patients do – this was particularly true in the period when I was not yet able to offer them any hope – is to try to have a child, in other words, try to gain eternity through their offspring. Because procreating, or transmitting life, equates primarily with not dying: it means becoming part of life’s eternal mystery.

Indeed, in Africa, life does not die; it is everlasting, just as time is, because both are a collective heritage that is passed down from father to son through one’s descendants or “Kikanda”, which it is hoped will be, like those of Abraham, as numerous as the stars in the sky. African traditional medicine takes a holistic view of man (muntu). Muntu is one and the same with those around him (Bantu) and will never live alone. To lead a healthy life, he must respect the “nsiku” or traditional laws that ensure good living and harmonious relations with all the members of one’s family and clan. If a man clashes with members of his own family, he is doomed. The extended family pools the goods of its single members and participates collectively in the great events: birth and death. When a child is born living, the maternal grandmother, who is required to attend the labouring woman, in the village or at the hospital, lifts her voice in a song of joy and relief, and all those present (including the midwives) join in, creating a joyful chorus. The extended family plays a role in the care of the sick, deciding who should remain at the patient’s side, given that, if he is to recover, he must have his mother or sister close by. Instead, when the prognosis is grim, he must have a female member of his family present in order to be assured a peaceful passing – a woman who, having nurtured and fed him to the end, will then sing the song of death, a song of lament and prayer, joined by all those present, including the nurses.

But one who has led a worthy life (“muntu muntu”) lives on in the memories of the living, who remember him for all the good he did. Such individuals are the “ancêtres” who support us in life’s difficulties and through its eternal journey. Only the person who has not lived worthily, who has contributed nothing to the social development of his community, that is to say the idler or “muntu mpamba”, is not entitled to be remembered forever and thus enjoy eternal life.

Life is like a circle: it begins a new with every birth, from which it draws new lifeblood. And the birth becomes part of the circle of life. Life, just like time or “ntango”, is everlasting: but “ntango” also means day, and the sun. And daytime is resurrected and renewed with every sunrise. Life is eternal just like the turning of the seasons – the season for sowing and the season for harvesting, each followed by a rainy season. Mother Earth is nourished by the rain, and the soil belongs not to individual men but to God and to the community that lives off it and inhabits it, and that therefore cultivates it and uses it as the resting place for its dead. The deceased who is not laid to rest in his mother soil is denied the source of eternal life. The bloodthirsty dictator Mobutu died of cancer while he was in exile in Morocco, far from his native land. Recently, his countrymen agreed to his family’s request to have him returned to his homeland and his body was indeed repatriated. But was this to allow him to rest in peace or perhaps (who knows?) to avoid his vengeance being exacted on a country that for twenty years has been seeking peace in vain.

The priest Abbé Serge also died far from his homeland, in his case in Italy. Our diocese lacked the resources to repatriate his body and asked the members of his parish to help make it possible for him to be buried in his own country. In the end, his body was repatriated so that he might rest in peace or perhaps (who knows?) to avoid his vengeance being exacted on a country that for twenty years has been seeking peace in vain.

Rain is heaven sent (I am reminded of this every time it starts to rain and we all place basins under the eaves to collect the water, a precious gift without which there would be no life), and year after year the heavy rains (“mvula”) feed the land. For this reason, the word “mvula” means both rain and year, and “na mvula ya mvula” means the eternity of time that is man’s. “You have a
watch, but we have time” a friend once said to me when, glancing at my watch, I told him “I’m sorry, I haven’t got time”.

In our clockwatching culture, in which we try to reduce time to an individual phenomenon, believing that we possess “our own” time measured out by “our own” watches, we have become slaves to time and never have enough of it. Until finally we reach the moment of death, when “time runs out”. Every day of our lives we are oppressed by time, which reminds us that death hangs over all of us – death, which for the individual, is like the “end of time”. The end of “his time” – the time he had believed to be his, but which never really belonged to him.

Whenever I come to Italy, I am aware of this palpable perception of time as a continuous flow of chronometrically marked seconds, which brings us, inexorably, closer to the point of death. But in Africa time is eternal, and will have no end; in the collective conception of life (which, on account of this collectivity, does not die with the death of a single individual), time is collectively owned, there is no such thing as “my” time, which dies. There exists only the time of the people (“bantu”).

Just as the moon (“ngonda”) is renewed every month, with each menstrual cycle (“makila ya ngonda” means blood of the month and of the moon), the womb is renewed for the child that may be conceived, and menstrual blood is synonymous with fertility. Aware that this blood is the food of life, countless women with AIDS or tuberculosis, affected by secondary amenorrhoea, despair because they no longer have their “makila ya ngonda”. Blood is another symbol that embraces the concepts of both life and death. In all cultures, proud fathers say of their sons, “he is my blood” (“menga ya mono”), with the result that blood is a symbol of the transmission of life.

Blood is also a symbol of death: “beto ta mona menga” is a death threat, and among the various “nsiku” or taboos related to sexuality (and sexuality is essentially the transmission of life), there is one about sexual intercourse during menstruation, which is held to result in death, a belief that dates back to centuries before the AIDS epidemic. Sperm is known as «white blood» and breastmilk is a mother’s «white blood». “Munu kele menga na ngolo! Tala bana na mono inki mutindu bo kele mayele” says the father of a family with pride, “mon sang est fort, regardez les enfants et leur intelligence”, and strong blood is handed down from father to son.

