



The Curse's Blessing

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The Curse's Blessing

Donna Haraway has made an eloquent plea for scholars to exercise caution in their adoption of certain positions that are “persuasive and enabling” but at the same time “dangerous, especially if any one position finally silences all the others, creating a false harmony in the . . . story.”¹ One of these positions is

to look always through the lenses ground on the stones of the complex histories of gender and race in the constructions of modern sciences around the globe, [which means] examining cultural productions . . . from the points of view enabled by the politics and theories of feminism and anti-racism. The challenge is to remember the particularity as well as the power of this way of reading and writing.²

This paper explores the possibility that a “false harmony” has crept unperceived into the interpretation of one area of women’s lives — the cultural handling of menstruation. Although it focuses on a relatively narrow topic, and calls on specific sources to make its argument, the essay is ultimately intended as commentary on the relationship between scholarship and ideological commitment more generally. In that spirit, I begin with some background thoughts, first on the nature of ethnographic practice, and secondly on “false harmonies” in areas of scholarship other than gender studies, before homing in on the ways in which ethnographic writings have been used and abused in the reinterpretation of menstrual customs.

The “art” of ethnography owes both its distinctiveness and its chance for insightfulness, in my view, to a willingness by its practitioners

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(myself included) to put at risk the categories and priorities that we have formulated in the course of our life experience, to venture into an unknown territory where they may no longer hold, and to internalize (partially, temporarily, awkwardly, hypothetically, self-consciously) their local replacements. Built upon an open attitude toward a community whose understandings about such basic elements of life as ethnicity or gender may complement, contradict, or even offend the assumptions and convictions that we hold "back home," the ethnographic endeavor requires the achievement of some kind of distance — however artificial, however instrumental — from the ideological givens that have emerged out of the specific problems and potentials of our own society, and our own life history within it. This stance can contribute to the study of history as much as anthropology; it implies a very particular balance in our attitudes toward the people we "study" and the people we interact with elsewhere, toward the initially alien and the initially familiar. The humbling dimension of "fieldwork" goes much deeper than the awkwardnesses stemming from incompetence in local matters such as slinging a hammock correctly or defecating from a log in the river or handling a conversation in proper slang; effective fieldwork involves an effort to loosen all culturally learned assumptions, leaving its practitioners personally vulnerable in an unusually fundamental sense. Without a readiness to submit to this vulnerability (at its logical extreme, the risk of going native), there is, in my view, little hope of ethnographic insight, no possibility of getting a real grip on cultural difference.

The eventual process of communicating the findings of ethnography can be viewed as a kind of translation (producing, like any translation, rough approximations, not perfect equivalents); it attempts to express one people's categories, concepts, construction of reality in terms of categories, concepts, constructions that are understood by readers/listeners. As translations, representations of gender constructs (for example) that cross boundaries of either historical period or cultural community must at some point grapple with gender relations in the world of the intended readers/listeners as well as in the population they're attempting to portray. And if this latter population has no viable power (because, for example, it lived in the nineteenth century or occupies some relatively isolated spot on the globe), the temptation can be strong to privilege the terms, categories, and dimensions of perceived reality that are most familiar to (and appreciated by) the readers/listeners. In the comparative use of secondary sources, where an openness to unfamiliar or incompatible ideologies is equally important but often more difficult to achieve, the potential of the researcher's

"home values" to intrude upon cultural interpretation and color its conclusions may be particularly great.

Scholarship in each field tends to be open to a distinctive set of political forces, and I wish to digress just enough longer to situate the specific argument of this paper within the context of its analogues in other fields. In encounters with the art world,³ for example, I have sometimes been pitted against a combination of political conservatism and cultural elitism that I have not run into as a commentator on gender or Afro-American studies. Even as it inches in the direction of greater cultural relativism and respect for non-Western perspectives, the field of art criticism continues to exhibit an underlying determination (perhaps "tendency" would be fairer, but I do see some level of motivation behind it) to maintain a hierarchy in which established Euro-based wealth, status, and education sit comfortably on top, occasionally bussing the artistic expression of other cultures into living rooms and museums, but always retaining control over its selection and interpretation. The result in many cases is coffee-table peoples, produced for the happy reinforcement of readers' tastes. I cite two examples of the exercise of this sort of authorial power in current African art criticism and in other high-cultured settings, before passing on to the realm of gender.

In an innovative 1987 book called *Perspectives*, Susan Vogel (director of New York's Center for African Art) invited ten critics/connoisseurs/enthusiasts of African art to express their personal visions by selecting, out of a pool of one hundred photographs, ten objects to describe, assess, and reflect upon.⁴ The identities of nine of the volume's contributors are sharp and clear: we see Ivan Karp very much in the round; William Rubin's grumblings about the terror of masks and the myopia of anthropologists communicate a strong and distinctive personality; David Rockefeller, Nancy Graves, Robert Farris Thompson, and others emerge as well-defined individuals who represent informed and articulate visions of an aesthetic domain. Then we come to the chapter on "Lela Kouakou, Baule artist and diviner" (pp. 11 and 146). Or is it, rather, "the Baule artist, Kouakou Kouame" (pp. 11 and 147)? The text tells us that the contributor for this chapter is Kouakou Kouame, a Baule artist who selected ten objects and commented on them at Susan Vogel's invitation; but the contents page and running heads identify the contributor, rather, as Lela Kouakou, and it is his portrait that accompanies the written commentary. The reader's confusion is smoothed over by repeated references to "the Baule artist" and to comments about what "most Baule" will say about a work of art, what "the Baule normally talk about" when discussing masks, and the

like. Finally, the "Baule artist's" perspectives on art are signed "S.V." and the first-person texts on particular objects, we are informed, represent "a composite of interviews conducted with Baule artists and art users" (p. 147).

What's going on here is not attributable to simple racism; James Baldwin, Nigerian archaeologist Ekpo Eyo, and Paris-based artist Iba N'Diaye are all allowed to play out their roles fully. It is, rather, a question of holding on to the conductor's baton for a chorus of Western-educated singers, within which the voice of a Baule villager is simply considered too dissonant for this book's audience; the editor cannot resist the urge to dub.

This kind of proprietorial prerogative is also exercised in less academic guises, as people who host talks and offer honoraria specify to their "speakers" the kind of reality they consider acceptable. A young woman named Shallini Venturelli, recently arrived in the United States from India, ran into this problem after she was invited to speak to a ladies' club. She reports:

The club secretary had advised me that perhaps a dose of history with a pinch of politics and culture would be wonderfully suited to their taste. I obliged. After an excellent tea served on fine silver, I started to talk. I talked of the past, of struggles, of despair and poverty on the subcontinent; I talked of the present, of political battles and world maneuvers, of challenges that lay ahead; I spoke of the right to learn, the right to self-awareness, of the chains of tradition and the poverty of women.

I did not notice for a long time that the faces around me had begun to twitch, that the women were shifting restlessly. When I suddenly became aware of the growing discomfort, I stopped. "Does someone have a question?" I asked.

The club secretary rose and drew me to the window.

"My dear," she said in a low voice, "it is history and culture they wish to hear about, not misfortunes." "But the truth is not misfortune; it is truth," I replied in a whisper, thoroughly confused. "Of course. But can't you leave out the bad parts? Talk about maharajas. And there are elephants and tigers, and you can even tell us about your beautiful sari, and show us how you put it on."

I looked down at the floor. There was an exquisite Persian carpet under my feet; I hadn't noticed. I remained by the window for a few minutes. The secretary had returned to her seat, and there were smiles and expectation on a few faces. "Ladies," I said, "my deepest apologies for meddling with your fantasies. Since I do not share them, and India is not a fairy tale or a novel by Rudyard Kipling, I must say goodbye. Thank you."⁵

Posed next to art catalogues and society luncheons, the fora for feminist studies would appear to represent some kind of antithesis. Consciously combatting the cultural elitism that threatens even the most liberal branch of the art world and the living room gatherings where speakers are surrounded by fine rugs and well-polished silver, it is one of several movements that attempt to empower the oppressed, to redress social imbalances, to watch over the exercise of nonhierarchical human rights, and to hand the microphone to traditionally silenced speakers such as Lela Kouakou, Kouakou Kouame, and Shalini Venturrelli. But many of the same temptations to tailor portraits more to the taste of the viewers than to that of the portrayed remain in place. I wish now to turn to gender, and to explore how writers with a serious commitment to feminist ideals can inadvertently allow their own convictions to upstage in subtle ways those of the people whose perspectives they are attempting to represent.

During the 1980s, growth in the field of feminist anthropology and a surge of interest in *The Body* combined to encourage often-fruitful reconsiderations of the ways in which women's reproductive systems are conceptualized and treated in ethnically diverse contexts. ("Do you know any good books being written now about *The Body*?" I overheard a graduate student ask a senior fellow over lunch at the Stanford Humanities Center in 1990. "Frankly," came the reply, "I can't think of a single good book being written that's *not* about *The Body*.") In this climate, the topic of menstrual pollution, once a dry staple of academic anthropological discourse along the lines of cross-cousin marriage or adolescent initiation rites, catapulted to a position of some importance in the revision of understandings of women's experience and was drawn into programs of persuasion targeted at a renegotiation of the potential place of women in modern, industrialized societies. (Writing this essay in 1992, surrounded by newspaper and magazine articles on hormone replacement, change-of-life mood swings, and support groups such as *The Red Hot Mamas*, it strikes me that baby boomers, concerned in the 1980s with ideas about menstruation, may turn the 1990s into the Decade of the Menopause.)

