

THE MENSTRUAL HUT AND THE WITCH'S LAIR IN TWO EASTERN INDONESIAN SOCIETIES

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Menstrual huts are associated with ideas of pollution, misogyny, and intersexual tension in the literature, but in Huaulu, Seram, I found an ambivalently charged but not necessarily negative view of female bodies. In contrast, the Kodi of Sumba do not seclude women during menstruation but do link menstrual contamination to venereal disease, herbalism, and witchcraft. Keeping menstruation secret expresses anxieties about bodily integrity that show a greater separation of male and female worlds than the public-health approach of the menstrual hut. (Menstrual huts, sexual politics, reproduction, witchcraft, pollution)

The anthropological literature on gender relations in Pacific Asia has tended to group ideas of menstrual pollution with sexual antagonism and the use of poisons and witchcraft by women against men in Melanesia, while the apparent absence of menstrual taboos, complementary or relatively unmarked gender relations, and harmonious households are connected with Indonesia and Polynesia. Since hiding menstruation from men and playing down its role in public correspond to Euro-American practices, this attitude has come to be seen as a reasonable norm, and an emphasis on menstruation as a deviant expression of intersexual conflict.

My field experiences in two Indonesian societies, however, have led me to find this conclusion unsatisfactory. The Huaulu of Seram have extremely stringent menstrual taboos, and as a woman among them, I was required to comply strictly.¹ I spent five to six days each month in a menstrual hut on the edge of the village, refrained from eating big game, and bathed at a special fountain which was forbidden to men. But rather than showing animosity toward men, the other menstruating women indicated a wish to protect them and spare them from harm. Huaulu women were proud of the fact that they controlled a dangerous flow of blood, and they emphasized its creative and empowering aspects.

In contrast, the Kodi women of the coastal villages of Sumba, with whom I had lived for three years before coming to Huaulu, kept their menstrual cycles secret, and (in the absence of tampons and toilets) instructed me on surreptitious techniques of doing so even when clothing was washed in mixed company at the river. It was in this society, however, that menstruation found its way into the witch's lair: the appearance of the menstrual flow and its believed relation to fertility, abortion, and venereal disease are all part of an occult realm of natural medicines that only women can control. The term for these medicines, *moro*, has the literal meaning of the color blue or green, and raw, uncooked, or unprocessed. *Moro* is also the term used to describe deep saturations of indigo dye on cloth. "Blue medicines" are part of a tradition of herbalism, midwifery, and witchcraft which concerns learning about roots and plants to keep the dyes in cloth from running, and also to control bleeding in

women—after childbirth, following a village abortion, or hemorrhage interpreted as caused by violations of taboos on incest or adultery. Men are excluded from the knowledge of when their wives are fertile, are often not told when they are pregnant until fairly late in the pregnancy, and may be tricked into sex acts that are believed to make them infertile and impotent. Female herbalists and midwives (*tou tangu moro*) compare the menstrual flow to the dyes fermenting in the indigo pot, and certain roots and barks are used both to control the bleeding of colors in textiles and to control the bleeding of women's bodies.

Deception concerning bodily fluids and their uses is paramount in Kodi, while in Huaulu every woman's menstrual cycle is public knowledge and even part of a concerted campaign to keep the village clean. These contrasts suggest rethinking some of the familiar anthropological oppositions between ideas of pollution and female purity, sexual antagonism, and sexual co-operation. Perhaps the apparently "polluting" women are really protecting their menfolk and co-operating with them to maintain the health and reproductive success of the group, while the women menstruating in secret are scheming to undermine male authority through clandestine spells, medicines, and poisons.

THE HUAULU OF SERAM, THE MOLUCCAS

The case of the Huaulu, who numbered 165 in 1985, appears to be a classic one of menstruation as pollution. Living in a mountaintop village in the rainforests of Seram, the Huaulu are hunters and gatherers of wild animals and wild foods who also occasionally plant and harvest the products of trees like sago and banana. For the last three decades, they have formed an enclave of defiant religious traditionalists in an area otherwise divided between Christian and Muslim villages, and have recently been torn by armed confrontations between these two religious groups. There are two menstrual huts at the mountain village, one behind each row of houses, and another at the coastal settlement where some Huaulu children go to elementary school.

The menstrual hut in which I stayed in 1985 was, like other Huaulu houses, a pile construction of sago wood with sago leaf thatch. It sat just below the edge of the village, but there were no windows open to that direction, and its doorway and veranda faced the forest. At any given time there might be from one to six women staying there, often with young boys and girls and nonmenstruating female friends. The menstrual hut is most crowded when a woman is about to give birth or nursing a newborn inside, when several dozen women and children may gather inside and around it. Women are separated from the village during their menstrual periods, but they are not secluded or confined: they are free to wander through the forest (as long as they avoid male hunting pathways), to gather shrimp at a particular place in the river, and to collect nuts and bananas. They are not allowed to cook for their husbands during this period or to carry heavy loads of water and firewood to the houses in the village. They do sometimes occupy their time with plaiting mats or

rolling twine, and they can play musical instruments, tell long stories to each other, and escape the drudgery of normal household work.

All Huaulu children are born in the menstrual hut, and many young boys spend much of their childhood playing alongside their mothers in the huts and even sleeping there until they reach puberty. Adult men, however, must remain at a distance from the huts, never touch them, and never look inside the windows that face the forest. The menstrual space excludes men under the risk of death, and must be built and repaired by women alone.

