Africa 52(4), 1982

SEX, FERTILITY AND MENSTRUATION AMONG THE BENG OF THE IVORY COAST: A SYMBOLIC ANALYSIS[1]

Alma Gottlieb

Menstrual blood has proved a popular subject for discussion in the anthropological literature but, surprisingly, only a single theme has emerged: societies either do or do not consider menstrual blood and menstruating women to be polluting. If they are not considered polluting, it is taken as a sign of sex-role egalitarianism; conversely, if they are considered polluting, it is taken as a sign of women's lower status *vis-à-vis* men and/or of the potential danger or threat that women represent to men (e.g. Kessler, 1976: 72–4; Meggitt, 1964; Ortner, 1974; Sacks, 1974; Young, 1965: 155). Friedl (1975: 29) goes so far as to suggest that menstruating women are viewed as threatening and polluting because menstrual blood is a symbol of death: when a woman menstruates, it is a sign that she has not conceived a child and thus during this time she is 'the antithesis of life'.

Recently two authors have begun to take the study of menstrual pollution in potentially more positive directions. Faithorn (1975) has demonstrated how, among the Kafe of New Guinea, menstrual blood pollutes not only men but other women as well and, moreover, men's semen is also considered polluting. Ahern (1975) uses a mixed approach for China: not only does she consider the variety of ways in which menstruating women pollute both men and gods, but she places menstrual pollution in a wider perspective by considering the range of other types of pollution, some confined to women (pregnancy and childbirth) but others crossing gender categories (corpses, entrances and exits). Nevertheless, both these authors retain the discussion of sexual substances either within overall framework of gender pollution (Faithorn) or within the general approach that polluting substances have only negative associations and represent the negative powers of disruption (Ahern).

I say that the relative paucity of theoretical insight about menstruation is surprising because, in other areas of symbolic anthropology dealing with pollution and polluting substances, varied theoretical explanations have been put forth that supplement or even challenge the original interpretations of the objects under study as merely being polluting. For example, Douglas's now classic study (1966) of pollution has been criticised by Tambiah (1969), Bulmer (1967) and finally by Douglas herself (1972), all of whose studies have demonstrated how certain objects that are definitely liminal are not in all cases polluting and might even be considered sacred. In the light of these newer, theoretically more complex and fruitful studies of pollution and liminality, it is perplexing that the topic of menstruation has not equally benefited.

Nevertheless, two recent papers, both on North American Indian groups, have enriched the anthropological study of menstruation. Powers (1980) demonstrates how, among the Plains Oglala, menstruation was viewed as an aspect of fertility; but she wavers in her interpretation, at times arguing that menstruation was viewed as sacred, at times that it was viewed as ambiguous. Buckley (1982) shows how Yurok women of California were secluded to heighten their spiritual awareness; his analysis reveals how notions of both purity and pollution were involved in the traditional Yurok menstruation practices. I view both these articles as encouraging signs that

the study of menstruation is finally 'coming of age'.

In this article, I shall be similarly seeking to relocate the topic of menstruation in a new framework, one not directly defined by gender at all and not restricted to the view that menstrual pollution and menstrual blood are by definition viewed negatively. Specifically, I shall explore Beng notions of menstruation as they relate to wider notions of pollution and of fertility. Rather than indicating the general pollution of women and, from that, women's lower status, the analysis will demonstrate how menstrual pollution among the Beng forms part of another type of pollution – the spatio-symbolic pollution of human fertility when it is removed from its proper place – and how, rather than debasing women, menstruation serves to give added value to a major aspect of women's labour – that of cooking.

THE BENG OF THE IVORY COAST

The Beng are a small ethnic group in the Ivory Coast. Having a population of about 7,000 in the *sous-préfecture* of M'Bahiakro, they belong to the Southern Mande branch of Mande languages within the Niger–Congo family. Relatively reliable ethnography on the Beng is, to date, restricted to Armengaud (1949), Conrad (1903) and Tauxier (1921). The group has been known in the literature as the Ngan, Ngen or Gan (all other people's names for them), but I follow their own usage of referring to themselves as the Beng.

Traditionally the economy was a mixed one of hunting, gathering and extensive horticulture; nowadays the introduction of cash crops (mostly coffee but also rice and cocoa) has meant that farming has taken precedence over hunting for men, though women continue to gather actively as well as to farm. Politically, the Beng are divided into two entities, the savana and forest kingdoms, each ruled by a king and a queen; in addition, each village has its own male and female chief. The social system is based on double descent, with corporate matriclans and patriclans, each having its own functions. Only the matriclans are localised, with the majority of members residing together in a section of a single village; the members of the patriclans live dispersed throughout all the Beng villages.

The main cult of Beng traditional religion is that of the Earth. All autonomous villages have their own Earth shrines and Masters of the Earth who regularly offer sacrifices and prayers to the Earth on behalf of individuals or groups. In turn, the Earth holds wide-ranging powers over human life (see below, n. 8 and *passim*). In addition, ancestor and forest spirits are recognised and worshipped either individually or as part of various cults. Nowadays many Beng, especially in certain villages, have been converted to Islam and a few, especially in one village, have become Catholics, but most aspects of the traditional religion remain intact and many of the Muslim and Catholic converts participate in some or all of its practices.