My own interest in menstrual seclusion and related beliefs began in the interior of Suriname, during about three years of anthropological fieldwork.⁶ Arriving in the Saramaka village of Dangogo in 1966, Richard Price and I had already adopted, over the course of ethnographic research in Martinique, Spain, Mexico, and (for him) Peru, a vision of anthropological fieldwork that was strongly participatory. It posed no problem, then, when we were told by village officials that the

residents of Dangogo took the threat of menstrual pollution with utmost seriousness, and that if we wanted to live there (contingent, they added, on the favorable outcome of oracle sessions and consultations with the ancestors), I was to follow the rules of seclusion to the letter. This I did; it constituted a revealing window on Saramaka ideas about social responsibility, the nature of ritual, and gender.

My first visit to the hut was, like many firsts in the adaptation to life in another culture, badly botched. Discovering that the time had come to follow through on the instructions that had been given me, I entered the house where we were temporarily based while our own was being built, collected a Primus stove, two pots, a box of matches, a bar of soap, some rice, a clean skirt, and a one-person hammock, and carried them off to the rather dilapidated, thatched *faági* at the edge of the village. Hearing about this several hours later, the woman who had allowed us the use of her house cried out in alarm; hadn't I understood, she said accusingly, that even the first drop of blood carried ritual danger, that I should have sent a child into her house to get the things I needed, and that she would now have to carry out purificatory rites in the hopes of undoing the contamination I had caused?

Beginning with that transgression, the understandings I developed of local attitudes toward the destructive powers of menstrual blood were built on a combination of observation, practical experience, and discussion in numerous contexts with Saramaka women and men. It was only when I asked my husband to get a notebook for me, for example, that I learned not to take things directly from a man's hand, but rather to have them placed on the ground where I could pick them up. Women often went off to their garden camps to work during their periods because many village functions were off limits to them, and the ritual involvements of many villagers prohibited even a perfunctory hello. So I was sometimes alone in the hut; something over half the time there was a second woman, and occasionally we'd be three or four. Cooking was rudimentary; it didn't seem worth bringing much equipment when cooking only for myself, and other women clearly felt the same way. The appropriate clothes to wear during this seclusion were those that were faded and worn thin with long use. Sitting was on the ground or a wooden plank, to avoid polluting furniture used in houses. The central area of the landing place — the one with the best rocks for washing clothes and the most desirable spot for getting drinking water — was out of bounds. So were several of the areas that contained shrines to gods and ancestors. In entering or leaving village space, menstruating women were required to skirt around the outside of the portal-like structures through which everyone else

walked, there for the ritual protection of the village. Because traveling in the same canoe with a man was not allowed, scheduled trips to distant downriver villages or to the coast were routinely postponed; and trips to garden camps several hours upriver, which a husband's or male relative's motor canoe could make fast and easy, were under the woman's slower and more tiring paddle-power. For a married woman, menstrual seclusion also meant that her husband would be sleeping with another of his wives or with a lover. Given these sorts of restrictions, it hardly seemed incongruous that in Saramaka a single expression (*dê a baáka*) meant both "to be in menstrual seclusion" and "to be in mourning."

There was a passing sense of camaraderie between women who "met" in the menstrual hut; a woman would remember who'd been there with her, and take that person's next trip to the *faági* as a signal that her own time was probably approaching, or that perhaps she'd become pregnant. And there was a general aura of celebration around a woman's emergence from the hut, when she would bathe, launder her hammock, and rejoin the community. At the end of a girl's first time in the hut (which happened, not upon first menses, but rather the first menses after she had been presented with the skirts marking social adulthood/marriageability), a female relative would "knock" white, ritually purificatory kaolin onto her body as a special sign of her renewed cleanliness; in my case our closest neighbor, a woman in her nineties, took on this ritual duty. For any woman, there were congratulatory greetings, welcome-backs, references to the "feasting" she'd now do, and playful remarks about the reception her husband would give her that night in their hammock. A woman's emergence from menstrual seclusion was taken to mark a moment of heightened fertility, when her husband would ideally sleep with her rather than any of his other wives. And it was considered an especially appropriate time to recut (and thus enhance the beauty of) the decorative scars that constituted an essential aspect of every woman's beauty and erotic attractiveness.

Interacting with Saramakas and other Maroons in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I found the cultural treatment of menstruation unchanged from the 1960s. In 1991, for example, Richard Price and I visited a couple who'd been living on the outskirts of Cayenne for the past five years — Yaya and her husband Mando, a professional wood-carver. They were about to return to Saramaka, she to stay and he to return in two months with his other wife. They had rented two trucks, piled them high with everything from outboard motors and barrels of salt pork to a four-poster bed and a washing-machine drum packed

with clothing, and made arrangements for transportation of the baggage, six children, and themselves to the border on July 28. Stopping by on the 27th to say our goodbyes, we were told by Mando that the trip was temporarily off; Yaya had gone "outside." Despite the inconvenience, it was inconceivable not to unpack everything, return the trucks, and renegotiate the trip for another date. They left on August 1.