One woman, named Alimau (Tigress), was the most frequent inhabitant of one of the menstrual huts in the Huaulu village, since she had never been pregnant. Because of the phenomenon of menstrual synchrony, she was usually accompanied by two close friends whose cycles tended to correspond with her own. By the late 1980s, she had adopted a son, who usually came there with her, and she turned the social stigma of her infertility into a strategy to achieve a leadership role in the village. She used the captive audience of young women in the menstrual huts to share her knowledge of myths and stories (*roromuem*), and managed to attract large crowds to listen to “the tales of the Tigress”—excluding, however, the male shaman leaders. She used the menstrual hut as a stage on which to display her skill in verbal performance, and because of the reputation established there, she also came to be respected by many male ritual specialists.

Alimau, like many other Huaulu women, spent longer in the menstrual hut than the four to five days that high-school hygiene lessons say the menstrual period is supposed to last. Were they simply being extra cautious, not wanting even a drop of menstrual blood to fall in the houses they shared with men? Or were they using the excuse of menstruation to get more time off and listen to stories and songs without worrying about cooking and cleaning? Huaulu men often speculated about this, as Valeri (2001:199) records:

Men fear the pollution of menstrual blood much more than women do. . . . [Women] are accused of taking advantage of the rule of menstrual segregation by faking their menses or pretending that they last longer than they actually do. In this way they are able to escape their obligations towards their husbands and family. Undoubtedly women enjoy their vacation in the menstrual hut. Observing this, and the rage of many a man when hearing the laughter that occasionally comes from the happy women in the menstrual huts, one is even tempted to speculate that the custom of menstrual segregation is a particularly sly female invention. But even if this were true, one would still have to presuppose the male fears that put menstruating women so effectively beyond men's reach, and thus a male contribution to the custom.

When asked if they exaggerated the amount of time they menstruated in order to spend more time in the menstrual hut, the women denied it. They said they could feel a menstrual period coming (“the belly feels heavy”) and they came early to be certain that they would not contaminate the village. It is also true that they sometimes stayed for some days after the flow had stopped, once again wanting, they said, to be sure that it would be safe for them to return. Then, the woman must bathe at a spring and enter her home through the back door. A woman must spend the first night after

returning from the menstrual hut in the kitchen of the village temple (*luma poto*, big house) and only then can she return to sharing a mat with her husband.

No woman ever told me that she faked or extended her menstrual periods to get extra leisure time, and all of them stressed that they followed the taboos because they wanted their husbands, fathers, and brothers to be good hunters and good lovers, and they realized that contact with menstrual blood could harm them. Male shamans did occasionally come near the menstrual hut if, for instance, a woman was having difficulty in giving birth or in expelling the placenta. In one difficult childbirth that I witnessed, the woman's husband passed medications through the window to her to help open up the birth canal, and performed a series of songs dedicated to the spirits in a seance in the village.

THE KODI OF SUMBA, LESSER SUNDA ISLANDS

The use of male healers to treat female reproductive problems was at odds with my experience in Kodi, where women were dedicated to policing their own health and fertility, and would not allow men to treat them for reproductive problems. There are now over 70,000 Kodi speakers in villages along the west coast of Sumba Island. Kodi women tend pigs and chickens, while Kodi men herd horses and water buffalo. Both sexes work in dry gardens of rice, corn, and tubers, where food is much more available than for Huaulu hunters, but more work is required to produce it.

As a semiagricultural people with a well-developed tradition of textile production, Kodi women are often accomplished weavers and dyers of *ikat* cloths, which can give them a considerable cash income independent of their husbands. The fermentation of indigo dye is part of a secret complex of female "blue arts" (*moro*) from which men are strictly excluded²: no man can approach the indigo dye pot, or touch it, or bring meat into close range while threads are being dyed. While the dyeing hut would seem to offer close parallels with the Huaulu menstrual hut, the taboos associated with the indigo dyeing hut specifically exclude most women of reproductive age. Women who are menstruating are not allowed to come near indigo dye because it is believed that their menstrual blood is "aggressive" and could destroy the dyes in the pot. Pregnant women are not allowed for the opposite reason: the contents of their wombs are believed to be vulnerable to contamination from indigo, and if they came near, the fetus they carried would dissolve and be aborted.

A pregnant woman who unexpectedly finds herself near an indigo dyeing shack can pray to the spirit of the shack (*mori kareke nggilingo*) to spare the contents of her womb. She addresses this spirit as "the foreign woman, the Savunese woman" (*minye dawa, minye haghu*), the ancestress from a neighboring island who first brought indigo dyeing to Sumba. She promises not to venture into the area again, and she agrees to sacrifice a chicken. If all this is done correctly, her child may be born safely. A menstruating woman cannot, however, do anything to keep her menstrual blood from spoiling the dye pot; the polluting contact is not subject to ritual

mediation. While indigo is "women's secret," metal-smelting is men's, and is also a secret brought from Savu. The taboos against men coming near the indigo pot are mirrored by similar taboos that forbid women to go near metal smelting. The importance of weaving and metalworking are evident in the Kodi creation story, which presents the Creator as a double-gendered entity: a Mother who tied the hair at the forelock (*Inya wolo hungga*) and a Father who smelted the skull at the crown (*Bapa rawi lindu*). The combination of female binding and dyeing and male metal-smelting is what made the human race.

