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Female blood ties: ideas on menstruation and female initiation rites in the context of purity in Zambia

Introduction

Since Mary Douglas' work on *Purity and Danger* (1966),[1] many scholars have been interested in concepts of purity, pollution, taboos and the danger associated with impurity and trespassing taboos. In the past three decades, there has been more attention to ideas of purity, particularly in relationship to the female body and female blood. Female scholars from various disciplines have examined concepts of blood and purity, especially those of the ancient Greeks up to 20th century Europe, in Judaism, in the biblical literature and in the Roman Catholic tradition.[2]

These studies show that, even though cultural concepts of purity, pollution and taboos seem to be fixed, they have changed during the course of history and vary according to different cultures. Yet anthropological literature about female blood often claim that in many cultures menstruation is associated with impurity, pollution,

1 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London-New York, Routledge, 1966.

2 See for instance Thomas Buckley, Alma Gottlieb, *Blood Magic. The Anthropology of Menstruation*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988; Leonie Archer, *Bound by Blood. Circumcision and Menstrual Taboo in Post-Exilic Judaism*, in Janet Martin Soskice (ed.), *After Eve: Women, Theology and the Christian Tradition*, London, Marshal Pickering, Collins Publishing Group, 1990, pp. 38-61; Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body. A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*, Buckingham, Open University Press-Milton Keynes,1993; Kristin De Troyer, Judith A. Herbert, Judith Ann Johnson, Anne-Marie Korte, *Wholly Women, Holy Blood. A Feminist Critique of Purity and Impurity*, Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 2003.

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contamination, fear and danger, and therefore menstruation is surrounded by certain taboos.

In Zambia, too, menstruation is surrounded by taboos, as is taught during female initiation rites, the main institute in which girls learn about these issues. However, these ideas and taboos are not only associated with concepts of impurity or contamination, but merely with inclusion as "pure" or "real" women. This is on a bodily, sociological and spiritual level.

This article focusses on female initiation rites and the perception of female blood in the matrilineal society of Zambia, predominantly among the Bemba. It discusses concepts of purity and cultural (dis) order. As I lived in Zambia for over twenty years, I observed how these ideas have changed in the past decade or two. The article will show these changes due to Western influences. It will show that mixing western and Zambian concepts of purity and pollution may lead to cultural disorder.

Methodology

This article is based on my long durée ethnographic fieldwork (1992-2016) in Zambia, during which I conducted many in-depth interviews with working class women and women at the grassroots, with young adolescents, and to a lesser extent with men, and had discussions and informal talks with them. Observations were made while taking part in women's daily activities during their work in the agricultural fields, cooking, performing household chores, attending rituals surrounding birth and death, attending parties, and during the preparation and performance of all stages of female initiation rites and wedding ceremonies. Fieldwork was conducted mainly in the urban Copperbelt, but also in the villages in Northern and Muchinga Provinces as well as in the capital Lusaka. In addition, I conducted a study of anthropological and historical literature on Zambia, with the focus on the Bemba.

The Bemba are one of the largest ethnic groups in Zambia, originally living in Zambia's Northern and Muchinga Provinces. Since the development of the copper mines in the 1930s, they moved to the Copperbelt Province and later to other parts of Zambia. The population of the urban Copperbelt consists of people from all ethnic groups in Zambia, but the Bemba are the largest and most dominant ethnic group in the Copperbelt towns.

Concepts of purity and taboo

Mary Douglas (1966) developed the concepts of purity, contamination and the danger associated with uncleanliness. She showed that these concepts are related to order in a specific society, the elements of order and those that create order from inside the knowable. Contamination, illness and disorder would occur when taboos are trespassed.[3] Taboo has a predominantly psychological function, originating from the fear of that which people do not understand. As a result, taboos imprint fear and respect for the supernatural, sustaining awesomeness of the supernatural. This goes with reinforcement and sanctions, such as punishments for trespassing or neglecting certain taboos.

Pollution ideas work in society at an instrumental level, meaning that people try to influence one another's behaviour. Beliefs reinforce social pressure, which may be done by referring to universal powers.

At an expressive level, the ideal order in society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors, or, in certain cases, the young and innocent. The one who pollutes is always the one who is wrong.[4] So, moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion, particularly by trespassing taboos.

Pollution beliefs also have symbolic meaning. This is a more interesting level at which pollution ideas relate to social life. Some of these ideas are used to express a general view of the social order. For instance, in many societies sexual intercourse and sexual fluids are considered polluting and dangerous. Yet, even though there might be some truth in contamination through sexual acts (for instance by the HIV-virus), it also reveals a lot about the differences and hierarchical relationships between the sexes.

Ideas about purity are compounded care for hygiene and respect for convention.[5] The rules of hygiene change, of course, with the knowledge of hygiene and contamination. Also, concepts of purity and taboo are related to boundaries, as taboo is also a mechanism to classify and separate certain groups, such as ethnic groups, social classes, and the sexes. Most societies emphasize the need to maintain boundaries of all kinds, including those sexual relationships that cut across the internal and external boundaries of their group or organi-

3 Cf. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001 [1912].

4 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p.113.

5 Ibidem, p. 7.

zation.[6] Passing boundaries is therefore dangerous.

Both Douglas and Durkheim stated that ideas about purity and contamination stem from or are intertwined with religious ideas. They claimed that religions are inspired by fear and that they at the same time, are inextricably confused with defilement and hygiene.

Religious ideas have been influenced by medical materialism. Religion and rites have a sound hygienic basis, no matter whether this basis on hygiene is actually correct. It may be true that there is a correlation between the avoidance of contagious disease and ritual avoidance as the dominant schemas for explaining illness in Western culture are contagion and vulnerability.[7] Contagion occurs due to an alien biological form entering the body; it may occur in conjunction with vulnerability. Both contagion and vulnerability seem value-neutral, but in fact they may be seen as self-induced, the consequence of carelessness or over-indulgence, which brings in a moral element.[8] Therefore, particularly in non-Western societies, illness is associated with the imbalance between the body and the social environment.

Thus, we should look at religious concepts in order to explain ideas about purity, contamination and the dangers associated with contamination and dirt. By equating hygiene with dirt in general, dirt becomes essentially comparable with, and represents, disorder.

Following this concept, the elimination of dirt is not a negative act but a positive effort to organise the environment, and to create order. The reordering of the environment is a creative act, a unifying experience in which the purification of society is done conform their ideas.[9]

Pollution, menstruation and purity rituals in religious contexts

Archer showed that central to the connotation of uncleanliness of menstruation and child birth is the flow of blood.[10] Archer clarifies that there is a different connotation about blood through genders, female blood is often seen as negative, dirt, pollution while

6 Christie Davies, *Sexual taboos and social boundaries*, «American Journal of Sociology», 1982, vol. 87, n. 5, pp. 1032-1063.

7 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 29.

8 Helen Haste, *The Sexual Metaphor*, Hertfordshire, Harvester Weatsheaf, 1993, p. 40.

9 Douglas *Purity and Danger*, p. 2.

10 Archer, *Bound by Blood*.

male blood is considered more positive. This is partly related to the dichotomy nature-culture; the idea that menstrual blood and childbirth are related to the functioning of nature, while male blood (i.e. shed in male circumcision), is related to culture, and therefore superior.[11]

The dichotomy culture–nature is based upon the idea that every society recognises a distinction between nature and culture, expressed by rituals representing culture's need to regulate and control the passive functioning of nature– while nature of course is a construct of culture.[12] Women are associated with nature due to their bodily aspects (or cultural concepts of), menstruation and childrearing, while men are associated with culture, due to their lack of these bodily aspects and their political and public roles.

Ritual tends to increase, intensify and shift focus in times of crisis.[13] In particular, when the body politic is threatened, it is common that increased attention is paid to purity, integrity and unity of the physical body. In addition, ritual reflects the anxiety of society and also expresses the ordering of society in all its aspects and complexity, and may be viewed as marking the human endeavour to transcend the world of nature.[14] The distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purpose.

Thus, culture at some level of awareness asserts itself to be both distinct from and superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness rests precisely on the ability to transform, or to socialise –or culturalise– nature, that is; to be active and in control. Within this scheme of thought anything that cannot be controlled is considered dangerous.

As pollution may be caused by secretion from various bodily orifices, it is believed that this is particularly so for menstruation and childbirth that follows a passive and unstoppable cycle, and is therefore considered dangerous, and needs to be controlled by cultural regulation. In this thought, women or female bodies for that matter, are considered to be in the realm of nature because most of their body activities are seen to be evolved around the processes of reproduction. Men, on the other hand, are in the realm of culture, so they lack such natural and visible creative functions. Therefore, they

11 Ibidem, p. 31.
12 Ibidem, p. 40.
13 Ibidem, p. 51, see also Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.
14 Archer, *Bound by Blood*, p. 51.

are bound to assert their creativity in technology, politics, ritual and symbol.

Female religions and purity rituals

Sered differentiated "female religions" from the more common, male dominated religions.[15] Female religions are related to matrilinity or matrifocality, and characterized by women's autonomy. They exist in societies in which women have a relatively high degree of personal, social, economic or political power and that often have clearly separate male and female spheres. So, women's religions usually occur in societies in which women control important resources, in which mothers are central and in which kinship is matrilineal.[16] Sered shows that in societies in which kinship ties centre on mothers, women/mothers often also have powerful roles in religious activity. In female-dominated religions motherhood comes to the fore from the perspective of mothers, meaning from a women-centered point of view. This is a crucial position of motherhood. In matrilineal societies social ties mainly consist of family and kinship relations.

Concerning rituals around "female blood", major differences exist between male-dominated and female-dominated religions.[17] This becomes clear by examining rituals related to menstruation. Whereas in women's religions female bodies are not seen as particularly polluted or polluting and no "purifying" rituals are required in the case of menstruation and childbirth, in most male-dominated religions ideas concerning menstrual and childbirth pollution are widespread and are often explicitly used to explain women's "otherness". This often results in the exclusion of women from religious places and from religious practices like prayer or becoming priests(esses). Menstrual and childbirth taboos in male-dominated religions are obviously defined from a male's perspective. For example, a woman's children or her parents are rarely considered to be affected by her menstruation. This does not mean that menstrual and childbirth taboos are totally absent from women's religions. However, in women's religions the social and physical separation that these taboos entail does not seem to underline women's "otherness" but merely

15 Susan Starr Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister. Religions dominated by women*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.

16 Ibidem.

17 Ibidem.

expresses the empowering and spiritual aspects of menstruation and childbirth.

In western societies and male-dominated religions, women are confronted with the boundaries of physical existence which have a profound, religious meaning.[18] With the rise of women's studies in anthropology and theology new approaches in the study of ritual occurred. Feminist theologians sought ways to reclaim and to create women-centred rituals.[19] Their rituals focus on the menarche and menstruation, and occasionally particularly attention is paid to rituals concerning the "purification" of menstruating women and women in childbirth. Purity rituals for women entail gendered symbolic meaning.[20] They contrast with the marginalization of women in almost all religions worldwide, and in male dominated societies. In new rituals as promoted by feminist theologians the pain and dismay that may accompany the (re)presentation of a "female body" are recognized, as well as the historical awareness that sacrificing their own bodies have been common reactions of women confronted with the normative image of their "uncontrollable" corporeality in the sense of menstruation, pregnancy, parturition and miscarriage that has marked the lives of so many women.[21] In addition, in male dominated, Western cultures, women are seen as passive and without autonomous sexuality. Feminist theories share the view that reclaiming female sexuality is part of authenticity and self-determination.[22]

The attention for menstruation among women's studies and feminist theologians is probably because in Western culture menstruation is (still) considered an anomaly: a state to conceal and not to be associated with, as is commonly demonstrated in the media and advertisements.

This is particularly so for middle class women, who consider menstruation a hassle, not so much in the private sphere at home, but merely at work, where it is awesome to hide it or change pads.

18 Archer, *Bound by Blood*.

19 Cf. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church. Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities*, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1985; Archer, *Bound by Blood*; Haste, *The Sexual Metaphor*; Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister*; Anne-Marie Korte, *Female Blood Rituals: Cultural-anthropological findings and feminist-theological reflections*, in Kristin De Troyer, Judith A. Herbert, Judith Ann Johnson, Anne-Marie Korte (eds), *Wholly Women, Holy Blood: A feminist critique of purity and impurity*, Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 2003, pp. 181-206.

20 Korte, *Female Blood Rituals*.

21 Ibidem.

22 Haste, *The Sexual Metaphor*.

They consider menstruation merely in medical terms, as a "failed pregnancy". By contrast, working class women consider it more as "women's experience of the world", while using this anomalous experience as the basis for common action by sharing its grief, exchanging pads and knowledge, and using the private spaces provided at work for refuge or rebellion.[23] Whichever way it may be seen, menstruation sets women apart, even in secularized countries. It forms the physical fact that marks persons as women.[24]

Thus, in male centered societies, a revaluation of women's corporeality and (the invention of) rituals on menstruation from a women-centered point of view is emphasized, as in these societies menstruation is associated with defilement and secrecy, based on male centered, Christian views and moral taboos concerning the presence and presentation of women's corporeality.[25]

In female centered societies, however, rituals surrounding menstruation are fully embedded in the socio-religious context, while menstruation and femininity have a much more positive connotation. This becomes clear when examining female initiation rites among the matrilineal Bemba, which will be the topic of the remaining part of this article.

Women's cultural and religious position in Bemba society

As rituals should be seen in the socio-religious context of a certain society, I will first depict Bemba cultural context, including concepts of purity and contamination, and women's socio- religious position in a historic perspective.

Like almost all ethnic groups in Central Africa, the Bemba have a matrilineal social system, and up to the 1940s, an uxorilocal setting. Sisters and mothers were more important than wives for men. The legal and ritual relationship between brothers and sisters was an important aspect of matrilineal descent.[26] In Bemba traditional religion and culture women had a central position.[27] It may be consid-

23 Martin, *The Woman in the Body*.

24 Korte, *Female Blood Rituals*.

25 Ibidem.

26 Audrey Richards, *The Political System of the Bemba Tribe - North Eastern Rhodesia*, in Meyer Fortes, Edward Evan Pritchard (eds), *African Political Systems*, Pub. for the International Institute of African Languages & Cultures by the Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1940, pp. 83-120.

27 Hugo Hinfelaar, *Religious Change among Bemba-speaking Women of Zambia*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of London, 1989; Thera Rasing, *Passing on the Rites of*

ered a "female religion" in Sered's terms[28] as it is a women-centered religion, embedded in a matrilinear and matrifocal culture in which women had autonomy.

In Bemba socio-religious system, as well as in that of the wider central African area, sexuality, procreation and motherhood were and are still central. Sex is a pleasure, to be enjoyed by both men and women, but merely within a legal bond between husband and wife. Female sexuality, meaning from a female perspective, is based on equality and on desire of both men and women.[29] At a young age, children are taught to prepare their bodies for sexual pleasure. At about the age of eight years, girls are taught to enlarge their labia. The stretching of the labia, a custom that is found all over South Central Africa, enhances pleasure during the sexual act for both husband and wife and facilitates the delivery of a child. Young girls in their initiation rite are taught about sexual pleasure for herself and for her future husband, and to take the lead in starting a sexual relationship, as well as starting sexual intercourse. This claim on female sexuality is a claim on the essence of womanhood. Yet, sexuality is surrounded by rituals and taboos. These are to be followed in the social world, while trespassing them will be sanctioned both by the community and the spiritual world.

The importance of female sexuality is emphasized because it was believed that a child was entirely formed from the physical contribution of the woman and only needs sperm to grow, so men nurture the unborn child by frequent intercourse.[30] Also, the spirit of the maternal ancestor was thought to quicken the growth of the child in its mother's womb. The father had limited rights over his children, as children belong(ed) to the mother's matriliny.

Access to parenthood and to the ancestors was through the

Passage. Girls' initiation rites in the context of an urban Roman Catholic community, London-Leiden, Avebury-African Studies Centre, 1995; Eadem *The Bush Burnt, the Stones Remain. Female initiation rites in urban Zambia*, Leiden, African Studies Centre, Munster-Hamburg, Lit Verlag, 2001.

28 Sered, *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister*.

29 Thera Rasing, *Sex in Times of HIV/AIDS: Ideas on sexuality and gender in Zambia*, paper presented at the AEGIS biannual Conference, panel on Sexuality in Times of AIDS, Leiden, The Netherlands, 11-14 July 2007; Eadem. *We Enjoy Having Sex: Sexual rights and pleasure among adolescent girls and boys in Zambia*, paper presented at the ECAS conference Paris, 8-10 July 2015.

30 Audrey Richards, *Chisungu: A girls' initiation ceremony among the Bemba of Northern Zambia*, London, Faber and Faber, 1956, p. 148; Thera Rasing, *Female Initiation Rites as Part of Gendered Bemba Religion and Culture. Transformations in women's empowerment*, https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/zssj/, 2021, vol, 7, n. 2, p. 61.

woman; a man could gain access to the divine ancestors through sexual intercourse with his legal wife. Individual perfection could only be reached by unity with the legal spouse. One had to strive after perfect harmony (Bemba: *ukumfwana*) within the marital structures in an uxorilocal village. The ideal of perfection, purity or wholeness (Bemba: *butuntulu*) was symbolized by the bored stone used by women as an agricultural tool and by beads called *bulungu*, divinity, which women wore around their waist. The perfect state of the village based on matrilineal structures was seen as the husbands inside the men's house surrounded by their wives in the home. This was the popular image of marital union.

The woman was the maker of the domestic shrine. She taught her husband to use the clay of a specific termite hill to construct a house. The circular home was the symbol of the woman's womb. The Bemba word *lushinga* refers both to the band of twigs that held the roof together and to the string of beads around the woman's waist. The woman's task was to finish the house by whitewashing the inner walls and the floor. Every month after her menstrual period a woman smeared the walls with new clay, which denoted a symbolical relation between soil and menstrual blood. It revealed a relationship between the purifying connotations of her menstruation and the cleaning of her house. After this a woman constructed the family hearth.[31]

Each house was considered a shrine, where the ancestral spirits of the couple living there were supposed to linger. The *imipashi* (ancestral spirits) were addressed at events such as birth, marriage, illness or death of a family member.[32]

Women were in charge of the territorial cult and the home shrine, and were therefore called *cibinda wa nganda* (creators of the house). They officiated at all religious services that took place in the home.[33] *Cibinda* had religious connotations and was related to Lesa, the high God, who is both male and female, but predominantly female. *Cibinda* was also the person who invoked the ancestors. In the home shrine the woman had to light the fire, which had to be started by friction and not be taken from a public fire, as this could be polluted.

The woman was considered the main celebrant of marital

31 Richards, *Chisungu*; Hinfelaar, *Religious Change*; Rasing, *Passing on the Rites of Passage*.

32 Audrey Richards, *Land, Labour and Diet in Northern Rhodesia. An economic study of the Bemba tribe,* London, Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 357.

33 Hinfelaar, *Religious Change*, p. 7.

life and responsible for the proper performance of the rituals surrounding sexuality. During the day she kept the sacred fire burning. After sunset her husband had to approach her home with reverence.[34] To be granted the gift of new life by the ancestors, there had to be mutual understanding between husband and wife. This was achieved by a conversation to which the ancestors were believed to listen. It had to be ascertained that neither of them had been in touch with spirits alien to their legal marriage, for instance by adultery of one of the partners or after having seen or touched blood that was not theirs. If this was the case, the woman could refuse intercourse.[35]

A religious title for Bemba women was *kabumba wa mapepo*. *Kabumba* referred to the moulder, the potter, the creator. Lesa, the female high god, was called *kabumba* and was shaped by the women who created houses, pots and the clay figurines used in initiation rites. *Mapepo* is derived from the verb *ukupepa* which means to worship, to honour the spirits. The area of the religious duties of women was in the forest where the spirits were believed to linger, and extended from the woodlands to the village. The woman was supposed to take offerings to the family shrine to obtain health, well-being and life itself from the ancestors.

Her public position within the village community, with the men in the central men's house and herself near the domestic shrines in the houses around it, was that of a mediator between the living and the ancestral spirits.[36] Men in this matrilineal and uxorilocal society, where married couples settled in the village of the woman's mother, were thought to have little knowledge of the divinities and their territorial cult.

Specific women in the community had the religious role and responsibility to coax the gift of parental regeneration from the peripheral sphere of the forest into the security of the village. This woman was called *na-ci-mbusa.* The word *mbusa* was associated with the word *mboswa*, the guardian spirit.[37] The *nacimbusa* would guide the novice during the initiation rite that symbolized a difficult journey from the liminality of the forest into the warmth of the village. Also, in the past, when a young woman had to deliver her first child,

34 Ibidem.

35 Edouard Labreque, *Beliefs and Rituals of the Bemba and Neighbouring Tribes*, Ilondola (Zambia), Language Centre, 1934; Hinfelaar, *Religious Change*, p. 9.

36 Hinfelaar, *Religious Change*, p. 10.

37 Rasing, *Female Initiation Rites*, p. 61.

she was taken to the bush by the *nacimbusa* and some other women, to deliver under a tree in the realm of the spiritual world. This practice disappeared in the mid 20th century, due to western (medical) influences.

The *nacimbusa* had a high status and authority. She belonged to the original inhabitants of the land and knew everything concerning territorial rituals. She was in fact a chief (*mfumu*).[38] She wore a feather hat, *ngala*, a sign of her status. She was considered a priestess whose function was hereditary, from grandmother to grandchild, and was also a healer (*nganga*).

She selected a young woman who had shown great aptitude in grasping the deeper meanings of the *mbusa* to assist her on every occasion and eventually to receive knowledge about the sacred emblems and titles of her predecessor. The *nacimbusa* was the girl's councillor from the girl's menarche until well after she had given birth to several children. She was the diviner during the naming ceremony and was referred to in case of marital problems.[39] Another female function was that of the *nakalamba*, the senior mother. She was the first who met the girl at her menarche and assisted the *nacimbusa* during the girl's initiation rite. Both roles of *nacimbusa* and *nakalamba* are still important today.[40]

Bemba cultural concepts of purity and contamination

In Zambian cultures, including Bemba culture, concepts of purity are related to the interrelated concepts of blood, sex and fire.[41] This culminates in the ideas of heat/hot and cold. The status of hot and cold are potentially dangerous and should not be mixed. A menstruating woman is considered to be cold (or in the cold world). Therefore, menstruating women should not come near a fire nor cook. A person who just had sex is considered hot, and should be cleansed after the sexual act by a small ritual in which water from the marriage pot is poured over his/her hands or one's body. Also, the pouring of cold water on a woman's belly when her first pregnancy is shown is to release her from the dangerous heat of her body, as the heat may harm her and her unborn child.

A person who is hot is potentially dangerous for the community.

38 Richards, *Chisungu*.
39 Rasing, *Female Initiation Rites,* p. 61.
40 Ibidem, p. 63.
41 Richards, *Chisungu*.

Food[42] cooked by a person who is hot –not cleansed or purified– is considered to be contaminated. Eating contaminated food can cause illness. Such an illness especially falls upon innocent people such as young children, or an innocent person who has sex with his/her adulterous spouse, as s/he cannot be properly cleansed by the ritual of pouring water after the sexual act. Such an uncleansed person can also cause illness to the community. Some of these cultural ideas about contamination that have been common in Zambia for many centuries, came to be considered as superstition in the mid 20th century.

During the HIV/AIDS era, however, the contagious HIV virus has surrounded sexual desire with fear. During this era, cultural ideas that were looked upon with disbelief and doubts, were revalued, as fear for contamination became widespread in the communities again.

Bodily secretion can be polluted in certain cases, especially when they are mixed. This is particularly the case of adultery, as then the secretion is mixed with that of the spouse and an outside lover. This is even more dangerous when the wife is pregnant. It is a severe taboo for a husband to commit adultery when his wife is pregnant (*ncila*) as this may harm the unborn child, and may even result in its death.[43] It may cause such a difficult labour that also the wife dies.[44] When the wife commits adultery while she is pregnant, she is believed to die while pregnant or in childbirth (*ncentu*). *Ncentu* and *ncila* are related to the binary concepts of open/closed. It is believed that adultery "closes" the woman or the birth channel due to the anger of the ancestral spirits.

Menstrual blood was seen as purifying, and not considered to be polluted for the women herself. Yet, it is considered a taboo to see menstrual blood that is not one's own, as for others it might be dangerous. Menstruation in general is kept secret and not talked about.

42 Food is a resource that women control. In Zambia, food rituals are public, communal and abundant, and involve both the supernatural and natural domains. This is for instance shown at the *amatebeto*, as part of the wedding ceremony, in which the relatives of the bride show all the food that they are able to prepare to the groom's relatives.

43 During my fieldwork (1992-2016) it occasionally happened that a husband run away after the death of a new born child, for fear of being killed by the in-laws for allegedly having trespassed this taboo.

44 In the past, this was such a severe taboo that in such a case, the husband had to offer his sister by killing her, to equalise the loss of a female member of the family (see Labreque, *Beliefs and Rituals*).

Ancient female initiation rites chisungu

Among all ethnic groups in Zambia, including the Bemba, female initiation rites at the onset of menstruation have since long been the most important institution for a young girl to learn about (taboos around) menstruation and fertility, about sexual matters, the spiritual world, marriage, and womanhood. These rites have been performed since at least 3,000 years, as can be derived from the rock paintings that show figures that are similar to the clay figures used in initiation rites today.[45] In the distant past, the ancient rites were merely a series of lessons in religious education whereby the young woman was trained to be the main celebrant of marital life and the fertility cult.[46]

The Bemba word for initiation, *chisungu* (or *cisungu*) is derived from the verb *ukusunguka*, to be astonished, to be overwhelmed, to be surprised, or to be knocked down.[47] To have one's first menstruation, *ukuwilwa chisungu*, was celebrated as a miraculous, divine event, when the young girl received the gift of her sexuality from the ancestors. Performing an initiation rite for a girl is called *ukucindilwe chisungu*, meaning "to dance the *chisungu*", as dancing for someone is a way to show respect, as well as happiness.[48]

Hence, the menarche is a joyful happening for the girl, for her relatives and for the community, as it denotes her fertility, granted by the ancestors, while menstruation was also seen as a purification of the girl. It is associated with the sacredness of parenthood and blood ties. Child-bearing is important for the family and society, especially in the past while individuals could only survive as members of the group. But even today motherhood is central and mothers have a high status, so women's role as child bearers for the family and the community is very important. This has to be celebrated in a ritual at community level. In the distant past, another important female fertility ritual was performed at the girl's first pregnancy or at the delivery of her first child.[49] The meaning of these two rites would make

45 Benjamin Smith, *Zambia's Ancient Rock Art: The paintings of Kasama*, Livingstone, National Heritage Conservation Commission, 1998; Leslie Zubieta, *The Rock Art of Mwana wa Chencherere !! rock shelter, Malawi. A site-specific study of girls' initiation rock art*, Leiden, African Studies Centre, 2005.

46 Hinfelaar, *Religious Change*, p. 34.

47 Ibidem.

48 Rasing, *Female Initiation Rites*, p. 39.

49 Although the ritual at the first pregnancy has disappeared, there are still some traces of it, such as the throwing of cold water by the *nacimbusa* on the young

sense in matrilineal societies where the woman's value as a member of the clan was not determined by marriage but by the production of new clan members.

During the initiation rite the novice was taught to feel herself surrounded by the benevolent spirits. To be divine meant to imitate the feminine.[50] Menstruation was considered the sign of a woman's return to Lesa, the High God, and as a journey towards the cold fecundity of the ancestors. When menstruating, a woman moved away from social contacts in the village towards the liminality of the forest, the realm of the ancestors, where she received the gift of her fecundity.[51] Expressions for menstruation are *ukuya ku mpepo*, to go to the coldness, or being in a state of coldness (*ukuba ku mpepo*), to be on a mat or in a shelter (*ukuba mu butanda*) or fearing fire (*ukutina umulilo*). This was both symbolical and physical, as during their menstruation, women went to a rock shelter or the "menstruation hut" that was placed separate from the village, in the bush. This was a resting place for women, where they could feel themselves surrounded by spirits. Elderly women after menopause cooked for them. In this way menstruating women could avoid to come near a fire and to prevent contamination by cooked food. Although this custom has disappeared, still *mbusa* and songs referring to these shelters are shown and sung during the initiation rites I attended during my fieldwork.[52] Menstruation and birth are directly related to the boundaries between life and death. The womb is the site of transformation from death to life, and vice versa. Death can be seen as a return to the womb because the womb is the place of birth. Thomson calls this the "totemic cycle of birth and death".[53] Initiation rites symbolise the death of the child and its rebirth as an adult. Hence birth is

woman's belly when her pregnancy is shown (to remove the heat from her belly and protect the unborn child), giving her a bracelet with white beads to denote that the pregnancy is guided by a spirit, and dancing the *kasimba* dance.

50 Hinfelaar, *Religious Change*.

51 Ibidem, p. 5.

52 For instance several clay models are made that symbolise a shelter, and the song I recorded during my fieldwork: *Nakatangalaee, nakatangala pa butanda, mwana wandi munangani* (Sitting idle, sitting idle on the mat, my lazy child), referring to the resting period of women during their menstruation. However, the meaning of this song has changed, as my informants said this means that a woman should not be lazy. In addition, in Zambian society traces of this resting while menstruating can be seen by the Zambian labour law by which working women are entitled to have an extra day off every month.

53 George Thomson, *https://ericwedwards.wordpress.com/2013/09/04/notes-and-queries-totemic-cycle-of- birth-and-death/*2013.

death and death is birth.[54] This symbolises a unity of opposites, or complementary parts of a process.[55]

Since the 16th century, the performance and the meaning of initiation rites have gradually changed, due to changes in society. First, there was the overruling by the *bena ngandu* clan with their male chiefs. Even though many cultural concepts remained the same, political and religious positions were partly taken over by male chiefs. This somewhat affected initiation rites, even though the women continued to perform these rites in a similar way as before.

Also in the 16th century, contacts with Arab traders changed ideas on (female) sexuality and marriage, which shifted towards a mere male dominated union. However, these influences only slightly altered initiation rites and the matrilineal society. In the late 19th century, Christian missionaries from Europe came to Zambia, and tried to imprint Christian, European mores, in which male dominance was the norm. It was particularly from the 1930s onwards, that Christian missionaries tried to abolish initiation rites in their endeavour to change Bemba culture. In addition, the shift from the village to the urban centres that occurred since the 1930s in Zambia has made parts of these rites (in towns) obsolete. Due to these influences, the rites shifted and lost parts of their religious significance. For instance, the experience of *ukuwilwa ngulu*, to be visited by a spirit, as part of the female domain of the forest, acquired a more negative connotation. Also, in Christian cosmology, sexuality (*bufyashi*) was considered a hindrance to perfection.[56] Obviously, these socio-cultural changes affected the performance and meanings of initiation rites.

Initiation rites in the late 20th and early 21st century's socio-cultural context

In the 20th century, Christianity, western education, western bio-medical insight and urbanisation changed religious and cultural concepts, while society gradually shifted towards a society in which men obtained a higher status and marriage became more important. This reflects the performance of initiation rites. The religious meaning of the rites has almost disappeared, while only traces of

54 Cf. Arnold Van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage*, Paris, Librairie Critique Emile Nourry, 1909.

55 Cf. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1962; Rasing, *The Bush Burnt*.

56 Hinfelaar, *Religious Change*, p. 95.

the spiritual aspects can be seen. I attended several rites during the 1990s and early 2000, both in Bemba villages and in urban areas in the Copperbelt. Remarkably, the rites in the villages were performed in the same way as has been witnessed by Richards in the 1930s, but only published in 1956.[57] The rites in towns have been shortened, and slightly altered. Although there is some variation in these rites, they all have the same format and sequence.

Initiation rites starts at the onset of menstruation. At this day, a small ritual, *ukusolwele*, is performed, in which the girl is taken away from fire, and given herbal medicine to drink, while she is anointed with pounded bark of a female (*musungu*) tree, and is given an amulet to wear around her neck, to protect her, as she is in a liminal and therefore dangerous state. Also, the first menstrual blood is considered to make her vulnerable. The novice is separated from the village or community (the living world), to a room for about a week. During this week, and usually some weeks afterwards, she is taught about social norms, including those concerning menstruation and hygiene, sexual life and the spiritual world; hence all the knowledge she is supposed to know as an adult woman. These teachings are done by the *nacimbusa*, her assistant, and the girl's grandmother, in the presence of her paternal aunt.

Also, several other women attend the rite. The lessons are taught along with *mbusa*, clay objects that have several meanings, and accompanied by various songs. A part of the initiation rite is performed in the bush, the spiritual realm, where the girl is taught about agriculture, fertility, and the spiritual world. When returning to the village, the girl is cleansed with whitewash to denote that she is surrounded by spirits. The last stage of the initiation rite is when the girl can have a bath (as she is not allowed to bath during the weeks of the rite, as she is in a liminal stage), is dressed in new clothes and shown to the public as a new adult member of the community.[58]

The rite still shows the joyful event of the first menstruation, and the girl's important role as child bearer for the relatives and the community. The coming out symbolises that she has returned from the spiritual world to the living world, and has obtained knowledge about

57 Richards, *Chisungu*.

58 Rasing, *Passing on the Rites of Passage*; Eadem, *The Bush Burnt*; Eadem, *Urban Female Initiation Rites in Globalized Christian Zambia. An example of virtuality?* in Pius M. Mosima (ed.), *A Transcontinental Career. Essays in Honour of Wim van Binsbergen*, Hoofddorp, Shikanda Press, Papers in «Intercultural Philosophy and Transcontinental Comparative Studies», 2018, n. 24, pp. 137-174; Rasing, *Female Initiation Rites*.

cultural concepts of fertility and regeneration, as well as about social and sexual norms and behaviour as a proper adult woman. The teachings in the rite including the *mbusa* shown during the rites are considered secret, as they should only be known by initiated women.

The performance of these rites in a group of women brings different generations of women close together and creates a bond between women, as they all have gone through the same experience and share knowledge. It also displays the power and control of elderly women over the young women in the community and it shows the importance of the matriliny.

Initiation binds women more closely to one another than to their husbands.

However, the rite is much curtailed; in the 1990s it was usually performed for about six weeks, while currently among the Bemba it is usually performed for one or two weeks, while the part in the bush usually takes half a day. Many aspects have been omitted, as they are considered to be obsolete or meaningless. Girls are still taught about (taboos concerning) menstruation, its spiritual connotation, and to avoid to come near a fire. However, the taboo on fire now only concerns girls at their menarche. It is said that when menstruating, a woman can still cook, but not add salt to the food. Salt is considered to make the body hot, and to give sexual appetite, while it is taboo to have sex while menstruating. So, there are still some aspects of the hot/cold concepts, while some practical aspects concerning this have changed. At the turn of the century, initiation rites were even more curtailed. Usually, only the small *ukusolwele* ritual in which the girl is removed from fire and anointed with herbal medicine is performed, and during a week confinement the girl is taught about menstruation by the *nacimbusa* and sometimes one or two other women. The showing of the *mbusa* is now postponed to the wedding ceremony. Also, the lessons about sexuality have been shortened, and are sometimes omitted, while the girl is told not to have sex before marriage. There have been lots of discussions in Zambian society on whether girls should be taught about sex in the rites, as it is claimed that these lessons encourage girls to have sex. Yet, most girls already have sex before their initiation rite.[59] The lessons on sex are postponed to the wedding ceremony that has become a major event today, and much more important than in the (distant) past.[60]

59 Eadem, *The Bush Burnt*; Eadem, *We Enjoy Having Sex*.
60 Eadem, *The Bush Burnt.*

Although the major part of the wedding ceremony is performed for the bride only –as she is still considered the main celebrant of marital life– the emphasis is on the husband-and-wife relationship, while girls still learn about sexuality, menstruation, and taboos.[61] A part of the wedding ceremony is performed in the bush, where reference is made to spirits. While explaining the couple's purification ritual by pouring water from the marriage pot, I often heard women say that they don't do this anymore. This shows that the importance of menstruation and childbearing for the clan has shifted towards the importance of the marriage and nuclear family.

In addition, while initiation rites were a means for women to come together, and women consider it a rehearsal to see the *mbusa* and sing the songs of initiation again, as a way to celebrate their womanhood together, it has now (partly) lost this function. This function was particularly important for urban women, as in urban areas social relationships are rather lose and family ties are less than in rural settings.

Cultural disorder and impurity

In the past decades, Zambian/Bemba society and religion have changed rapidly. Western influences such as churches from various denominations, western education, the opening of Zambia to western economic markets and globalisation, media and various NGOs have promoted a western life style. Particularly Pentecostal churches and NGOs promote western values, and disapprove initiation rites. Zambians in general are open to these new ways of life, and especially youngsters accept modern ideas, while they consider others obsolete and old fashioned. Due to these western influences and rapid changes, socio-cultural and religious ideas about hygiene, sexuality, marriage and the spiritual world have changed. As a consequence, the meaning of initiation rites changed, while religious and spiritual aspects are left out. Initiation became seen merely as a way for girls to be taught about sex.

Subsequently, female initiation rites have been curtailed in the past decades and are (almost) disappearing in certain areas.

As a result, girls lack cultural and sexual norms that are taught in the initiation rites, and lack cultural knowledge about hygiene

61 Eadem, *Passing on the Rites of Passage*; Eadem, *The Bush Burnt*; Eadem, *Female Initiation Rites.*

and proper dealing with menstrual blood and its socio- cultural and religious meaning. In addition, the idea of purity and perfection of marriage as a way to get access to the ancestors has disappeared.

Youngsters receive different types of information; at school and the (social) media they get western type of information, while at home and during the curtailed initiation rites they learn 'traditional' ideas, but less thoroughly than in the recent past. These "home discourses" are still more influential than the ones spread by the media and western NGOs.[62] However, the messages they receive are confusing. Many programs broadcast by the media, as well as at school, and proclaimed by NGOs, teach children and young adults about their rights, which are different from their cultural rights in Zambian society. For instance, while in the 1990s it was emphasized by young girls that they should say "no" to sex, today young girls claim they have the right to do what they want, including having sex.[63] Yet, in all focus group discussions I had with youngsters, they indicated that they lack proper information about sex, and they do not know who to believe or where to get proper and useful information from.[64] These changed ideas and lack of indigenous knowledge, combined with western education and the raise of the marriage age, leads to multiple sexual relationships of youngsters. In order to avoid pregnancy, today young girls have sex while menstruating, thereby breaking the taboo that no one should see (menstrual) blood that is not theirs, as it is considered dangerous and contaminating for others. Even though sexual intercourse has always been common for girls at the age of about fifteen or sixteen –which used to be the age of marriage– now many unmarried girls at this age get pregnant. These pregnancies of young girls are usually initially considered unwanted and "bad", particularly by the girl's relatives, as such a girl has trespassed the socio-cultural norm of the first sexual intercourse that needs to be surrounded by ritual and taboo. The girls concerned have mixed feelings; it is rather shameful to be pregnant while unmarried, yet it is also a happy event to become a mother, as motherhood is still important in this society.[65] Although the female ancestral line is still

62 Heather Munachonga, *The School and Home Discourses on Sex and HIV/AIDS among Selected High School Girls in Zambia's Lusaka Urban,* Oslo, Oslo University College, 2009.

63 Rasing, *We Enjoy Having Sex*.

64 Eadem, *Traditional Initiation and its Impact on Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health in Western, North-Western and Luapula Provinces of Zambia***,** Report for UNFPA, 2014.

65 Cf. Signe Arnfred, *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa*, Uppsala, Almqvist and Wiksell Tryckeri AB, 2005.

central in Bemba culture, children born out of wedlock and sometimes not even knowing their father, results in loose family ties and unknown paternal ancestral ties.

Moreover, ideas about menstruation and menstrual blood are changing. Menstruation is no longer seen as a journey to the cold world of the ancestors and a purification of women, but, like all expressions of (female) sexuality, tends to become considered an anomaly. Even though the female blood line is still important, western ideas in which menstruation is seen as dirt, painful and a woman's burden, are becoming more prominent. This is especially so among young adult women and girls. Whereas in the past menstruation was not talked about and the menstrual cloths were secretly washed and dried, now discussion about menstrual pads that can be bought in shops are frequently heard.

Hence, the consequence is a mixture of Zambian and western ideas, in a culture that has changed rapidly, yet, where certain cultural ideas are still accepted by elderly people. This leads to disappointment, misunderstanding and clashes between young and old, parents and their children, chiefs and youngster who do not accept their authority, and husbands and wives who either expect the spouse to be more modern or more traditional. This results in disorder, defilement and contamination. Of course, a "pure" culture never exists, but the many different western influences – Christianity, western education, modernity, western media and globalisation, in a changed society where old ideas are disappearing, leads to lack of cultural knowledge about purity and contamination.

Conclusion

Contrary to western cultures, in which menstrual blood is associated with pollution and uncleanliness, in Zambian matrilineal society, female blood is connected to a large diversity of experiences. Menstrual blood is predominantly seen as the life giving force given by Lesa, the female God, through the ancestors. Blood is associated with life. A girl's menarche is therefore celebrated while the girl is honoured as a full member of society and a future mother.

Although menstruation is something that "happens" to women, Bemba women also see it as something that women do; an active state. By paying a lot of attention in initiation rites to explaining all aspects of menstruation –its meaning, fertility, biological aspects, the use of pads, the relationship with the spiritual world and the

importance of the matrilineal line– women share their experiences, feel important and connected. This provides women with a sense of wholeness and purity.

However, due to western influences, menstrual blood became looked upon more negatively, particularly by youngsters. It is no longer seen as uniquely positive, but it is also considered a burden at times. Yet, it is neither ignored nor marginalised, it is neither unclean nor clean.

Initiation ritecs emphasize a bond between women, or inclusion of women in the 'cult' of womanhood and motherhood, and specifically, in the ethnic group. At the same time, it emphasised a differentiation between men and women.

The disappearing of female initiation rites, and with it the knowledge about proper cultural norms on hygiene and taboos, combined with western ideas leads to a mixture of concepts on sexuality and menstrual blood, which results in uncertainty, confusion and cultural disorder.

Abstract: La maggior parte della letteratura antropologica sulle idee riguardanti le mestruazioni sostiene che in molte culture le mestruazioni siano associate a impurità, contaminazione, paura e pericolo, e che perciò vengano circondate da tabù. Anche in Zambia le mestruazioni sono circondate da tabù, come si insegna durante i riti di iniziazione femminile che costituiscono la principale istituzione in cui si istruiscono le ragazze su questi temi. Tali temi e tabù, tuttavia, sono associati non soltanto a concetti di impurità e contaminazione, ma anche alla loro semplice inclusione sociale in quanto donne 'pure' o 'vere'. Ciò a livello sia fisico sia sociologico. A livello spirituale, il sangue mestruale indica soprattutto rapporto con una linea ancestrale fisica e spirituale, donde l'inclusione nella linea ancestrale come pure nel gruppo etnico. Oggigiorno in Zambia i riti di iniziazione femminile stanno rapidamente scomparendo a causa dell'influenza delle culture occidentali. Questo fa sì che le ragazze siano prive di quella conoscenza delle mestruazioni che è ritenuta culturalmente indispensabile per le donne e che può venir impartita solo all'interno dei riti di iniziazione, mentre d'altro canto questo fatto porta anche a una esclusione sociale rispetto alle donne socialmente 'pure' o 'vere', e finisce per portare a un disordine sociale. Il presente articolo si propone di rivedere i concetti di purezza e (dis)ordine culturale, basandosi sulle idee correnti in Zambia circa i riti di iniziazione e le mestruazioni. Intendo dimostrare come la mescolanza di concetti europei e zambiani circa la purezza e la contaminazione possa condurre a un disordine culturale.

Most anthropological literature about ideas on menstruation claim that in many cultures menstruation is associated with impurity, pollution, contamination, fear and danger, and therefore menstruation is surrounded by a lot of taboos. In Zambia, too, menstruation is surrounded by taboos, as is taught during female initiation rites, which is the main institute in which girls learn about these issues. However, these ideas and taboos are not only associated with concepts of impurity or contamination, but merely with inclusion as "pure" or "real" women. This is both on a bodily

and sociological level. On a spiritual level, menstrual blood predominantly indicates relatedness to a spiritual and physical ancestral line, hence inclusion in the ancestral line as well as in an ethnic group. Today, in Zambia female initiation rites are disappearing rapidly due to western influences. This means that girls lack knowledge about menstruation that is culturally considered necessary for women which can only be given during initiation rites, while this also leads to social exclusion from the socially 'pure' or "real" women, and also leads to cultural disorder. This article will revise concepts of purity and cultural (dis)order, using ideas on female initiation rites and menstruation in Zambia. It will show that mixing western and Zambian concepts of purity and pollution may lead to cultural disorder.

Keywords: Riti di iniziazione femminile, mestruazione, sangue femminile, matrilinearità, maternità, religione, Zambia, bemba; female initiation rites, menstruation, female blood, matrilinity, motherhood, religion, Zambia, Bemba.

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