Our research trips of the early 1990s also established the existence of these general attitudes among Maroons other than the Saramakas with whom we had lived.⁷ Traveling up the rivers of eastern Suriname and western French Guiana (the Marowyne, Lawa, and Tapanahoni), we visited in the villages of Paramaka, Aluku, and Ndjuka Maroons, where I heard women talking in different settings about menstrual seclusion, both through general discussion and through gossip about particular women suspected of "hiding" their periods. Their conversations were completely familiar to me; except for details of speech and dress, I could easily have been in Saramaka in the 1960s. The women expressed resignation about doing something they didn't particularly enjoy; and the animated accusations that certain individuals were "cheating" in order to avoid the "the dirty house" only served to confirm the view that going into seclusion was not done for the fun of it, but rather out of a sense of community responsibility.

Past literature on Maroon menstrual customs, though using different lenses and cast in different discourses, suggests relative stability in this realm of life. An eighteenth-century German Moravian missionary alluded euphemistically to "certain superstitious customs which the [Saramaka] negro women observe every four weeks," but ventured elsewhere into specific details:

In regard to certain physical conditions of women, there is among the Free Negroes a unique and remarkable custom. Because they leave the company of their husbands during this critical moment and must avoid all kinds of social interaction, it was decided to establish an institution by which some of the families get together and build for their wives and young women a certain communal house for this purpose, and they are obliged to maintain it in a liveable condition. As soon as a negress notices that such a female condition is coming on, she must leave her house and family immediately, even in the middle of the night, and go to this designated *kay*-house. She takes along her cookware, some food, and her hammock, and a mother can take along her very small children. On the way to this house of quarantine, she must very carefully avoid showing her back to any man she happens to meet, nor can anyone pass behind her. She must stop still when anyone approaches, and

wait till the person has passed by. If it happens that a man or woman comes toward her, and it appears they want to speak to her, then she immediately stands still and says, in a fearful voice, *mi kay, mi kay*, I am unclean! She is not allowed to reenter the house of her husband until everything is over with. If she needs something from her house during this time . . . she must stand in front of the doorway and whatever she needs must be handed out to her. And then she must scurry back to her shelter. Furthermore, she is not allowed, during this time, to have dealings even with her very best female friend. These rules must be observed to the letter by all negro women, and even the wives of the village captain are no exception to the rule.⁸

Melville and Frances Herskovits, who spent two summers in Suriname in the 1920s, reported the phenomenon through an incident in which a Saramaka woman was prevented from dancing as a spirit medium because of her menstruating condition. Frances

found herself walking toward the partially cleared ground outside the village, past the menstrual house and the open shrine to the great gods which stood almost directly opposite it. There were three women in the house, dressed in faded cloths, their hair disheveled, their faces without the glint which the oil gave to their dark skins, and their eyes without the touch of dark flame which the gleaming skins brought out. One of these women stood leaning against a doorpost trembling. Her hands were clenched, and her mouth moved without pause, and without sound. . . .

The white woman must not stop with them longer, and she must not come closer, the two women who stood beside their quivering companion called out at once, for the obia which she [FH] wore around her neck would be contaminated if brought too close to them, and its power to protect the wearer against danger would leave it at once.

"Do not come too close. Tomorrow I will return to my house, and after I have bathed and washed in pemba, I will be clean again, and then I will come to see you," the younger of the two women said.

The other said, "When you go there," and she pointed toward the woman's path, "do not go by the way of the broken calabashes. That is the unclean way. It is the path for the women who stay in this house."⁹

Putting on hold a discussion of the cultural baggage that might or might not be weighing down accounts of such a practice for an eighteenth-century missionary or an early twentieth-century anthropologist,

let's jump right into another vision of menstruation, one that has developed in certain corners of late twentieth-century feminism. A series of quotes may provide the most direct communicative device in this case; the first is from Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*:

If you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your menstrual blood — if it makes you sick, you've a long way to go, baby.¹⁰

From Annie Leclerc's *Parole de femme*:

Watching and feeling the warm, tender blood that flows downstream from its source once each month is happiness. To be this vagina, open-eyed in the nocturnal fermentations of life, ear alert to the pulsations, to the vibrations of the primal chaos . . . to be this vagina is bliss.¹¹

Emily Martin's *The Woman in the Body*:

One [American] woman said, "There should be celebration around menstruation. If done right it could be wonderful!" . . . Maybe we could restore a feeling of wholeness about the process and reduce in and of itself some of the disgust. . . . Some have urged us to revel in menstrual blood and make it a matter of spiritual delight by developing new rituals, "bleed-ins."¹²

And a printed sticker taken from a mailbox on New York's Columbus Avenue in 1990:

SUPPORT VAGINAL PRIDE

These calls to celebration represent just one element of a joyous, multifaceted campaign to find pleasure in every aspect of the female experience; as Milan Kundera has summarized his reading of this school, "A woman who has managed to remain true to her inner self takes pleasure in everything: 'eating, drinking, urinating, defecating, touching, hearing, or just plain being.' . . . Suckling is a delight, giving birth a delight, menstruating a delight."¹³