Indigo dyeing, herbalism, and abortion medicines are part of an occult complex of knowledge invested in older women, and used at least in part to control the morals of younger women. Indigo is the color for dyeing funeral cloths all over Eastern Indonesia, and for this reason is associated with both death and regeneration. When a woman dies while pregnant, she is said to "carry the funeral shroud along with her in the womb" (*ngandi ghabuho la kambu dalo*), since the fetus is enveloped in the placenta. When an adult dies, he or she is enveloped in indigo cloths which serve as a second placenta, and the body is laid on its right side, in fetal position, and closely bound before being placed in the "stone womb" of a tomb. Menstrual blood is called "blood from the womb" (*ruto wali la kambu dalo*) and is said to dry into the bluish-black color of a deep indigo dye. Since menstrual blood is also seen as "dead blood," and as possibly infected blood, its links to disease but also to regeneration are important. The most prestigious indigo-dyed cloth is a man's cloth, the shroud woven with the pattern of a python's scales, used to represent the supposed immortality of snakes (see Hoskins 1991).

Kodi society would be marked as displaying an absence of menstrual taboos in a shallow comparative study, since menstruating women are not forbidden to enter villages or temples, and are expected to cook and clean for their husbands during their periods. But a formal absence of taboos does not mean that menstruation is seen as harmless, or that it is not important in magic and witchcraft. On the contrary, Sumbanese people believe that sexually transmitted diseases are the result of deliberate menstrual poisoning of men by women. An Australian doctor who has practiced medicine on the island for over 30 years describes the situation in this way: "Women are supposed to avoid intercourse during their menses, but the men believe that unscrupulous women will deceive men and have intercourse during the phases of the menses when the flow is slight, either from an excess of sexual desire, or out of malicious or vengeful intentions to contaminate the man concerned" (Mitchell 1982:10). According to the local theory, placing the penis in contact with menstrual blood causes it to fester and produce a "blood clot" (*manuho*, the same word used for the product of a spontaneous abortion), which must be transferred to another woman by the same means it was acquired. This vocabulary suggests that the experience of a bloody discharge from the penis is associated with the idea of an inappropriate male pregnancy, which must be moved into a woman's body in order to relieve the male sufferer of an affliction that blurs the distinction between the sexes.

Dr. Mitchell surveyed the relationship between fertility and disease in 1968-69, while he was acting head of the District Health Service in West Sumba. The island had wide variation in population growth rates, with slow growth seeming to correlate with the highest levels of gonorrhoea. In connection with a yaws-eradication campaign, he found that in the areas with the lowest fertility rates, 53 per cent of the men had untreated gonorrhoea, and 23 per cent had the disease in an asymptomatic form. Although women could not be examined, fertility questionnaires revealed that 42 per cent of Wanukaka women had not had children since the age of 25. These data were compared with data from another district, Loli, with lower rates of gonorrhoea and much higher fertility: 3.6 living children per fertile woman in Loli versus 1.9 in Wanukaka (Mitchell 1995:2, 1982b). Rates of gonorrhoea in Kodi seem to be much closer to those in Loli, although the disease is not unknown. My genealogical surveys show that only 16 per cent of women reported secondary infertility (defined as no children after age 25), and the average number of children born to each mother was five.

The local term for gonorrhoea, *hadu waricoyo*, translates as "disease you get from women," or more euphemistically, *hadu hamama*, "the disease you get from chewing betel" (i.e., in courtship). The key social problem that doctors faced in fighting the disease was its relation to sexual politics. Local people had developed a complex set of customs for making and maintaining sexual liaisons outside of formal marriage that they refused to reveal to health practitioners. They also believed that the only way for men to rid themselves of the painful, bleeding sores on their penises was to pass them to a woman, whose body could absorb the infection and purge itself during her menstrual period. Rather than seeking treatment at local clinics, young men therefore simply sought new women to "take away the blood." Infections were passed back and forth between jealous and resentful lovers, spurred to seek new sexual conquests in the mistaken belief that this would cure them of their own affliction.

Women in Kodi are associated with the "blue arts" of witchcraft, indigo dyeing, and herbalism. Hereditary witches have "blueness in them," they are "bluish people" (*tou morongo*) whose very blood is believed to be in some way poisonous to others. While both men and women may be hereditary witches, only women will pass on the affliction to their children, since witchcraft always travels along the matriline or *walla* (flower). Their souls may travel from their bodies at night, seeping from the navel and leaving a small bluish ring, like a bruise, around the area where they left; this blue spot can be seen as a symptom of witchcraft. Blueness is said to be deep inside the liver (*ela ate dalo*) of a witch, a kind of poison that can affect others even without her willing it. On the other side, herbalists and sorcerers are called people who apply blueness (*tou tangu moro*), since they intentionally manipulate raw green and blue substances to control bleeding, affect the color of dye on threads, and restore health or cause mental confusion. These distinctions recall Evans-Pritchard's (1937) famous separation of witchcraft and sorcery, defining witchcraft as a largely psychic act, while sorcery is a conscious manipulation of words and objects. Kodi

“blue witches” have a special darkness within them, while others simply learn to deal with the darker powers.

Since gonorrhea has serious consequences on fertility, menstrual magic is involved not only in afflicting men with the disease, but also in treating women who believe they may be afflicted with infertility by jealous co-wives or sexual rivals. Infertility treatments on Sumba are the specialty of female midwives, masseuses, and herbalists who use some of the same roots and herbs to stop bleeding in women after childbirth that they use to stop the indigo dye from bleeding when it is washed. One particular combination of herbs is said to cause an abortion, another to prevent miscarriages, another to “tighten the womb” after childbirth and allow the new mother to recover her strength.