There is no initiation ritual to mark the passage of boys from childhood to adulthood. Teenage girls, however, are initiated, but it is an individual ceremony done singly for each girl. When her daughter reaches the age of about fifteen to sixteen years, a mother formally announces to her husband that the girl is of marriageable age. Depending on a complex set of marriage rules, the mother or father (with their kin) arrange a husband for their daughter at this time, or not. If they do select a groom, the girl's initiation takes place up to one or two years later and

constitutes the first day of her wedding. If, however, neither of the parents arranges a husband for their daughter at the time of the announcement of her eligibility, the girl is then initiated within a few weeks. In this case it is said that she is 'married' by the initiation, despite the fact that she has neither a husband nor a fiancé at this stage. This is because there are certain consequences common to both initiation and marriage: most importantly, after she is initiated, as well as after she is married, a girl may no longer go into the forest while menstruating, and she must wash twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening (see below, pp. 40–1).

As in most of sub-Saharan Africa, polygyny is the male ideal for marriage though by no means attained by all men. The Beng admit that most women do not like polygyny, though it is not unheard of for co-wives to get along. In polygynous marriages the husband establishes a rotational system: each wife sleeps three to five consecutive nights with him, during which time she cooks for him and brings him his bath water.

PREGNANT SEX, MENSTRUAL SEX: EXPLORATIONS IN MENSTRUAL POLLUTION

There are three rules which Beng observe concerning menstruation, as follows:

1. No initiated, married or previously married woman who is menstruating may set foot in the forest for any reason other than to defaecate; in particular, she may do no kind of work in the fields (which are located in the forest), including chopping down wood and fetching water, both of which are generally done daily. (For this reason, any pre-menopausal woman who does not have a daughter to help her with these tasks is wise to keep a sizable store of firewood and water at the house, in preparation for the days when she will be menstruating.)
2. A menstruating woman may not touch a corpse.
3. A man may not eat food cooked by his wife during the days she is menstruating, nor may a Master of the Earth eat food cooked by *any* menstruating woman.

When I first learned of these three taboos I thought that it was yet another case of the pollution of women through menstruation and yet another instance of women's oppression. I therefore felt little curiosity to explore these taboos further, but I did think to ask a Master of the Earth one day exactly what it was about menstrual blood that was polluting to the Earth. His answer was not one that I had expected:

> Menstrual blood is special because it carries in it a living being. It works like a tree. Before bearing fruit, a tree must first bear flowers. Menstrual blood is like the flower: it must emerge before the fruit – the baby – can be born. Childbirth is like a tree finally bearing its fruit, which the woman then gathers.

I was delighted at this poetic statement but saw no relevance to my original question. I repeated the question – Why is menstrual blood *polluting*? – and the Master of the Earth only shrugged, got bored, and soon left.[2]

Ignoring my informant's lead, I started to look for the kinds of answers which anthropology leads us to expect, by seeking other ways in which menstrual blood and other female substances might be considered polluting. I was surprised to find that there seemed to be no other rules specifying what activities a woman should or should not pursue during menstruation: she might attend funerals and weddings, and dance and sing at both (though if the funeral or wedding were in another village,

a menstruating woman at the heaviest part of her period would only attend if she had a hostess in that village in whose bath-house she could wash out her menstrual cloth at noontime); she might attend a childbirth, cook for the woman in labour, remove the placenta, and do other childbirth-related chores; spin cotton; bathe her small children, and so on. In short, she was by no means isolated from the flux of social life.

I was even more surprised to find that sexual activity seemed not to be affected by female substances as it often is in societies where these are considered polluting in sexual contexts. Thus, though not commonly done, it is not taboo (*sõ pɔ*) for a husband and wife to have intercourse during the wife's menstrual period. My informant giggled when I asked her about this: she said that generally the couple wouldn't want to have intercourse then 'because it would be too bloody', but that if they did there would be no negative consequences: no sacrifices or other ritual expiations would be required, as there was nothing wrong with the act. While it is not common for a menstruating woman to make love with her husband, it is common for them to sleep together, regardless of whether or not she has a co-wife.[3] This casual attitude towards menstrual blood on the part of men extends to another aspect of menstruation: a husband is not forbidden contact with his wife's menstrual cloth, which she washes every night (and at noon, if the flow is heavy) and then stores in her room, between periods.[4]

Just as there is no taboo on sex during menstruation, so there is none on sex during pregnancy. A couple may continue to have sexual intercourse as long as it is not uncomfortable for the pregnant woman, although it is not required for the formation of the foetus (which is held to require only a single act of intercourse to form properly). This lack of taboos relating to pregnancy and menstruation raises a number of intriguing questions. Since menstrual blood is considered polluting in one context – the Earth – why should it not be considered polluting in another, more commonly associated context – sex? Surely the mass of comparative ethnographic evidence has led us to seek out men as the first victims of pollution where menstrual and pregnant sex are concerned? And, even more perplexing, why should eating food cooked by menstruating wives be considered polluting while having intercourse with the selfsame woman is not? Comparative data indicate, again, that these two taboos are commonly found together. For instance, among the Mae Enga of the New Guinea highlands men may neither copulate with, nor eat food cooked by, their menstruating wives (Meggitt, 1964: 207–8). Likewise, why is a menstruating Beng woman permitted to attend a funeral but forbidden to touch the corpse?

In seeking the usual explanations of menstrual pollution in the general pollution of women I came across another fact which at first seemed to support this type of explanation: the Earth is male. Thus the fact that menstrual blood pollutes the Earth might at first glance seem to indicate a wider theme of women polluting men or objects that are classified as male. However, this explanation is invalidated by the associated taboo on a man and a woman having sexual intercourse on the male Earth (see below, pp. 39ff.). This taboo would seem to indicate that the Earth is not being polluted because of the male gender assigned to it but because of some other defining feature, as will be seen below.

To understand these perplexing issues, I began inquiring into related aspects of the life cycle: why is it only married (or previously married) women who are forbidden to enter the forest while menstruating? Is it sexual contact with her

husband (or lover) that makes her more polluting than a (presumably) virginal girl? I was told that one of the most important aspects of her daily routine that changes when a girl gets married (or initiated – see above, p. 35) is that she may no longer go into the forest when she has her menstrual period. Associated with this change is a sacrifice that is performed. If the girl is a virgin at marriage, her father provides the necessary sacrificial animals; if she is not a virgin, her lover(s) provide(s) them. In either case the ritual consists of chickens and/or goats being sacrificed to the Earth. The purpose is to apologise to the Earth for the girl having gone into the forest during her menstrual periods before her marriage (or initiation) and to promise that she will never again repeat the offence now that she is married. If this necessary sacrifice is not performed by the time she gets pregnant, the girl will have a very difficult childbirth. If the child that is born survives, it will become sickly. Concomitantly, should a married or previously married woman go into the forest during her menstrual period, she too will have a very difficult delivery during her next childbirth. There is another negative result of violating the taboo: the crops in the field she is working in while menstruating will die. I recorded such a case:

> About a year ago a menstruating woman was in the forest to work in her husband's yam field. Two days later, all the leaves of the yam plants in that part of the field fell off and the yams died. In addition, she herself developed bad stomach cramps. She consulted a diviner to discover the cause of her stomach cramps and he accused her of having been in the forest while menstruating. She confessed but explained that her period had come while she was in the fields and she didn't want to return to the village right away. However, as a result of her misjudgement the whole year's yam crop [the starch staple of the Beng diet] in that field was spoiled and the Earth was polluted [*e ba zozona*: she polluted the Earth]. To rectify the latter conditon, the woman's husband was required to sacrifice a female hairy goat.

While interesting in itself, this case did not seem to answer the question of *why* menstruation and the Earth were mutually inimical. I started on another tack: what are other substances or actions that – rather than being polluted *by women* – are considered polluting *to the Earth*? In other words, I switched from considering the crucial aspect of the problem as the inherent pollution of menstruation (or women) to a focus on the vulnerability of the Earth. In doing so I learned that there are many substances or actions that pollute the Earth, mostly relating to illicit contact by people other than Masters of the Earth with various Earth shrines and with the Earth itself on sacred days. For instance, the traditional six-day week of the Beng includes one day that is considered an 'Earth Day' (called *Po Fẽ* in the forest region and *Ba Fẽ* in the savana region). On this day no work is done in the fields (unless a sacrifice has been performed beforehand by the village chief to apologise to the Earth in advance for the sin). Moreover, during the evening and night hours of every Earth Day (the Beng day begins at sundown), no one is to make a noise in the village. Fights are taboo; indeed, talking above a whisper was forbidden 'in the old days', and because young children could not be relied on to carry out this rule they used to be stuffed into large pots to keep them quiet all evening! Lastly, women may not pound yams or other foods in the large mortars whose pestles make a loud noise. The violation of any of these rules results in the pollution of the Earth and requires any of a variety of animal sacrifices to the Earth on a later Earth Day.

However, I was told that there is one action considered to be the gravest of all the

possible offences to the Earth, causing it the severest form of pollution and in turn posing the gravest possible threat to humankind: the act of human sexual intercourse in the forest or in the fields. In order to distinguish between the social spaces for legitimately and illegitimately conducted sex, a Master of the Earth ritually plants in each village a kapok tree which serves to make sexual activity in that village acceptable; concomitantly, sex in the forest is forbidden because no kapok tree has been *ritually* planted there which would legitimate sexual activity (though kapok trees do grow wild in the forest). One informant described the village kapok tree as 'the beginning of all things in the village'. A forest camp, which is formed to shelter farmers whose fields are many miles from the village, is considered a 'village' – a social and political entity where sexual activity may take place and thus the members may reproduce themselves – only when such a kapok tree is planted by a Master of the Earth.

The consequences of violating the taboo against sexual activity in the forest/fields are various and grave. Not only may the woman involved have a difficult time in her next childbirth (and in ensuing ones as well, if the sin is not expiated), but the couple's children and any close or distant kinspeople (especially members of their matriclans) are endangered. In one case I recorded, a married couple had slept together repeatedly in the forest for a year. Six of their relatives died or suffered before the act was ritually punished, and these deaths and misfortunes were all attributed to the Earth as indirect punishment of the couple: the wife's maternal half-brother died suddenly after developing a headache and fainting; two or three days after his death one of this man's daughters died of chickenpox; about a month later the wife's matrilateral parallel cousin, who was nine months pregnant, developed heart pains and died the same day without having gone into labour; the couple's own daughter died of a snake bite in the forest; the husband's sister's daughter lost a great deal of weight and died; and the house of the husband's patrilateral cross-cousin caught fire and all the possessions inside, including his wives' food stores and kitchen implements as well as the house itself, were ruined. In addition to thus endangering the couple's own relatives, however, the man and woman who have sexual intercourse in the forest/fields also jeopardise the lives of the entire Beng people: a general drought will ensue which, if the Earth is not properly propitiated in time, will result in the ruining of the entire year's crop and, ultimately, the starvation of all the Beng![5]

During my field work a minor drought in June 1980 was blamed on two separate couples having had intercourse in the forest. In fact such illicit acts seem to be common: a thirty-three-year-old informant recalled at least five cases as having occurred within her recent memory for three Beng villages. Significantly, many of these forest sex cases also seem to be cases of rape. In these instances the rape is blamed on madness (which is itself caused by witchcraft). In one case I recorded, a well known healer was bewitched and attempted to rape his wife in the forest. She escaped, and when he 'came out of it' within a few hours he hanged himself in the forest from shame. Having sex in the forest is thus more shameful as one ages and presumably becomes responsible for one's actions. This is borne out by another case: a middle-aged man was bewitched to have sexual intercourse in the forest (presumably with his wife) but other witches of his matriclan were able to partly protect him and change the 'spell' so that it was the man's son (about twenty years

old) who committed the offence with a girlfriend. Although the result was the same – the Earth was polluted – the boy's father, though deeply ashamed that his son had engaged in forest sex, was less ashamed than if it had been he himself who had polluted the Earth in this manner.

The punishment meted out to the guilty couple who have sexual intercourse in the forest or fields is considered drastic (*o grigri*). They must return to the spot where they copulated. There they repeat the act in front of a large, jeering audience of middle-aged and old men who brandish sticks and firebrands with which they respectively beat and burn the couple during the act of sex. This over, a cow is sacrificed by the Master of the Earth. The couple's clothes are then taken from them and later given to the king of their region, and they are given new clothes to wear back to the village.[6] This punishment was meted out to one of the two guilty couples during the minor drought which occurred during my field work, and, soon after, the rains indeed came.

A variation of this ritual punishment is possible in extenuating circumstances. Thus, in one case, a man who raped his wife in the forest was sent to jail by the woman's relatives. But since the Earth was still polluted and needed purification, the raped wife was required to perform the ritual in the forest and go through the motions of sex without her husband, all the while being beaten and burnt by the old men present. My informant couldn't recall any cases where, for whatever reason, it was only the guilty man who was present at such a ritual punishment.

Related to the prohibition on sexual intercourse in the forest is a rule that all adults must bathe in the morning to 'wash off' sex from the previous night (whether or not they actually had sexual relations the night before). Should a man or woman have sexual relations one night and go into the forest/fields the next day without having bathed in the morning, the person runs a good risk of being bitten by a snake while in the forest. In this case none of the usual snake remedies would be effective and it is said the person would inevitably die.

Additionally, all adults are required to bathe at night. It may be that this is so for a parallel reason: to wash off the Earth (physically and metaphorically) before engaging in sexual activity later that night. Whether or not a given individual actually went into the fields on a specific day and has sexual relations the same night would be irrelevant: the rule is established, it is suggested, to instil 'good habits', that no one should make a mistake on days when it would 'count'. The Beng themselves offer this explanation for another taboo: that against cleaning one's teeth with a chewing stick in the afternoon, evening, or at night. Its violation by an adult results in the death of the individual's spouse. Young children are taught not to clean their teeth after the late morning so that they get used to the routine for when they will later marry. In the same way, it may be that adults are required to bathe every night to get used to the routine for the days when they *are* returning from the fields (Earth) and *will* be having sexual intercourse that night. Unfortunately, I was not told what the consequences would be of illicitly engaging in sex one night without having washed that evening after returning from the fields. But it is suggested that the logic of this taboo is related to the logic of the first taboo: sex must be washed off in the morning before entering the Earth during the day, and the Earth must be washed off in the evening before 'entering' sex at night.

How does the direness of the sexual pollution of the Earth in both its forms

(copulating in the forest/fields, and not washing off sexual or Earth substances before contacting the other realm) tie in with the pollution of menstruation? The beginning of an answer may be found if we note the consequences of each type of pollution. When the Earth is indirectly polluted (by menstrual blood) the offending woman will have difficulty in giving birth and bringing forth a child; when it is directly polluted (by sexual activity in the forest/fields) the whole area's crops will be ruined by lack of rain. The link between the two consequences is clear: they are both associated with aborted fertility. And it is here that the explanation of 'menstrual pollution' lies for the Beng.

Menstrual blood, as my informant articulately and poetically explained, embodies a symbolic principle which makes possible human fertility in the form of babies. Because of menstrual blood the Beng can reproduce, through the mediation of childbirth. In parallel fashion, the Earth embodies a symbolic principle which makes possible field fertility in the form of crops. Because of the Earth the Beng can survive (by eating), with the mediation of the rain, which makes the crops grow. But the essential aspect of this cosmology is that to the extent that human fertility and forest/field fertility are seen as parallel – and it may be noted that the cutting-progeny of rootstock crops (e.g. the yams that grow from the planted tubers) are called 'children', *ley* – to the same extent they must be separated. If they are inappropriately combined, the mediating force which makes each possible becomes in its own way aborted: the rain stops, the delivery of the child is impeded. Children and crops represent parallel but distinct realms of human and human-related fertility, as they in turn represent the conceptual distinction of the village and the forest/fields.