Not surprisingly, this campaign has inspired a second look at comparative materials from "other" societies; if most societies in the world held a demonstrably positive or even joyful view of menstruation, they could be called into service as an ideological precedent, implicitly highlighting the cultural constructedness of the Western relegation of menstruating to a cursed condition. As Marilyn Strathern

has pointed out, anthropology “appears to offer an unparalleled position from which to scrutinize Western assumptions, enlarging the scope of feminist enterprise by reminding us of the conditions under which women live elsewhere.”¹⁴ But the enlistment of cross-cultural evidence for a celebration of menstrual joy is a tall order, given the tone and content of many past reports; it requires both finding evidence of positive attitudes and casting doubt on the credibility of the overwhelmingly “negative” picture built up over the years in the anthropological literature. Here is where commentators risk stepping into the quicksand of ideologically shaped interpretations. (I refer here to degrees of ideological input, not to its mere presence. Certainly, all researchers approach their subject in the light and clouds of ideology, but some of the clouds are thicker than others, with important effects on the visibility of the flights.) Is it possible that some feminist writings have, in effect, redecorated the menstrual hut?

Arguably the most important and well-received contribution to the recent cross-cultural reassessment of “the anthropology of menstruation” is *Blood Magic*, a series of essays edited by Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb in 1988.¹⁵ In programmatic statements of the goal of this volume, the editors take pains to dissociate themselves from the simplistic view that “rather than originating in an urge to suppress women and increase male solidarity, menstrual taboos uniformly arose to empower women and enhance female solidarity. Instead,” they write, “we are arguing that the social functions of menstrual taboos are culturally variable and specific.”¹⁶ Indeed, the ethnographic material provided by contributors, on societies they know well, amply demonstrates this variability, and the book provides a wealth of useful material. At the same time, the editors’ stated commitment to uncovering cultural specificity and variability is juxtaposed in their introduction with a comparative use of published ethnographic sources that at moments seems to betray an irresistible desire to portray women’s lives through images of empowered individuals, solitary sisterhoods, and enlightened practitioners of 1980s-style Western feminism. What are the mechanisms that accomplish this refashioning? How can we see, in this case, the social and ideological construction of knowledge at work?

The process begins with a tendency to polarize interpretations into either/or options, to allow for either sisterhood or loneliness, either joy or despondency. Comparing reports on Suriname Maroons and other groups, the editors of *Blood Magic* muse: “Do women usually ‘resent’ their seclusion . . . or do they . . . usually ‘enjoy this break from their normal labors’? . . . What do women do during this time? Some,

at least, talk and weave, meditate . . . , cook . . . — do others just mope?”¹⁷ My own experience suggests that in general Maroon women (Buckley and Gottlieb’s candidates for the allegedly resentful variety) accept the restrictions of seclusion with resignation and mild annoyance, but at the same time are sufficiently well adjusted within their culture so that they enjoy life too; one would be hard pressed to characterize them as “enjoying this break from their normal labors,” but neither could one claim that they “just mope.”

The potential, in comparative studies, for this sort of polarization to skew the original sources may be illustrated by another consideration of menstrual practices published in the 1980s. Sharon W. Tiffany and Kathleen J. Adams present material from the literature on Yanomami Indians as part of a persuasive argument about perspectival differences, concluding that “each writer communicates differing images and meanings of female bodies and biological processes.”¹⁸ Their discussion juxtaposes passages by Jacques Lizot (writing on the basis of his own research) and Marvin Harris (using ethnography provided by Napoleon A. Chagnon). First their (translation of a) quote from Lizot:¹⁹

There is magnificent Remaema [described by Tiffany and Adams as “an initiate who had just completed her menstrual seclusion”]; her body is covered with adornments and the heady perfume of flowers and plants; she conveys a provocative and charming sensuality; her face shows a quiet joy. . . . she is strong (*tat^{he}*) now, her menstrual blood proves it.

And now their quote from Harris:

The Yanomamo think menstrual blood is evil and dangerous. When a girl has her first menses they lock her up inside a specially constructed bamboo cage and force her to go without food. Thereafter, she must isolate herself at every menstrual period and remain squatting alone in the shadow of the house.

But in this “comparison,” we’re actually dealing with Tiffany and Adams’s editorial selectivity more than interpretive differences between Lizot and Chagnon/Harris. Consider the following passages, excerpted from Lizot’s extensive description of Remaema *during* her seclusion, which paint a rather different picture from that of her *emergence* from seclusion:

In a corner, near the base of the shelter's roof, in front of the propped-up logs, rise the fragile, leafy walls of an isolation booth where the young girl is hidden from sight. . . . an isolation booth that will hide her from the sight of men. If she remained exposed to male eyes in her condition, the whole community would be threatened with dire perils. . . . Remaema has to give up the cultural elements — including clothing and adornments — that are connected with cultivated plants. Tobacco is allowed provided it is *nosi*, namely worthless, tasteless, and without effect after having been washed clean by endless sucking. She has replaced her cotton hammock with a coarser one made from crushed vines. She has shed her little loincloth and undone the twisted threads she was wearing crossed on her chest or coiled around her limbs: She is now completely naked; she has even taken out her earlobe plugs. She is forbidden direct contact with water: For drinking she uses a hollow cane that she pushes deep into her mouth beyond the teeth, for the teeth would loosen if they came into contact with water. She has a little pointed stick to scratch herself; if, through forgetfulness, she should use her nails, the hair on her body and scalp would fall out and lesions would spread over her skin. To revive the fire she does not blow on it but uses a fan. She may speak only in a whisper. Pre-pubescent girls may come to her to chat, but the sound of their voices may never be heard outside. Her diet is severely restricted. Boiled foods and meats in general are prohibited, as well as bananas and sugarcane. Her daily ration consists only of a few plantains roasted on the embers or taro roots; she eats this meager pittance by stabbing into it with a twig. Her only gastronomic enjoyment is sometimes to suck on the shell of a crab, a pleasure she prolongs as much as possible. These various obligations as to her behavior all contribute to isolating her from everything. She urinates in the middle of her quarters and defecates into leaves that she bundles together for her mother to throw out. . . . There is a striking resemblance between the ritual for murderers and the ritual that a couple must observe when the wife has her first period; indeed, the same word, *unokai*, defines the two situations. . . . For Remaema seven long days thus pass in seclusion. She is thin and dirty.²⁰

It is only after this week-long seclusion and another twelve days devoted to the recovery of her strength, not mentioned by Tiffany and Adams, that Remaema makes the "magnificent" return, with "charming sensuality" and "quiet joy."

Another axis of poetic license in comparative studies involves the casual identification of ethnic groups. Returning to the *Blood Magic* introduction, we note that while the "Saramakas of Surinam" are said to "resent" their seclusion, "the Djuka of Dutch Guiana" are said to

accept it in a very different spirit. The source for the "Saramakas of Surinam" is my 1984 book, *Co-Wives and Calabashes*; that for the "Djuka of Dutch Guiana" is a 1931 book by a traveling physician named Morton Kahn.²¹ Readers of *Blood Magic* are not informed that "Dutch Guiana" and "Surinam" (now officially "Suriname") are two names for a single colony-turned-republic, or that "Kahn's Djukas" and "my Saramakas" are one and the same people. Kahn himself took pains to explain that he followed a local convention in adopting "Djuka" as a generic term for Maroons; and his text, which often specifies "Saramacaner," "Aucaner," "Paramacca," and "Boni," makes clear that the very great bulk of his experience was with Saramakas on the Suriname River, the same people with whom I've lived.²² These "contrastive cases," then, are a single ethnographic reality, reported by a physician who visited briefly in the 1920s and by an ethnographer who lived there over several years in the 1960s and 1970s, regularly going into menstrual seclusion.²³

Analytic waters may be muddied still further by a less-than-fastidious reporting of the sources. The *Blood Magic* introduction asserts, for example, that in some societies "menstrual seclusion has been seen as bringing women sexual autonomy and opportunities for illicit love affairs," and goes on to underscore "the frequency of this claim."²⁴ The supporting references are to "the Djuka of Dutch Guiana (Kahn 1931:130), the Warao of Venezuela (Suárez 1968:2-6), the Kaska of western Canada (Honigmann 1954:124), and others." With no library access to the "others," let us consider each of the three referenced passages in turn.

Kahn says no more on the subject than: "Menstruating women are required to leave their homes and retire to a separate hut situated outside the village on a by-path; they may not return until three days after the period is over. Under no condition are they allowed to go to the provision fields during this time."

The Suárez pages that are cited merely allude to a 1945 work that "attributes certain ethnographic characteristics to the Warao: periodic expeditions in search of crabs, filing of the incisors, matriarchy, betrothal of young girls to adult men, polygyny for chiefs, seclusion of women during the menstrual period, and 'the couvade.'"

And Honigmann, the only one that could be construed as touching on the generalization in question, states that among the Kaska "Sexual intercourse with a menstruant caused a man to pass blood in his urine so that he would sicken and die. Despite this belief boys seized on the easy accessibility of girls in seclusion who, in turn, did

not always resist their advances. When they became ill the youths might confess such an offense."²⁵

Toward the end of Suárez's book, we do find a discussion of Warao beliefs relating to sex and menstruation (pp. 206–10), but even that in no way paints the picture of happy sexual opportunity implied in the *Blood Magic* introduction. After describing the "negative" conceptualization that casts menstrual blood as a polluting agent if it comes in contact with food or cooking fires, Suárez goes on to detail a set of beliefs that relate menstrual seclusion and sexual activity, but evokes something rather far from any image of free love in the menstrual hut. I translate from the Spanish:

Menstrual blood, in addition to embodying *hebu* [a supernatural force] in its negative and harmful sense, attracts the *nabarao*, river inhabitants who, driven by a predilection for menstruating women, abduct them and carry them off as wives to their homes at the bottom of the water. The Warao often identify the *nabarao* with dolphins (*Inia geoffroyensis*), which inspire in them great fear. For this reason, menstruating women refrain from bathing in the river and during their period instead wash in small pools in the forest, close to the house of seclusion.²⁶