One midwife and herbalist claimed she had a vast array of secret potions for promoting and preventing childbirth. A woman who was having difficulty conceiving would be told that her uterus was “turned around,” and could, through vigorous massage, be turned back and opened so that children could be born from it. A child in the womb who presented in the breech position could also supposedly be turned around to permit a normal birth. She said that her medicines could make “blue blood” that was flowing from an infected birth canal turn red again and stop flowing. “It’s all like the indigo dye pot,” she said. “You have to use the right herbs and roots to get the color that you want and keep the fermentation under control.”

Women’s skin was also decorated with the same bluish designs woven into cloth. Older women still have elaborate tattoos on their forearms and calves that mark their aristocratic rank and reproductive achievements. The designs include geometric patterns called the “buffalo eye” or the “horse’s tail,” which represent the bridewealth animals exchanged for Kodi brides. The first tattooing occurs shortly after menstruation for women of high rank and is said to mark them as nubile and available for marriage. The finest and most intricate designs are reserved for the private area of the upper thighs, usually hidden by sarungs worn to at least the knee. These tattoos are the subject of a huge amount of erotic speculation and even horrible insults. One of the worst things one can say to a Kodi man is, “Your mother has no tattoos on her thighs,” implying both that she is of low birth and that intimate parts of her anatomy are already public knowledge. A full set of tattoos designate a woman as a wife and mother whose bridewealth payments have been made. They are therefore “receipts printed on the skin,” signs that she has been fully incorporated into the patrilineal house, and has borne descendants for that house.

Tattoos are now rare in young girls who attend school and have become unwilling to have these signs of male ownership painfully carved onto their bodies. But a traditional midwife, herbalist, and tattoo artist remained proud of the mystique she still had of being able to control all aspects of female reproduction and adornment, saying fiercely, “Men will never know how much we really can do to control these things. We have all kinds of secrets, and they should always believe that we can control even more than we really can.”

A woman famous for her knowledge of magical potions was said to have two recipes to win back a husband's affections from a second and younger wife. One magical recipe uses kitchen ashes, skin scraped from the hands and feet, and splinters from the main house pillar, which the husband is supposed to drink three times in a meat broth. The other recipe involves sexual secretions (saved on a handkerchief by secretly wiping oneself after intercourse) mixed with coffee or tea, and served to the husband without him knowing it. One seems to evoke the magnetic authority of the ancestral house, the other a different kind of magnetism.

INTERSEX TENSIONS AND BETRAYALS

The overt menstrual taboos of the Huaulu involve both men and women in the social management of a dangerous substance, which has to be safely channeled in order to keep it from contaminating food and descendants. Women willingly accept quite stringent taboos out of love of their menfolk and a sense that they bear an important responsibility. For many of them, the time spent in the menstrual hut may not be unpleasant, and it can even form an alternate stage for performances of socially valued skills, such as singing and storytelling.

Women are also keenly sensitive to the fact that men depend on them for protection against a potentially dangerous substance. A man who accidentally touches the menstrual hut or comes too close to the spring where menstruating women bathe will begin to cough persistently, and will finally end up spitting blood. His bleeding from the respiratory apparatus matches female genital bleeding (Valeri 2000:148). Hemorrhaging from the mouth is seen as conclusive evidence of menstrual contamination. A man who simply looks at a menstruating woman may become nearsighted or blind.

The one great uneasiness that Huaulu men confess about their wives and daughters is that they may laugh at them while they are in the menstrual huts, and this theme of disruptive female laughter is found again and again in Huaulu folklore. Valeri (1990) reports a Huaulu myth about the origin of fire which asserts that this pre-eminent cultural acquisition was endangered when a male culture hero showed his penis to a woman and she laughed. Women are normally supposed to speak quietly in the menstrual huts, and while they are allowed to sing and tell stories, if they laugh too loudly men will come and ask them to stop. It is perhaps an important signal that even in a society which emphasizes co-operation, the possibilities of betrayal are still there.

Betrayal of men by women (and vice versa) is, however, central to many Kodi notions of the body and its dangers, even if these do not include menstrual pollution in the classic sense. Blood out of place is associated with witchcraft, whether or not this blood is specifically identified with menstruation. Traces of raw blood found in a coconut, or on a plate of rice, are a sign that the host may be a hereditary witch (*tou morongo*) who must release certain bodily poisons into whatever foods she prepares, even without necessarily meaning to harm a guest. The use of roots and

barks by herbalists and midwives is said to be a way of controlling excessive bleeding, as in an indigo cloth when washed, or the bleeding of a woman after childbirth. The same preparations (*amo ghaiyo*, medicine roots) are used in both cases. Older women may also use these blue substances to enforce their own standards of morality. Beside the bed of a woman suffering to give birth or to expel a placenta, they hear whispered confessions of adultery or incest, and decide how to respond to them. Their cult of dyeing secrets is also a cult that seeks to control female reproduction, and men are strictly excluded from all its mysteries.