It would be tempting to follow Lévi-Strauss here and equate 'village' with 'culture' and 'forest/fields' with 'nature'. Thus one could state that the taboo against menstruating women entering the forest is representative of the distinction between culture and nature, as Lévi-Strauss (e.g. 1969, 1969–81, 1976) defines those realms. Indeed, because Lévi-Strauss postulates that all societies make a basic distinction between what is natural and what is cultural, and, moreover, because he views this very distinction as the basis of all social life (e.g. Lévi-Strauss, 1969), it would be especially tempting to apply his analysis to our data and suggest that the Beng taboo on menstruating women entering the forest is (as Lévi-Strauss says of the incest taboo) 'the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished' (1969: 24); that is, the Beng taboo could be said to create the distinction between 'natural sex' (in the forest) and 'cultural sex' (in the village). However, I suggest that this interpretation is not appropriate to Beng society precisely because it is arguable that the Beng themselves do not make a distinction between what we define as 'nature' and what we define as 'culture' (see Strathern, 1980, for a similar case among the Mount Hageners of New Guinea).

Specifically, the Beng view the forest/fields as an orderly space, infinitely classified (they say, for example, that all the plants have names, regardless of whether or not they know those names) and having intimate relations with the village, in the form of sacrifices in the forest to the Earth and to various forest spirits. Moreover, for the Beng it is the Earth (located in the forest) that has control over all human (village) affairs, whereas in Lévi-Strauss's scheme it is the village ('culture')

which must inevitably triumph over the forest ('nature'). So in the Beng world it is the Earth, in this instance, which is in control over not only forest fertility (the crops) but over human fertility as well.[7] Thus during his wife's pregnancy a husband should contribute an egg to the Master of the Earth, who will then 'sacrifice' it to the Earth to ask for his wife's childbirth to go well and she deliver the baby successfully; and after the delivery the husband will sacrifice a chicken to thank the Earth. Ultimately, then, the two realms of human and forest/field fertility are interconnected, as both are regulated by the Earth, and both babies and crops are here by the grace of the Earth.

But, conceptually as well as spatially, the two realms of fertility must first be separated before they can be joined; hence the washing off of sex before entering the Earth, and vice versa. The actual creation of human life – the act of sex – and the symbolic principle representing human fertility – menstrual blood – must be separated from the creation of the Earth's fertility in the forest/fields. This is in keeping with the axiom, well developed in anthropology and originating in linguistics (see Lévi-Strauss, 1963a, 1963b, 1963c) that realms must first be differentiated before they can be joined; indeed, as Leach writes (1976: 34), 'all boundaries are artificial *interruptions* to what is naturally continuous' (emphasis in original). Human beings have taken the continuum of 'nature' and segmented it by defining boundaries because, as Lévi-Strauss says (1963e: 89), such boundaries are 'good to think'; in other words, we derive intellectual satisfaction from classifying the world as discrete entities. In postulating such discrete entities we create relationships between them, and it is such relationships which in turn create meaning. Thus, in the Beng case, the realms of village and forest/fields, rather than being autonomous, are instead connected by their mutual dependence on the same Earth (imbuing both realms with meaning) for their reproduction via children and crops respectively; and the taboo on menstruating women entering the forest becomes a symbol of this complex relationship.

There is a further confirmation of the interpretation offered here that the ban on menstruating women entering the forest is unrelated to any idea of menstrual or female pollution. This has to do with the second taboo relating to menstruating women: the prohibition on touching a corpse. Normally, when menstruating women are forbidden contact with a class of persons or things, such as men's hunting or craft tools, the taboo is interpreted as indicating the polluting character of women in this state (e.g. Hammond and Jablow, 1976: 6–7; La Fontaine, 1972: 164–7). Significantly, Beng do not forbid menstruating women contact with any object (including men's tools) other than corpses, which would suggest that it is not a question of gender pollution but, rather, some other kind of pollution. It is well known that corpses themselves are often viewed as polluting (e.g. Douglas, 1966), and in Beng thought this is certainly the case, as we shall soon see. Thus it could not be a menstruating woman who pollutes the corpse but instead the corpse which pollutes the menstruating woman.

For Beng indeed view corpses as contaminating, lodging a disease which is called, metonymically, 'Corpse' (*gale*) and which is contagious, especially through touch. The symptoms are also metonymically defined: the victim becomes listless, loses all appetite and energy for all activity – becomes, in a word, corpse-like. The action of the disease is swift; if left untreated, the victim may die in a matter of a few days. The

disease is both caused by and, in turn, causes death and is thus inimical to menstrual blood, which represents fertility, or potential life. Hence the taboo on menstruating women touching a corpse is clearly not explained by any natural state of female pollution but by the fertility symbolism inherent in menstruation.[8]

THE CUISINE OF MENSTRUATION

We have seen how menstrual pollution of the Earth can be explained not by the naturally polluting state of women but, in the case of the Beng, by the conceptual principle of separating the kind of fertility represented by women's menstrual blood from the kind of fertility represented by the Earth in the forest/fields. It remains to explain the associated taboo against men eating food cooked by their menstruating wives (and against Masters of the Earth eating food cooked by any menstruating woman).