Continuing the juxtaposition of citations and original sources, consider the principal support Buckley and Gottlieb present for their argument that the Western perception of menstruation as negative "is hardly a universal one":

Niangoran-Bouah (1964:52 [*sic* for 92; page 52 is blank]) reports, for instance, that among the Ebrí of Ivory Coast it is forbidden to collect fruits of trees protected by their owners with certain mystically powerful objects. If a man disobeys this taboo he is afflicted with impotence until he confesses to the owner; if a woman picks the fruit she is afflicted with amenorrhea—*losing* her period (rather than enduring it for eternity like the daughters of Eve) until she confesses. In this case menstruation would appear to be the female counterpart of the masculine erection: associated with fertility, not pollution; desirable, and traumatic to lose. As the Ebrí case shows, menstruation is by no means coded as a universal negative.²⁷

Niangoran-Bouah's book²⁸ (which I read in full in order to track down the elusive passage) presents a more general picture that falls somewhat short of confirming Buckley and Gottlieb's characterization of menstruation as "desirable" (a term which Niangoran-Bouah does not utilize, a concept which he does not imply). In addition to

describing prohibitions on the participation of menstruating women in certain ceremonies,²⁹ he offers broad-ranging statements about attitudes that the Ebrié share with “all the peoples of the ‘Lagoon Region’ and even some that are more distant, such as the Dogon.” I translate from the French:

[Purificatory ceremonies] take place whenever the natives feel dirtied by a forbidden contact, such as that with a menstruating woman. There is no impurity more dreaded than that of a woman during her periodic indisposition; she brings misfortune to anything she touches and to anyone who touches her.³⁰

The *Blood Magic* introduction also employs various rhetorical devices, which help to uncover empowered females and sisterly fulfillment in the menstrual hut. Depictions that run counter to the underlying argument are tagged with pejorative or dismissive terms such as “received literature,” “received studies,” or “received ethnographies” (evoking images of “received ideas” or “received wisdom”).³¹ Yet a seven-sentence text accompanying a photograph of a Pacific-island menstrual hut in the pages of the *National Geographic*³² is treated as authoritative. And in pitting the assertion of this same photo caption (that women on Mogmog Island enjoy menstrual seclusion) against my own presentation of the Saramaka case, the writers manage to stack their cards against the latter without explicitly questioning its reliability by the parenthetical, and curiously gratuitous, insertion of a distancing label, alluding to “Price’s (third person) accounts.” Granted, I have never, like Annie Leclerc, adopted the voice of the vagina, but my understandings of the Saramaka menstrual hut have been formed inside its walls and through countless conversations, both direct and overheard, with its other users, in their own language. Writing often in the third person (like most other commentators on the subject), I have nevertheless been reflecting on a distinctly firsthand set of experiences.

A final illustration of the more general point that I’m arguing here is provided by two African-American men who visited the Maroons in the late 1970s, searching for “the connecting link” between Africa and Afro-America. Working through urban Creole interpreters and their own visual impressions, and imbued with liberal state-of-the-times ideas about race and gender, they brought Maroon women’s confinement to the “outside house” in line with the image they had set out to find, arguing the case on the basis of a fantasized (and ideologically prefabricated) reality:

Rules governing the practice [of menstrual seclusion] are made by the women themselves. . . . The women seem to enjoy this opportunity to get away from the village chores and family and join their friends in the woman's *oso* [house] for several days of gossip and laughter.³³

Part of the problem, of course, is that knowledge gets recycled, and as it's repeated from one "source" to the next, it begins to take on authority within some kind of canon. Buckley and Gottlieb's assertion of sexual opportunities during menstrual seclusion among the Djuka, Warao, and Kaska, for example, has already been reissued, verbatim (including the erroneous page numbers) but without quotation marks or reference to their book, in an ambitious 1991 study by Chris Knight (published by Yale University Press), as has their discussion of the Mogmog case, this with a proper reference.³⁴ Readers of these two important books, who will not generally take the trouble to verify the sources used, will have no reason to doubt the specifics of their arguments. The 1991 publication strengthens the apparent authority of ethnographic "facts" that arose from a combination of ideological zeal and careless scholarship in the 1988 book — "facts" that have an immediate appeal to contemporary readers because of the empowerment they would seem to reflect in previously misunderstood areas of women's lives; recycled without full references, the relevant passages in the 1988 study take on the appearance of having been independently corroborated three years later.