COMPARATIVE COSMOLOGIES

To better understand the two societies requires turning to their cosmologies. The Huaulu menstrual hut does not correspond to the romantic fantasies of cultural feminists, who see these huts as clubhouses where sisterhood is powerful, and women came to perceive that “their blood was a key into the heart of the Goddess” (Owen 1998:xiii). Huaulu men and women indeed believe that menstrual blood is powerful, but not to serve a gentle, nurturant earth goddess. It instead is part of a cycle initiated by a terrifying female predator. The Huaulu story of the origins of death illustrates how female power is linked to themes of waning and waxing, decomposition and recomposition, sex and death:

It was a female monster, Hahanusa, who introduced death in the world by outwitting a male cultural hero, Olenusa—the epitome of the powerful warrior. Olenusa’s “system” guaranteed immortality and eternal youth to humans by providing them with a nonsexual mode of replacement. Once old, they would not die and be replaced by their children, but would be transformed into stone. The stone, put in the kitchen, would break after three days, and the old person would come out of it, transformed into his or her youthful self. This system, in which man’s continuity would be modeled after that of durable stone, was opposed by Hahanusa, who propounded a “system” modeled after the banana tree. The tree is soft and does not last long, but it is replaced by the “children” (*ananiem*) that sprout at its base. Individual immortality is thus contrasted in this myth with individual mortality as a logical correlate of species immortality through sexual reproduction. And since in the latter woman is viewed as preponderant, she becomes identified with a life that implies death. (Valeri 2001:209)

Hahanusa is feared and hated by the Huaulu, who find occasions to curse her (and tell her story) whenever someone dies in the community. But they also recognize that death is necessary, for if humans did not die, the world would be too full of them: “We would have not enough to eat, we would have to eat one another” (Valeri 2001:209). So Hahanusa’s grim victory has meant that new generations can be born, and that people can co-operate and live together, because they are all aware that life must imply death in order to continue. “The paradox is recognized, but men still cannot quite accept it, as they cannot quite accept its signs in women’s bodies” (Valeri 2001:209).

Huaulu women are seen as connected to the earth, and to Puhum, the anthropomorphized primordial earth mother, who is married to Lahatala, the primordial heavenly father. Human bodies come from the first mother, and were originally made

of earth, and so they are corruptible like all earthly things. The breath of life, “like a wind,” comes from the heavenly father. The female-created parts of human beings rot and decay, while the male-created breath leaves the body at death and disperses in the air. Male spirit is abstract and as powerful as the invisible winds that contain the animating breath of past generations. It is associated with heat, light, the day, and the glowing sun. Female power is concrete, earthy, and related to plant and human regeneration. The earth mother is associated with coolness, darkness, and night, and the changing shape and luminosity of the moon. The Huaulu also state that a woman’s menstrual periods are triggered by the appearance of the new moon:

Menstruation is connected with the lunar cycle: the transition from the old to the new moon allegedly triggers it. When I pointed out to my informants that women seemed to go to the menstrual huts at any time of month, I was answered that there is a greater concentration of menstruating women at about the time of the new moon and that, anyhow, this was always so “in the past.” (Valeri 2001:208)

When the “earth mother calls,” people die a natural death of old age, and their ghosts come to reside on earth. When the “heavenly father calls,” people die a sudden, violent death (by falling from trees or being eaten by wild animals, or when giving birth) and their ghosts reside in heaven. “Women are the passive bearers of a force that gives a life implying death; men willingly and artificially give death” (Valeri 2001:210).

The most important male ritual object in Huaulu, the greatest source of its strength, and the symbol of its alleged superiority over all neighboring societies is, appropriately enough, a “living” phallus descended from the heavenly father Lahatala:

This object (referred to as “a human being” and named Leautuam, “the sun’s life principle”) is preserved in the most sacred house in the village, and it is to it, as *luma upan* “lord of the house,” that men consecrated (and perhaps still occasionally consecrate) the fruits of their manly exploits—the heads of their enemies. I was told that when this happened, the always-erect phallus vibrated in triumph, its strength renewed. There could not be a more telling proof of the identification of maleness, as strength and power of subjugation, with society’s identity and sacredness. (Valeri 2001:207)

The phallus is explicitly linked to men’s power to cause bleeding in human and animal victims, and its cult celebrates male bloodthirstiness in graphic detail. Today, the Huaulu lament the fact that they can no longer “freely shed blood and face death in the eye” (Valeri 2001:243), since headhunting is forbidden and “the fuller knowledge of death that was accessible to their forbears eludes them” (Valeri 2001:244). And yet female fertility is a central ritual preoccupation in Huaulu life. “Let women give birth well” is the most frequently heard invocation in Huaulu prayers, and men recognize that “without women, men would not exist” (Valeri 2001:205). The most terrifying image of the dangers to human health and fertility are the witch-like female ghosts called the *muluakina*—the ghosts of women who have bled to death in giving birth, or women who failed to conceive or miscarried and died childless. They are said to attack men in the forest, “severing their genitals and

giving them to their babies as playthings” (Valeri 2001:206). They may also make men bleed to death by causing them to fall from trees or cut themselves on their hunting weapons.

The muluakina is a gruesome image of female revenge and female predation, in which a woman makes men bleed to exact payment for her own suffering. In a study of the gendered origins of warfare, Ehrenreich (1997:107) argues that the spectacle of menstruation may often be tied to images of predator goddesses: “The vagina, in myth sometimes a *vagina dentata*, represents a mouth as well as a ‘wound,’ and the mouth of the predator animal is often its most powerful weapon. Long before the male phallus gained its symbolic status as a weapon, the blood-smearred mouth may have been the organ most associated with violence and potency.” Like the Greek and Roman Medusa or the Hindu Kali, the muluakina’s bloody maw places her in the fierce sisterhood of female predatory ghosts called *pontianak* found all over the Malay archipelago. In Kodi, these female ghosts take on a terrifying form in Kali Nggaka, a demon described as tall and white skinned with a single pendulous breast (*warico ha wu huhu*), and in the more erotically appealing but equally dangerous nymphs (*lemba karingge*) who haunt certain sources and seashores. These beautiful temptresses have genitals switched back to front and an extra opening at the back of their necks for their souls to escape and wander.