Once we have understood the first taboo on menstrual blood contacting the Earth, this second taboo becomes clear, as it is regulated by the same principle. Thus, instead of being explained by the usual theory of the general pollution of women, it too can best be understood by reference to the dual definition of fertility. A woman who is menstruating, as we have seen, is producing an essential symbolic principle of fertility. When she cooks, she handles foods which have come from crops grown in the forest-fields. There is no reason for her not to consume such foods, as, singly, she cannot become pregnant; likewise for any other person (other than a Master of the Earth), male or female, with whom she does not have a sexual (hence fertile) relationship. However, if her husband were to eat such food he would be simultaneously ingesting a product of Earth fertility (food) and having contact with a principle of human fertility (menstrual blood) and the latter is, of course, through his marriage associated with his own fertility. As we have seen, it is one foundation of the Beng symbolic economy that these two principles of Earth and human fertility must be separated.[9]

The lack of a taboo on sex during menstruation no longer seems problematic. Sex during menstruation combines two versions of the same type of fertility (human and village), whereas eating food cooked by a menstruating wife combines two different types of fertility which should remain apart (human and forest/fields). It is equally clear why a Master of the Earth may never eat food cooked by any menstruating woman, though he does not necessarily have a sexual relationship with her: he is a priest to the Earth and always imbued with its powers. As an extension of the Earth and its field fertility, he, like the Earth, would be polluted by the human fertility which menstrual blood symbolises.

There is one final noteworthy point about menstruation and cooking which goes along with the taboo on men eating such food. This is that women themselves are said to enjoy food cooked during their menstrual periods immensely and for a specific reason: women cook best when they are menstruating. In particular there is one dish, a sauce made from palm nuts (*si ben dŏ*), that is supposed to be most delicious when prepared by a menstruating woman. This is because the sauce gets better and better (i.e. thicker and thicker) as it cooks longer and longer – up to four or five hours for optimum flavour. Usually a woman does not have the time to cook a

sauce for so many hours because she is busy working in the fields all day. While she is menstruating and confined to the village she has the leisure to cook the sauce properly – virtually all day – and she and her friends and close female kin with whom she exchanges food[10] have the exquisite pleasure – usually denied to men – of eating palm-nut sauce as it was meant to be eaten. It might also be added that, though no Beng ever said so, palm-nut sauce may be seen to resemble blood. As it cooks for hours its colour develops into a rich, deep red, not unlike the colour of menstrual blood.[11] If Beng culture has an *haute cuisine*, it is indeed this rich, red, thick palm-nut sauce – a cuisine of menstruation.

These data concerning the high value placed by men and women alike on food cooked during a woman's menstrual period are theoretically significant. For it has been postulated (Ortner, 1974: 80) that where societies have developed traditions of *haute cuisine* it is generally men who take it over and leave the daily, boring cooking to women. This hypothesis has been adduced to support the more general theory that societies universally accord higher status to men and men's activities than they do to women and women's activities (Ortner, 1974: *passim*). In the case of the Beng, however, it is acknowledged by both men and women that the *haute cuisine* – especially long-simmered palm-nut sauce – is cooked and generally consumed by women alone; and this should serve equally to convince us that women's activities may be granted positive value by men as well as by women.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this article it was noted that most anthropological explanations of comparative menstruation beliefs focus on the polluting nature of menstrual blood and infer from that the polluting nature of women in general. I have tried to show how such a theory does not apply to the Beng data. In the Beng case, the fact that it is only working in the forest (and not other activities) that is prohibited to menstruating women reveals that menstruation is not viewed as dangerous to men or as polluting in general. Rather, menstrual blood is viewed as a symbol of human fertility; for this reason is is not allowed to touch the forest/fields, which are viewed as a form of Earth fertility, for forest/field fertility and village fertility must be conceptually kept apart, according to the Beng view of the world.

Similarly, Beng husbands may not eat food cooked by their menstruating wives for a related reason: menstruating women who cook are handling crops produced in the forest/fields, and their husbands, with whom they produce (village) children, must therefore avoid contact with such food, lest the two realms of village and forest fertility be mixed. Moreover, far from being considered disgusting, food (especially palm-nut sauce) cooked by menstruating women is agreed by all Beng to be the most delicious of all Beng food, thus giving positive value to an activity of menstruating women.

In conclusion, we have discovered that a rule which seems to be a restriction on women and thus a reflection of their general polluting character – the taboo on their entering the forest while menstruating – is instead a part of a wider system of symbolic classification of space and fertility; and that a rule which seems further to indicate the polluting nature of menstrual blood – the taboo on husbands and

Masters of the Earth eating food cooked by menstruating women – is also a part of that complex symbolic system.

NOTES

[1] The field research upon which this article is based was conducted on a dissertation grant from the US Social Science Research Council/American Council of Learned Societies from September 1979 to December 1980; their generous support is hereby gratefully acknowledged. I am appreciative to my Beng friend and main informant, A., who fearlessly provided the majority of the data presented in this paper. I would also like to thank the following readers, who all gave interesting and helpful comments, only some of which could be incorporated into this paper: J. Christopher Crocker, Frederick H. Damon, Robbie Davis-Floyd, Mona Etienne, Irving Goldman, Philip Graham, J. David Sapir, Roy Wagner and James Wilkerson. My greatest thanks go to my husband, Philip Graham, who bravely endured the trials and rewards of field work.

An earlier version of this article, under the title 'Pregnant sex, menstrual sex and the cuisine of menstruation: the Beng case', was presented at the twenty-second Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Anthropological Association in Princeton, New Jersey (March 1982), where it was the winner of the Graduate Student Paper Competition.

[2] The Beng word *zozoa* may be translated as 'polluted' in some circumstances. It has a wide spectrum of meanings, ranging from 'broken' (as in a typewriter) to 'all messed up' (as in the situation of a serious dispute) to, finally, 'polluted' (in the religious sense, as in the Earth being transgressed by human sins).