Before concluding this paper, I wish to reiterate, for the record, that in commenting on interpretations of my own work and that of other ethnographers, my primary aim has been to make a point about the methodology of comparative scholarship. It has not been to generalize about the nature of menstrual customs which, as Buckley and Gottlieb so correctly point out, are "culturally variable and specific"; I am in no way arguing against the notion that some societies view menstruation positively. Indeed, it has been many years since Michelle Rosaldo noted, with a combination of insightfulness and wise restraint, that the "ideas of purity and pollution, so often used to circumscribe female activities, may also be used as a basis for assertions of female solidarity, power, or value. . . . Women may, for example, gather in menstrual huts, to relax or to gossip, creating a world free from control by men."³⁵ Since then, important advances have been made in our understanding of the varied cultural idioms through which women attain and express solidarity, and much more surely remains to be discovered. But it's useful to keep in mind, as we sift through the evidence

and formulate our conclusions, that we are working in an ideologically charged terrain. Françoise Lionnet has noted, in analyzing the even greater minefield of excision studies, that “anti-ethnocentrism can have the unfortunate consequence of undermining feminist political solidarity.”³⁶ And Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s historical probing of relations between enslaved women and their mistresses in the Old South³⁷ inspires similar caution in our quest for realms of sisterly solidarity.

In the very right-headed attempt to redress the biases undeniably introduced into ethnographic reporting by the sexism of earlier anthropologists, we need to exercise special vigilance about the temptingly attractive, and sometimes quite powerful, ideological packages that contribute to the cultural fabric of our own moment. My attempt to explore the paths by which certain cultural constructions have made their way from local menstrual huts to ethnographic monographs and finally to cross-cultural summaries is intended to underscore the extent to which understandings can be colored by the time and place in which they’re formed — and to add my voice to pleas, such as Haraway’s, for self-awareness about our various roles as champions of anti-ethnocentrism, advocates of feminist solidarity, analysts of cultural constructs of gender, or any other guise in which we reflect, with differing mixtures of perception and conviction, on the nature and meaning of women’s lives.

Notes

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1. Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 6.
2. Haraway, 8.

3. See, for example, Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
4. Susan Vogel et al., *Perspectives: Angles on African Art* (New York: Center for African Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1987).
5. *Christian Science Monitor*, April 1977; quoted in Mort Rosenblum, *Coups and Earthquakes: Reporting the World for America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 164–65.
6. See Sally Price, *Co-Wives and Calabashes* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984).
7. See Richard Price and Sally Price, *Equatoria* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
8. J. A. Riemer, translated in Richard Price, *Alabi's World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 260, 425–26.
9. Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, *Rebel Destiny: Among the Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1934), 228–29.
10. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 42.
11. Annie Leclerc, *Parole de femme* (Paris: Grasset, 1974), 48–49.
12. Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon, 1987), 111 and accompanying note.
13. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 57.
14. Marilyn Strathern, "An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology," *Signs* 12: 2 (1987): 276–92, esp. 279.
15. Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb (eds.), *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
16. Buckley and Gottlieb, 14.
17. Buckley and Gottlieb, 12–13.
18. Sharon W. Tiffany and Kathleen J. Adams, *The Wild Woman: An Inquiry into the Anthropology of an Idea* (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1985), 56.
19. Tiffany and Adams, 55–56.
20. Jacques Lizot, *Tales of the Yanomami: Daily Life in the Venezuelan Forest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 75–78; the French original was published in 1976.
21. Morton C. Kahn, *Djuka: The Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana* (New York: Viking, 1931).
22. The Maroon group properly referred to as Djuka or Ndjuka are Kahn's "Aucaner."
23. Kahn's level of sensitivity about gender issues may be gleaned from his depiction (p. 121) of sexual relations among the Maroons:

We should, perhaps, not expect to find romantic love, as we know it, among the Djukas [i.e., Maroons]. The peculiar transports and attenuated delights of romantic passion are a rather extraordinary phenomenon which, according to Briffault, does not exist outside of Western civilization. Romance requires a high development of individuality among women so that one may be desirable above all others. Where women are mutually interchangeable, romance cannot exist. The Djuka black does not love a woman; he loves women. Love

among the Djukas is not a brainstorm but a physiological release, and marriage an economic device.

24. Buckley and Gottlieb, 13.
25. John J. Honigmann, *The Kaska Indians: An Ethnographic Reconstruction*, Yale University Publications in Anthropology 51 (New Haven: Yale University, 1954), 124.
26. Maria Matilde Suárez, *Los Warao: Indígenas del Delta del Orinoco* (Caracas: Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas, 1968), 208–10.
27. Buckley and Gottlieb, 32–33.
28. Georges Niangoran-Bouah, *La division du temps et le calendrier rituel des peuples lagunaires de Côte d'Ivoire* (Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1964).
29. See, for example, Niangoran-Bouah, 124.
30. Niangoran-Bouah, 100.
31. Buckley and Gottlieb, 6, 8, 12.
32. Carolyn Bennett Patterson, "In the Far Pacific at the Birth of Nations," *National Geographic* 170: 4 (1986): 460–99, esp. 490–91.
33. S. Allen Counter and David L. Evans, *I Sought My Brother: An Afro-American Reunion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 133.
34. Chris Knight, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 386, 387.
35. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, "Woman, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview," in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 17–42, esp. 38.
36. Françoise Lionnet, "Feminism, Universalism and the Practice of Excision," *Passages* 1 (1991): 2–4, esp. 2.
37. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); for further examples, see Richard Price and Sally Price, eds., *Stedman's Surinam: Life in an Eighteenth-Century Slave Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).