Women are seen as the originators of death, but also of a cycle of life-giving fluids and substances. Their cooling, fertile powers are needed for human reproduction, but they must be judiciously combined with male heat and passion. In this way, the cult of life and strength which is Huaulu religion is dualistic and based on the combination of male and female elements, which are often separated but must ultimately be reunited.

Menstruation is contrasted to the practice of bleeding boys in initiation ceremonies. While menstruation is involuntary, and apparently co-ordinated with the cycles of the moon, the bleeding of young boys is voluntary, and should normally be performed by a man “who has seen blood,” who is a hunter and, in the past, also a hunter of human heads. This bleeding is usually described as circumcision, although on Sumba it was really supercision (making a vertical slit in the foreskin of the penis), and that may also have been true in Huaulu (Valeri 2001:246, n. 37).³ When young Huaulu men were recovering from being cut, it was particularly important for them to avoid contact with bleeding women, and also with hunting and fishing implements (cf. Valeri 2001:237). Once they have recovered, they can be presented with a bark loincloth, which signifies their social acceptance as adult males, capable of sexual activity.

The taking of the loincloth is followed by a period of license—flirting and dancing with girls all night long—which often results in a socially acceptable trial marriage: “The temporal sequence here reflects an ontological one: the phallus is indeed—as pointed out in psychoanalytic theory—a detachable and transactable object. The reality of exchange—between men and women, between exogamous groups—grows in the shade of a severance” (Valeri 2001:241).

Huauļu headhunting and circumcision can be conceived as substitution sacrifices: “The idea is explicitly articulated for headhunting, which is defined as feeding blood to the ancestors so that they do not feed on Huauļu blood, and indirectly for circumcision, since it was believed that the more copious the bleeding at the moment of operation—the more abundant the offering of one’s life to the ancestral principle—the greater the return: luck in life” (Valeri 2001:242).

Ehrenreich’s argument that blood sacrifice and warfare build on the human experience of being prey as well as predator is supported by Valeri’s argument that people like the Huauļu feel a close kinship with the wild animals that surround them: “The intimacy that the pastoralist experiences with the animals of his flocks and herds, the agriculturalist with his cereal or tuberous plants, and the warrior with his enemy, the hunter experiences with the game on which his life and sense of worth depend” (Valeri 2001:266). This intimacy is particularly strong when the opponent is a large, powerful, and dangerous animal like a wild boar, deer, or cassowary. Their tusks, antlers, and powerful legs are capable of goring humans and even killing them. The forest is believed to be owned by spirits, “the lords of the forest” (*kaitahu upuem*), who patrol the area and become angry if too many of their animals are killed by humans. “Just as humans hunt game with their dogs, so the lords of the forest invisibly hunt humans—and *their* dogs are pigs, deer and cassowaries! The price of eating meat is becoming meat” (Valeri 2001:268).

The lords of the forest can also chase humans as sexual objects, assuming the illusory form of a lover, or husband, or even wife in order to “assault or even seduce humans, driving them to death through the madness of insatiable longing and desire. Eating thus becomes ‘eating’ (a Huauļu metaphor for sexual intercourse). The arrow shot at the animal bounces back at the human. But at the end of its loop, it takes a genital form: it penetrates humans at the point of their greatest vulnerability—sex” (Valeri 2001:270).

Huauļu religion focuses on propitiating two sets of spirits which can become angry: the lords of the forest, who receive the head of each hunting victim so that they will authorize the consumption of its meat, and the lords of the house, who may punish human transgressions with sickness, sterility, famine, or excessive rain. The animal head is symbolically returned to its original owners, the lords of the forest, in a wordless gesture, as it is simply put on a tree. In contrast, offerings to the lords of the house, which range from a bit of tobacco and betel to cloth, arm-shells, and porcelain plates, are always accompanied by “prayers, requests, curses and even threats” (Valeri 2001:279-80). The lords of the house were also offered human heads, in the era before pacification, and are presented with five marsupials at the time of the initiation feast (*kahua*) (Valeri 2001:284).

Kodi cosmology, in contrast, is classically dualist, and would seem on an idealized level to offer a paradigm for gender co-operation. Spirits are always evoked with paired couplets, often including one female term and one male one, with the two images paired to suggest a single metaphor. The Creator is double-gendered, and called “Mother who bound the forelock, Father who smelted the crown” (Inya wolo

hungga, Bapa rawi lindu), combining the female task of binding threads for weaving with the male one of smelting metal (for tools, weapons, or the hard human skull). The breath-like, vulnerable aspect of the soul, the *hamaghu* or vital spirit, is said to reside at the forelock. It can be detached during delirious illness, attacked by witches, and lost at death. The more enduring ancestral soul resides at the top of the crown, and it continues to live on after death as the object of the patrilineal cult of the ancestors. Each person has both a female-created hamaghu and a male-created ndewa, and belongs to both a dispersed matriline identified as the "flowering" (*walla*) of an early ancestress, and a spatially defined patriline identified with an ancestral village (*parona*).

When Kodi people pray, they invoke the highest-ranking, double-gendered deities, and then lower-ranking ones, which may be male or female. The founder of each village is the "Elder Mother, Ancient Father" (*Inya Matuyo, Bapa Maheha*), and each garden hamlet has its "Mother of the Earth, Father of the Rivers" (*Inya mangu tana, Bapa mangu loko*). Below these deities are smaller guardian spirits at the edge of the ceiling and the top of the house, at the garden's gate and the edge of cultivated land, and in the graves and tombstones. They skirt the margins and boundaries of human spaces and are given human names. Ancestors are normally invoked as couples, "dead mothers and dead fathers," usually as a husband/wife pair, although sometimes as brother/sister. At the bottom of the spirit hierarchy lie the undifferentiated and genderless spirits of wealth and plentiful harvest; rice and corn, livestock, and cloth. Their lower rank is marked by the fact that they are not anthropomorphized or given personal names. Gender combination is thus a sign of power. The double-gendered deities are the most complete and perfect beings; their paired subsidiaries are somewhat less illustrious (and addressed according to the same etiquette as human ancestors), while the spirits of wealth and crops are more inert and faceless.

The symbolism of descent opposes blood to bones and vitality to ancestral essence in a way that is suggestive for the understanding of menstruation. The patriline (*parona*) is divided into houses (*uma*), which designate both a physical structure in the ancestral village and a patrilineage with specific ritual tasks. The patriline is personified in the great tree planted beside an upright stone which gives its name to most of the villages (called High Tamarind Tree, Great Banyan Tree, Tall Kapok Trunk, etc.). Descendants are the "fruits and flowers" of the tree (*ha wu walla da*), with males being the seed-bearing fruit, and females the flowers which are picked and bloom in other villages. The word for flower (a common euphemism for menstruation, "wearing a flower between the legs") also refers to the female blood lines (*walla*) which bear the personal name of an ancestress, the place of her origin, and sometimes a link to sorcery or scandal. Matrilineal lines define marriage exogamy, the dangers of mixing the same blood, and the inheritance of personality characteristics, while patrilineal lines define land ownership, the inheritance of heirloom valuables, and ritual tasks. A person's patriline is always an object of public knowledge, while the same person's matriline may be a shameful secret. Some matrilineal lines are said to consist

of hereditary witches, others of the descendants of slaves, foreigners, or outcasts (Hoskins 1993:16-18). Matrilineal ties may provide access to occult knowledge, especially of the "blue arts" of herbalism, indigo dyeing, and midwifery and abortion (Hoskins 1989), but they are carefully kept out of the spotlight and alluded to only discreetly when marriages are being negotiated.

Blood is therefore both central to Kodi cosmology and personhood and vaguely suspect, since it can suggest secret ties and subversive activities. Women do not live with people of the same blood, as they move from the house of their birth to their husband's house once a substantial amount of bridewealth has been paid. Women do at times leave their husbands and seek a divorce, but they must give up their children in order to do so. Many Kodi wives tolerate physical abuse and younger co-wives in order to remain with their children and raise them in the patrilineage. A wife joins in the worship of her husband's ancestors when she joins his household, and can invoke her own ancestors only in prayers to ask for more children. The spirits of the mother's village remain ritually important at life-crisis rituals, marriages, and funerals, because only they can bestow the blessings of health and fertility, and remove the pollution of death.

Hunting is no longer important in Kodi subsistence, which is tied to gardens of rice and corn, and herds of horses and buffalo. Women do a large share of the gardening and tend pigs and chickens, while men and boys herd the livestock. Domestic animals are sacrificed at feasts, weddings, and funerals, and since they are traded for women in bridewealth (at least ten "tails": five horses and five buffalo), women identify with the animals in a series of fables that mock masculine assumptions and stress female resourcefulness (Hoskins 1998:59-82). These stories make reference to women's knowledge of reproductive medicines, and hint at their power as sorceresses, but in general they are critical of particular men who do not treat their wives well, rather than critical of the institutions (polygyny, patriliney, etc.) which make abuse possible. The stories reveal Kodi women as strategists who try to make the best of what they have been given, rather than resistance fighters who seek eventually to overthrow the whole system.

Kodi gender dualism is based on an idealized interdependence of male and female, treated in an image of mutuality, but this cosmogony does not translate on the ground into an inspiring recipe for female empowerment. The symbolic and spiritual parity that is portrayed in the heavens is, to say the least, not fully realized in the everyday sexual politics of the region. Masculinity is not as marked as in Huaulu, since there are no organized male initiation ceremonies. Femininity is also less marked as both powerful and polluting, since there are few obvious menstrual restrictions. Menstruation becomes something more secretive, still potentially dangerous and even infectious (in its links to sexually transmitted diseases). But while women are rarely excluded from public events, they are usually not the principal players, either. A mother has the right to veto, through nonparticipation, any important decisions about the marriage of her sons or daughters or the transfer of

property (land, livestock, etc.), but she rarely speaks in formal negotiations and is almost always on the sidelines.

The comparison of cosmologies reveals that initial impressions can be misleading: while the Huaulu have a rather blatant form of phallus worship among their traditional practices, their daily lives are not necessarily more oppressive of women than the daily practices of many other people in Southeast Asia. The region has, in fact, been considered to accord a relatively high social position to women (Atkinson and Errington 1990; Reid 1988). Kodi cosmology seems to give greater priority to female spirits and double-gendered deities, but these are aspects of a general dualism in which images of mutuality and co-operation are evoked in the language of gender, but not necessarily acted on in households and villages with living men and women.

CONCLUSIONS

Douglas (2000:2288) argues that recent explanations of taboo include relational theories, in which taboos project the relations of society upon the relations in nature; housekeeping theories, in which taboos tidy up the conceptual world and reduce cognitive ambiguity; and moral theories, in which taboos create dangers that reinforce the moral code. Her own formulation of pollution has been primarily with the housekeeping model, which views pollution as an aid to "imposing system" on "an inherently untidy experience," equating it with dirt as "matter out of place."

But the relationship between ideas of menstrual pollution and sexual politics that I have just surveyed in these two Indonesian societies suggests that it is not dirt but bodily integrity which is at the root of the experience of menstrual anxiety. As Valeri (2000:103) has argued for the Huaulu, "The reason that certain bodily substances are viewed as polluting is precisely that, coming from inside other people, they intimately belong to them, and thus undermine our own intimate sense of self when they enter into contact with us. Their decay and decay-inducing properties are secondary: they simply reinforce a fear of loss of identity and integrity which already evokes death."

Why, then, do men and women in some societies find menstrual blood so powerful and fearsome, while in others it is much less the subject of public management? I suggest that there is in almost all societies a profound ambivalence about bodily emissions, particularly genital bleeding, and that those societies, like the Kodi of Sumba, which do not mark menstruation obviously may nonetheless harbor a deep fear of the consequences of menstrual contamination. Hence, secret menstruation can be more closely linked to witchcraft, illness, and betrayal than the social practices of menstrual seclusion and pollution.

How does this idea of bodily integrity apply to the two societies considered here? For the Huaulu, men must avoid menstruation because it directly endangers the purposeful shedding of blood that they engage in while hunting or headhunting. If they do break the taboo, they will start to bleed themselves, coughing up blood and choking on it, blocking their own eating and breathing processes by inappropriate

bleeding. If they look at menstruating women, they will become nearsighted or blind. In Kodi, in contrast, inappropriate contact with menstrual blood causes bleeding of the penis, sores, and pain, which may lead to impotence and infertility. This is described as a male "abortion," an inappropriate pregnancy. So in both cases it is the gendered integrity of the body which is threatened: contact with female menstrual blood makes men less masculine, and therefore weaker.

Contact with menstrual blood is hedged with anxiety because it occurs between lovers, who are supposed to show trust for one another but may often be unsure of that trust.

Love may be seen as flirting with precisely that loss of identity which we fear most, but also desire most, and which is evoked by the mixing of the innermost bodily substances. To be penetrated, invaded, just as to penetrate, to invade, is to break down the boundaries of self and other, the experience, the shudder—and pleasure—of self-annihilation, of a death that is no death. Love is, perhaps, a controlled form of fear, playing with the catastrophe of pollution by circumscribing it in a space and time hidden from the all-seeing eye of society and its relentless dictate of personal integrity. (Valeri 2000:104)

Menstrual taboos have been mistakenly linked to sexual antagonism because of an emphasis on the negativity of taboos. Douglas (2000:2288), readjusting her argument after reading Valeri's book, makes this point well:

Taboos stop the cosmos from disintegrating. It is a process of learning by not doing. The strange connections taboos make between actions and consequences are not due to faulty logic but to a formidable intellectual effort to link nature and morality into one single scheme. . . . The effort that the Huauulu themselves make to reconcile frail hierarchy and trusting equality is mirrored for them in the precariously balanced position and dynamic contests that mark all relations among humans, animals and plants.

In a modern urban context where menstruation itself may not be feared but the exchange of blood and bodily fluids is associated with the transmission of AIDS and other sexual diseases, linking fear to love-making still makes sense, psychologically and medically. Even without our present knowledge of HIV infection, it is clear that intimate contact threatens body boundaries in a wide range of societies. Classifying some as having ideas of menstrual pollution while others do not is an oversimplification of a complex relationship between efforts by members of both sexes to open themselves up to another person, and also to control the loss of identity which may follow such intimacy.

NOTES

1. Fieldwork in Seram was conducted with Valerio Valeri over a period of five months in 1985, 1986, and 1988. Fieldwork in Sumba was conducted over a total period of four years in 1979-1981, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988, and the summer of 2000. This research was supported by the Fulbright Commission, SSRC, NSF, Wenner Gren, the Research School of Pacific Studies, ANU, and the USC Faculty Research and Innovation Fund.

2. The associations between indigo and witchcraft, and especially the spirits of the dead, are found in many parts of eastern Indonesia. Indigo may be associated with spiritual malevolence and especially

ghosts because the dye is used for funeral shrouds. On Roti, terrifying spirits use wild indigo plants for nefarious purposes (Fox 1973:350). While indigo can be used for sorcery, it can also be used to "fix" the body of someone who has died a violent death (Fox 1973:360).

3. This kind of operation is also performed in Toraja, Indonesia, in Tonga, Tahiti, Tikopia, and many parts of New Guinea. Langness (1999:92) suggests it is performed to "relax a tight penis" for intercourse and to assure that the glans is retractable, suggesting that this could be "one of those male secrets that would shame men if women knew." Huauulu women definitely know that men need to bleed from the penis before they can have intercourse, and it was Kodi practice that after supercision a young boy needed to have intercourse first with an older woman, preferably postmenopausal, so that the "water from the knife" (the first semen) would be deposited in a safe place, since its "heat" could damage the fertility of his future wife. Male bleeding was supposed to make men stronger and more potent, and also protect them from debilitating disease. In this regard, it is interesting that recent medical research has shown that supercision and circumcision offer some protection from AIDS and other venereal diseases, so perhaps there was a medical rationale for these forms of male genital mutilation.

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