In contrast, there is no Beng word for 'polluting', and the transitive word for 'to pollute' (*zozo*) does not permit intransitive constructions; one can say 'she pollutes the Earth' (*o ba zozo*) but not 'she is polluting' or 'she pollutes' (**o zozo*). I believe that this linguistic fact may reflect a wider theme in Beng culture (which I hope to develop elsewhere): that substances are not polluting in themselves but only when they come into contact with certain other substances; certainly this is the case for menstrual blood, as I shall be suggesting in this article. As originally used by Douglas (e.g. 1966), the English word 'polluting' implied a wide range of moral states, but it has since taken on a popular meaning (possibly influenced by the environmental movement) with only pejorative connotations. On one level this article is a plea for a return to the potentially multivocal meaning of 'pollution': things out of place.

[3] If the wife whose 'turn' it is to sleep with the shared husband happens to be menstruating and her husband does not mind making love that night because of the blood, he will sleep with her. If he wants to make love that night he will sleep with his co-wife out of turn or, more rarely, will make love with the menstruating wife.

[4] I believe that the model of menstruation presented in this article, to the extent that it is a consciously realised one, is shared by Beng men and women. Individual men did not view menstrual blood as disgusting. Indeed, I frequently discussed the topic of menstruation with many male friends of all ages, none of whom evinced disgust or even embarrassment. Whether or not the ideology of fertility that lies behind this behaviour is widely known – and it may well be fairly esoteric, articulable only by Masters of the Earth and other intellectuals – the daily attitudes that accompany it certainly seem to be virtually universally held.

[5] The chief of the village in which I lived told me that neighbouring peoples who share the same Earth with the Beng would also be affected by such a drought, as would the Beng if someone of those ethnic groups had likewise polluted the Earth. The ethnic groups he mentioned were: Ando, Baule, Diammala and Djimini. He also insisted that the only cause of any drought is always a case of forest sex. Other informants mentioned additional causes of drought: the patriclan which is in charge of the rain (*Kriley*) is lacking a queen, who alone is empowered to perform the most powerful of the rain-making ceremonies; the sacred goats which are kept in one of the Beng villages and are dedicated to the Earth are hungry and must be 'fed' with a village-wide sacrificial meal; and, whites (i.e. the anthropologist and her husband) are living in the area. During my field work the first and third of these explanations were joined to the more usual one of forest sex in trying to explain the drought of that year. Fortunately for my husband and myself, the drought went away after a couple who were guilty of committing forest sex were punished, and the theory that we might be to blame for the drought was forgotten.

[6] The cost of a cow is approximately $150 to $300. It is bought by the guilty man or, if he is young and unmarried, by his father; in either case, his own matriclan members help contribute. The average yearly income of a Beng nuclear family nowadays ranges from $500 to $1,000.

My informant didn't know what the king would do with the couple's polluted clothes, but in any case the intent is clear: separate the guilty man and woman from the pollution to cleanse them as well as the Earth. The fact that it is the king who is given the clothes serves to affirm his ultimate 'ownership' of the Earth. The ritual itself can suggest various interpretations. One, which fits in with a theme that is common in Beng symbolism, is the principle that 'two negatives equal a positive': in this case, the sin of sex in the forest is expiated by a repetition of that act.

[7] It is said that the Earth came before the Sky and, as in other areas of Beng life where seniority rules juniority, for this reason the Earth in some senses has priority over the Sky. (The word *eci* refers to the Sky, but Beng who speak French often translate it as *Dieu*, or 'God'. Because the Earth in some senses 'rules' the Sky, I am not convinced that 'God' is an accurate translation of *eci*.) However, my informants pointed out that the boundaries of the Earth and the Sky are uncertain; the two are friends (*gwe*) and thus look out for each other's interests. In keeping with this, when the Earth is polluted the Sky withholds rain to punish humans and protect its 'friend'.

[8] It is useful to compare briefly the Beng treatment of menstruation with that of the Baule. The Baule are the Bengs' immediate neighbours to the west and south. Though they belong to different language groups (Beng to the Mande family, Baule to the Akan family), Beng nevertheless claim – and sometimes accurately – that many of their social forms are similar or identical to those of the Baule. In this instance, however, there are profound differences. The cult of the Earth is not nearly as developed among the Baule as it is among the Beng, and many Baule groups, especially the southern Baule, have no Master of the Earth positions. Correspondingly, menstruating women, at least in recent times, are not prohibited from working in the forest (Mona Etienne, pers. comm.). They are forbidden all sexual contact with any men, but this is because of spirits and cults with which men are associated and not because of any violation (direct or indirect) of the Earth (Etienne, 1981: 29 n. 7). This accords with the observation that human actions and misfortunes are tied or attributable to spirits far more than to the Earth, in general Baule cosmology (Susan Vogel, pers. comm.; Mona Etienne, pers. comm.). All this, of course, is in direct contrast with the Beng situation as we have been outlining it, and would thus serve as a further confirmation that the elements which we have grouped together – the Beng taboo on menstruating women entering the forest, and the worship of the Earth – form a complex or a unit of meaning, neither of whose two main elements the Baule have developed to any large extent.

[9] Perhaps it is apt to observe here that the model of menstruation presented in this article is almost certainly a traditional one; that is, there is no hint that, in the past, menstruation might have been viewed more negatively and been surrounded by more taboos but that such a belief is now fading, in the face of modern influences. Other acts that were highly polluting in the past, such as copulating in the forest, are still so today, and I have no reason to suspect that menstrual blood, on the contrary, would have once been equally polluting but is now seen as harmless. In contrast, I believe that the Beng notions of fertility offered here would argue for a traditional lack of extensive menstrual taboos and against a negative view of menstruation, generally. The two – ideas concerning fertility and paucity of menstrual taboos – form a complex, each element giving meaning to the other.

[10] Women form exchange relationships with other women of their own choosing – normally friends or matrilaterally related kin. Though my data are incomplete on this, it is my impression that only women (and their daughters and very young sons) eat the food that they exchange. It is conceivable, however, that men might consume food cooked by menstruating women who are acting as their hostesses when they are visiting in other villages.

[11] That there is a symbolic connection between palm nuts and menstrual blood is confirmed by data concerning a certain medical remedy. If a woman has severe menstrual cramps, a treatment consists of her cooking palm nuts, extracting the threads (*san*) that separate from the nuts while cooking, and, late at night when there is no one awake to observe her in an embarrassing position, squatting over a fire and steaming the palm nut threads' vapours up her vagina. This remedy clearly shows that cooked palm nuts are associated on yet another level with menstruation.

REFERENCES

Ahern, Emily, 1975. 'The power and pollution of Chinese women', in Marjorie Wolf and Roxanne Witke (eds.), *Women in Chinese Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 193–214.

Armengaud, M. 1949. 'Autour de la culture de la kola chez les Ngan de Mbaiakro', *Notes africaines* 44, 114.

Buckley, Thomas. 1982. 'Menstruation and the power of Yurok women: methods in cultural reconstruction', *American Ethnologist* 9(1): 47–60.

Bulmer, Ralph. 1967. 'Why is the cassowary not a bird? A problem of zoological taxonomy among the Karam of the New Guinea highlands', *Man* 2, 5–25.

Conrad, Capitaine. 1903. 'Les Gans du Diamala', *Journal Officiel de la Côte d'Ivoire*, 15 mai, 12; 31 mai, 6–7; 15 juin, 9.

Douglas, Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

—— 1972 'Self-evidence', *Proceedings* of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland for 1972, 27–43.

Etienne, Mona. 1981. 'Gender relations and conjugality among the Baule (Ivory Coast)', *Culture* 1(1), 21–30.
Faithorn, Elizabeth. 1975. 'The concept of pollution among the Kafe of the Papua New Guinea highlands', in R. R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 127–40.
Friedl, Ernestine. 1975. *Women and Men: an Anthropologist's View*. New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston.
Hammond, Dorothy, and Alta Jablow. 1976. *Women in Cultures of the World*. Menlo Park, Cal.: Cummings Publishing Company.
Kessler, Evelyn S. 1976. *Women: an Anthropological View*. New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston.
La Fontaine, J. S. 1972. 'Ritualization of women's life-crises in Bugisu', in J. S. La Fontaine (ed.), *The Interpretation of Ritual: Essays in Honour of A. I. Richards*. London: Tavistock, 159–86.
Leach, Edmund. 1976. *Culture and Communication: the Logic by which Symbols are Connected; an Introduction to the Use of Structuralist Analysis in Social Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1963a. 'Language and the analysis of social laws', in Lévi-Strauss (1963d), 55–66.
——1963b. 'Linguistic anthropology', in Lévi-Strauss (1963d), 67–80.
——1963c. 'Structural analysis in linguistics and in anthropology', in Lévi-Strauss (1963d), 31–54.
——1963d. *Structural Anthropology*, Vol. I. Claire Jacobsen and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, trans. New York: Basic Books.
——1963d. *Totemism*. Rodney Needham, trans. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.
——1969. *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Rodney Needham *et al.*, trans. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.
——1969–81. *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, 4 vols. John and Doreen Weightman, trans. New York: Harper & Row.
——1976. 'Jean-Jacques Rousseau, founder of the science of man', in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Vol. 2. Monique Layton, trans. New York: Basic Books, 33–43.
Meggitt, M. J. 1964. 'Male–female relationships in the highlands of Australian New Guinea', *American Anthropologist* 66(4, 2), 204–22.
Ortner, Sherry. 1974. 'Is female to male as nature is to culture?', in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.), *Woman, Culture, and Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 67–87.
Powers, Marla N. 1980. 'Menstruation and reproduction: an Oglala case', *Signs* 6(1), 54–65.
Sacks, Karen. 1974. 'Engels revisited: women, the organization of production, and private property', in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture, and Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 207–23.
Strathern, Marilyn. 1980. 'No nature, no culture: the Hagen case', in Carol MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern (eds.), *Nature, Culture, and Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 174–222.
Tambiah, S. H. 1969. 'Animals are good to think and good to prohibit', *Ethnology* 7, 423–59.
Tauxier, Louis. 1920. *Le Noir de Bondoukou*. Paris: Leroux.
Young, Frank W. 1965. *Initiation Ceremonies: a Cross-cultural Study of Status Dramatization*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.

Résumé

Sexualité, fertilité et menstruation chez les Beng de la Côte d'Ivoire: une analyse symbolique

Cet article explore les dimensions symboliques des croyances rattachées à la menstruation chez les Beng de la Côte d'Ivoire. On a trouvé trois règles qui restreignent les activités

Suite à p. 66