

## *BLOOD (SYMBOLIC)*

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**blood (symbolic)** If, as the English saying goes, blood is thicker than water, is it 'thick' in the same ways cross-culturally? With an anthropological perspective, one generalization can be made: put simply, blood is never 'just blood'. Rather, it always has powerful associations embedded in a variety of well-developed cosmological schema, from Christian ritual manipulations of 'the blood of Christ' to the common theory that women's menstrual blood coagulates to help form a growing fetus.

Accordingly, in many places, the loss of blood is problematic even if it is not medically dangerous. For example, among the Kaguru of Tanzania, if blood is shed during a dispute, the offender is fined more than he or she would have been had no blood been spilled, even if the injury is minor (Beidelman, 1963). In another arena, both Jews and Muslims may eat meat only from animals killed by religious specialists who can control and bless the spilt blood of the animal as it is slaughtered (Fredman, 1981, 62).

Where blood is seen as a potent fluid whose alienation is dreaded, one may find vampire rumors flourishing at appropriate historical moments. In east and central Africa, such rumors circulated during colonial times (White, 1992). Inevitably, the vampires were said to be Europeans, and the victims, Africans. Colonialism, one might say, was sucking the life-blood out of Africa.

The metaphoric power of blood is also evident in its role in sacrifice. Throughout Africa, for instance, domestic animals such as chickens are sacrificed to deities and ancestors (de Heusch, 1985), with the blood often drizzled over an altar (Zahan, 1979).

In other religious traditions, the literal sacrifice of blood has been replaced by offerings now meant to symbolize blood, such as red wine in the Christian ritual of the Eucharist (Douglas, 1970)--although even here, the doctrine of 'transubstantiation' avers that the wine transforms by MAGIC into the blood of the deity, Jesus Christ, once drunk by a parishioner (Feeley-Harnik, 1981).

What passes for blood is not immediately obvious to those from alien cultural traditions. For example, in many Bantu-speaking societies in southern Africa, both women and men are said to possess their own form of reproductive blood: menstrual blood and sperm, respectively (e.g. Taylor, 1988). In many languages throughout Africa, the word for 'semen' is actually the same as that for 'blood' (e.g., Héritier, 1982, 172). In the womb, both bloods are thought to 'mix' (e.g. Richards, 1982, 34), but a miscarriage is said to be caused by the female blood defeating the male blood (Kuper, 1982).

A somewhat similar conceptual system exists in Jamaica, where it is thought that both men and women have red and white blood, although only white blood--combined from both sexual partners--leads to conception (Sobo, 1993, 56). Elsewhere, including many societies in Melanesia (Knauff 1989), it is said that a fetus receives its blood from one parent only (more often the mother), with the rest of the body (especially, the bones) seen as coming exclusively from the other parent. In all these variations on a theme, sex and blood are intertwined as metaphorical sources for a philosophically based understanding of human society; as with Euro-Westerners' discourse on kin as being 'of one blood', there is a symbolic conception of the substance of blood at work.

The operation of blood and blood-related diseases is frequently subject to cultural manipulation. In societies as distant as Haiti, Wales, and the Ojibwa of Canada, individuals may have culturally specific notions, for example, of the value of a copious vs. a scanty flow of blood during MENSTRUATION (Skultans, 1988), the role of blood

in spoiling a nursing mother's milk (Farmer, 1988), or the causes of high blood pressure (Garro, 1988). In Japan, a well-developed classical ideology concerning the role of blood in regulating the body's four humors was the basis of cures for assorted illnesses (Picone, 1989).

Further evidence of the symbolic potency of human blood is in the creation of blood pacts or covenants. While making cuts, blood partners generally swear oaths or utter prayers to pledge mutual allegiance; they might also lick each other's wounds (Paulme, 1973, 75). If one later violates the pact, it may be thought that the partner's blood will automatically take vengeance (Evans-Pritchard, 1962). Similarly, when one dies, the blood partners may still be mystically joined (Beidelman, 1963, 328). In many places in the Third World, local colonial powers and, more recently, newly independent governments have exerted pressure to abolish such pacts. Where they are still executed, however, it must be noted that if both partners share a knife in making their cuts, the custom may bear medical risks, including, nowadays, transmission of the HIV virus.

Menstrual blood is different from venous blood not only biologically (it is incapable of clotting) but also culturally: it is frequently seen as potent and endowed with mystical properties, whether positive, negative, or both (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988). Thus it must be disposed of privately--others are frequently forbidden to see or touch it (hence the common TABOO against menstrual sex). However, precisely because it is considered powerful, menstrual blood may be used for certain purposes, from witchcraft to love potions.

Popular ideas about blood in contemporary North America are as well developed as they are anywhere--although, because they are couched in an idiom of (folk) biology,

they may appear to be more transparent than ideas that, to Western sensibilities, are more obviously 'symbolic'. Yet what passes for 'common sense' in one cultural setting may be anything but common elsewhere (Geertz, 1983). For example, in the U.S., it is widely accepted that 'blood' relationships--which essentially index biogenetic connections--are more 'real' than other relationships, hence they are permanent--as Schneider puts it (1968, 24), one can have an ex-husband but not an ex-mother. Consequently, adoption is frequently resisted by infertile couples; if they are financially able, they may opt for expensive technologies to create a fetus that is related genetically to at least one of the parents and/or that may be carried for at least most of the pregnancy in the mother's womb, thus creating, via scientific manipulation, what is commonly accepted as a 'blood' tie (Strathern 1992). The potential legal battles that may attend such procedures as 'surrogate motherhood' (Ragoné 1994) and in vitro fertilization have not dampened the enthusiasm for the available techniques, which have, on the contrary, become increasingly popular. Ideas about the nature of blood can have more sinister consequences. In medieval Europe, Jews were persecuted by Christians who accused them of murdering Christian children to use their blood in making matzohs (Dundes, 1991, 337). The persistence of blood feuds in portions of eastern Europe (Boehm, 1984) has had devastating repercussions in recent years. Likewise, one need only think of the 'miscegenation' laws in a variety of countries, including South Africa and many states in the the U.S., and the rhetoric of 'racial purity' aired continuously in Hitler's Germany--and 'ethnic purity' aired even today in Croatia--to realize the potential danger of thinking about humans in terms of 'blood' ties.

In short, blood is a bodily substance that has acquired extraordinary cultural elaboration. Its meanings go well beyond those derived from serology and straight to the

heart of deeply held assumptions that are, nonetheless, quite variable cross-culturally concerning the nature of FAMILY and ethnic identity (see also COLORS, CONSANGUINE/ CONSANGUINITY, FICTIVE KINSHIP, INCEST TABOO, KINSHIP/KINSHIP SYSTEMS, MAGIC, MENSTRUATION, SACRIFICE, SYMBOL/SYMBOLISM, TABOO).

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**Glossary entries:**

**blood pact:** an oath taken by two or more individuals who swear mutual loyalty usually on pain of death, after exchanging blood with one another through cuts made on each of their bodies (also called **blood covenant**)

**blood brother(hood):** a somewhat misleading term for a **blood pact** or **blood covenant** (the partners may or may not be considered 'brothers')