Death is a part of life. That is a phrase you will undoubtedly have heard before, perhaps even today. Also because it states an obvious fact: being alive is the only absolute prerequisite for accessing the experience of death; as long as we are alive, our inevitable encounter with death is our only certainty!

The purpose of many rites in different African cultures is to drive death away, and they are sometimes interpreted in a very superficial manner by the uninitiated. Let me begin by citing the example of the funeral rite in which the widow, during the funeral, is required to mate with the brothers of the deceased. This practice quite rightly opposed on the grounds that it can encourage the spread of AIDS, but those who suggest that it might be replaced by another in which the widow is required to “climb over the body of the deceased” fail to attach due
significance to a rite in which death is combined with the sexual act – an act whose supreme purpose is not pleasure but the transmission of life.

Among the Bayaka it is not the grieving widow who is required to perform the sexual act of salvation; indeed, all those present at the “matanga” (the night-long funeral vigil before the body of the deceased, resting in an open coffin) are in principle allowed to couple with their own partners, taking advantage of the darkness. All these rites linked to the redemptive value of sexuality as the source of transmission of life.

Transmitting life is a human need that is highly valued among the Bantu-speaking cultures and especially among the Bayaka. If a couple fails to conceive the whole of the extended family will be drawn in and involved in efforts to find a solution to the problem, which can even result in divorce. A woman who is unable to conceive is diminished in the eyes of her family members, the women included. This sentiment will turn to shame if it is subsequently found to be the husband who is sterile: “a childless man is a dead man” states the Talmud, and this is a view that is still held here in the Kwango.

If we can manage to understand the inherent sacredness of sexuality as a source of transmission of life, focusing, with the Yaka people, on the sacred stages in the cycle of life (birth, the initiation of the young through male circumcision, marriage, death), then we will be able to link the fight against HIV to the pursuit of positive values, like all the various prohibitions or “nsiku” well known among the Yaka, which are entirely bound up with sexuality, marriage, blood and death, the latter seen as a consequence of violation of a Nsiku.

Chastity before marriage, the obligation for a man to pay a dowry to the extended family to show that he is not a “muntu mpamba” but, instead, will be able to safeguard the health and well-being of his wife and children, marital fidelity, the prohibition of sexual relations during menstruation, and the horror of contact with blood are all traditional Bayaka values that date back to long before the inculturation of Christianity, and punishment for their violation is believed to consist of sexual impotence for men, metrorrhagia for women, and, in the long term, death.

This does not mean that disease and death are forms of divine retribution: they are demonic punishments (bandoki) invoked by members of the extended family offended by the violation of “nsiku ya palu”, i.e. the ban on sexual intercourse outside marriage, and thus of the gift of life.

The fight against AIDS must take into account this cultural background, or it will be bound to fail. The transmission of disease and death through the supreme act that is meant, instead, to transmit life is a contradiction in terms that spells tragedy for the Bayaka. A tragedy that no condom can hope to remedy.

Chiara Castellani was born in Parma on 23 November 1956, the second of four sisters; she grew up, with her family, in Venice and Rome. She was only seven years old when she decided that she wanted to be a doctor in Africa.

After graduating in medicine and surgery, she specialised in obstetrics and gynaecology in Rome, and then in tropical medicine, in Antwerp. Her working life began in Nicaragua, where she spent seven years. Since 1991 she has lived and worked in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire) in an area where tuberculosis, AIDS, malaria and sleeping sickness are highly endemic. In the course of her career as a doctor in war zones (first in Nicaragua and then in the Congo), Dr. Castellani’s role has evolved and changed: from a gynaecologist-obstetrician responsible for bringing babies into the world, she has become a war surgeon, called upon to treat, and even perform amputations on, war and landmine victims. Following a car accident in Africa she herself lost an arm, but this did not stop her from continuing to work in African hospitals and setting up health education facilities in disadvantaged areas. As she herself wrote, «That was the day I became “a sparrow with one wing” – the day my life, as a woman and as a doctor, was broken in two».

The hospital in Kimbau where her African mission began lacked everything and the facilities were crumbling. Patients slept on the ground, on mats they had brought with them from home. Thanks to Chiara Castellani, effective health care began to be provided in a hospital originally built by the Belgians but subsequently abandoned, and a hydroelectric power plant was opened, finally making electricity and water available where previously these resources had been lacking. Since 2007, with the support of non-governmental organisations, Dr. Castellani has been promoting a project for monitoring and treating AIDS in the region of Bandundu and throughout the Congo.

She has written two books of memoirs: “Carissimi tutti – lettere di un medico dal fronte” (Dear All – a Doctor’s Letters from the Front), and “Una lampadina per Kimbau” (A Light Bulb for Kimbau). Together with Nobel Prize winner Rita Montalcini and other women, she wrote a book entitled “Aggiungere vita ai giorni” (Adding Life to Days).

Chiara Castellani’s work in the medical and social fields has earned her numerous honours and awards; in particular, in 2000, she was made an Officer of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic by the then Italian President, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi.