Becoming Clean: First Menstruation

Rituals in Southeast Asia

By Brennan Lennox

Human lives are filled with physical, mental, emotional, social and political changes. The ever-repeating sequence of birth, puberty, marriage, childbearing and death serve as milestones that in many Southeast Asian cultures are marked by rites of passage. By ritualizing such events a group of people can place significance on the event that allows for a change in status for the person experiencing a particular stage in life. Suad Joseph and Afsaneh Najmabadi, authors of the Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures: Family, body, sexuality and health, explained that, "Women undergo more ceremonies associated with bodily wastes than men. A woman’s body receives minute attention. As she grows up, reproduction and its cycles call for celebration and concealment," (32). This statement has become the motivation for the research presented in this paper. K.A. Narayan, D.K. Srinivasa, P.J. Pelto and S. Veerammal, authors of Puberty Rituals, Reproductive Knowledge and Health of Adolescent Schoolgirls in South India, explained the importance these rituals play in the health of young girls. According to them, "The events and experiences surrounding menarche can be a significant influence on young girls’ view of themselves, as well as on their understanding of reproductive health issues, and on appropriate behavior for hygienic management of menstruation," (Narayan et al., 226). It is, hopefully, universally understood that there is a significant difference between identifying a female’s onset of puberty than a male’s onset. It should also be mentioned that education about menstruation is not always discussed as being part of the rituals. Rather the ritual signifies that...
menstruation is a natural occurrence for females. Deborah Winslow, author of Rituals of First Menstruation in Sri Lanka, asserts that in Southeast Asian countries (such as Sri Lanka, India and Nepal) menarche has been tasked with being a sign of physical growth and maturity, increase social status as well as a sign for ready for marriage (605-607). With the amount of cultural significance placed on menarche, marking a variety of changes as indicated by Winslow, it becomes a point of curiosity that the ceremonies that celebrate these occasions are hidden from public view. In Southeast Asian countries the culturally constructed rituals surrounding the first menstruation serve the dual purpose of signifying that a girl has entered womanhood as well as encouraging the reinforcement of gendered ideology.

The rituals of first menstruation are culturally constructed performances of gender identification. This is easily visible in Sri Lanka where there are numerous religious belief systems all practicing similar rituals. Winslow wrote that, “No central authority or text defines the ritual. Members of the girl’s family, particularly older women, pool their knowledge and consult with respected advisers, working within the constraints of money, time and information,” (607). Male family members are seldom included in the process of planning, or enacting, the events. Winslow explained that many social anthropologists assume that these rituals are part of a “structured universe of social relations” to which most, if not all, Sri Lankan people can relate. These rituals possess very few notable differences that are likely not differences in social structure but rather representations of contrasting ideals of womanhood (604). The role of religion is minimal, while spirituality, that has been kept separate from religion, plays a much larger part. Without a prominent textual origin in a specific religion there is wonder as to where the rituals came from. Hannah Fane, author of The Female Element in Indian Culture, stated, “The predominance of the female elements in the religion of the Indus valley towards the female, maternal a energy which is pronounced ev (56). The worship of the divine times, but its cultural echoes st

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in the religion of the Indus valley suggests that worship was at first directed towards the female, maternal aspect of Deity. The veneration of female energy which is pronounced even in modern India is of pre-Aryan origin," (56). The worship of the divine feminine may not be common in modern times, but its cultural echoes still flow in the region.

While different groups may practice female puberty rituals differently, the rituals all contain certain stable elements that like them together as a cultural practice. Despite the religious, or ethnic, traditions of the group performing the ritual there are four elements that, to varying degrees, must occur. Winslow identifies these elements as isolation, ritual bathing, celebration and a return to normalcy (607). There is also mention of a special diet that is followed during menstruation that will be examined later.

The isolation of girls undergoing first menstruation is done for their own protection as well as for the safety of men. The isolation of the girls is seen as, "necessary to prevent attack by blood-hungry demons (yakshas)," (Winslow, 607). It is not completely clear, but the assumption is that isolating the girl from the outside world and leaving her in the company of other females protects the menstruating girl from the yakshas. If these demons found the young female they would cause her problems that would affect her future. Winslow explained, "All other males, including her father and grandfather, who lived in the house, were kept from seeing her. The killa (pollution), of first menstruation is said to be the strongest of all killa and particularly bad for men," (607). The idea of menstrual blood as a "pollution" is not exclusive to this group. In Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation several cultures believe that, "Menstrual blood is a particularly apt candidate for analysis in terms of this theory. As blood itself, menstrual discharge is 'out of place,' breaching the natural bounds of the body that normally contains it. All forms of human bloodshed may be coded as polluting
(...), but menstruation is generally found especially so," (Buckley & Gottlieb, 26).

As part of their confinement the transitioning girl is given a bland diet of unspiced vegetable curries. General dietary restrictions include no meat or fish, oil, coconut or foods that would increase the girl's body temperature as this is believed to attract yakshas (607). The menstruating girl is given a ritual bath on the third to fourth day after the onset of menarche. The elements of the bath tend to vary depending on the families income and interest in celebration details. The bath takes place by a well or a river. The girl is covered from head to toe and escorted by a female relative. In her article, Winslow recounted the following example of a more elaborate ritual bath,

"The redi nanda [washer woman] took along a branch of milky sap wood apple tree, some turmeric and sandalwood powder, two water pots, and a piece of cloth. With one pot, she scooped up water from a small hole made in the river edge, and strained it through the cloth from one pot to the other, the powders having been placed in the second pot. Chandra faced east, as prescribed, and looked at the milky sap branch (kiri gaha), a sign of fertility and cooling, as the redi nanda poured the pot of special water over her head and body. Then Chandra was covered up again and led back to the house, this time to the main entrance," (608).

The ritual bath places a strong emphasis on cleanliness. By cleanliness they are not just referring to the physical. Since the killa of first menstruation is the most powerful, and harmful to men, the girl must be thoroughly cleansed of it before returning to the home. The clothes, and cloths, used during the first cycle must also be sent to a special caste group for cleaning. The group that cleans them is supported with materials for ceremonies such as weddings and deaths," (Winslow, 609). This has significant. Winslow wrote, "The group that cleans the and the white cloths they provide the menstruating girl with, is the Sinhalese are 'sudu veneva', believed to keep the girl from harmful energies, or entitile her body to return to its normal that practice such rituals.

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For a month, "(Buckley & Gottlieb, 543) a bland diet is prescribed. Restrictions include no meat or alcohol, and the girl's body temperature as a means of tracking menstruation is given a ritual reading. The girl's body temperature, along with other elements of her life, such as income and interest in material possessions, is followed by her relatives. In her article, Winslow described an elaborate ritual bath, which took place along a branch of a river. The girl, along with a branch of turmeric and sandalwood, would soak cloth from one pot to the other, placed in the second pot, and looked at the milky fluid as a source of fertility and cooling, as the water was poured over her head. The process was repeated and led back to the entrance, "(608).

Purity is vital. By cleanliness they ensure that the materials for ceremonies such as, "births, first menstruations, weddings and deaths," (Winslow, 609). The fabrics for these rituals possess a cultural significance. Winslow wrote, "To make a ritual clean is their particular task and the white cloths they provide are both the fact of that task and its symbol. Appropriately, though perhaps only coincidentally, menstruation in colloquial Sinhalese is 'sudu veneva', becoming white or clean," (609). Culturally, purity from harmful energies, or entities, ranks high in importance for the women that practice such rituals.

The Branches symbolic meaning may originate in India. Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, author of The Female Ling--: Interchangeable Symbols and Paradoxical Associations of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, analyzed several common symbols in Hindu culture. Some of the symbols are echoed in the rituals of first menstruation in Sri Lanka. Ferro-Luzzi wrote, "Trees are widely venerated in India, both at the popular level of religion and in Sanskritic temples," (46). Depending on the viewpoint of the observer the tree can possess masculine or feminine associations. In the case of the ritual, "The latex of a tree is readily likened to milk in India and elsewhere (...), accounting for a female association of various species of 'milk-trees'," (Ferro-Luzzi, 46). A tree that is giving off "milk" would be seen as potentially echoing the idea of mother's milk which reinforces its place as a feminine fertility symbol.

The clay pots are symbolic in their own right. As with most object that are classified as "vessels" the symbolic thought leans almost exclusively to female association (Ferro-Luzzi, 49). The connection is, obviously, based on a physical representation of the womb. Ferro-Luzzi wrote, "As to pots, we have already met two instances demonstrating their dominant female association: the village goddess in the guise of a pot who is visited by..."
Siva in the guise of a sword and the chaste wives whose miraculous water pots break when they conceive by Siva, the peepal tree," (49). Since both representations of the vessel relate to conception the importance of this icon in the ritual is to further influence the girl's reproductive abilities.

For the return home the girl must still be completely covered. For many families, the girls simple re-enter the house and change into a new outfit before a family dinner/celebration (Winslow, 607-608). For families that choose to add the extra detail, before the girl enters the house she is presented with clay basin filled with water, a coconut, and a knife. After gazing into the water basin the girl is instructed to strike the coconut and, with one hit, break it in half. Winslow explained that the breaking of the coconut serves two distinct functions. First, it removes the negative energy from the girl and the house she is about to enter. Secondly, the coconut serves as a means of divination that predicts the girls "domestic future". Winslow stated, "both halves falling outside the house would mean marriage soon, inside would be late, and one in and one out, as occurred, neither extreme. Also, the female half (with the eyes) should not be too large or too small compared with the male half (with the tuft), but equal, so that neither husband nor wife will dominate the marriage," (608). After the coconut is broken and the future is predicted the girl enters the house, dons her new clothes, and celebrates the end of her first cycle before returning to her normal daily tasks.

While the groups that perform the rituals are culturally different the rituals themselves have more similarities than differences. Regardless of the methods and elements used in the rituals the primary connection between the rituals is the focus on girls, women, femaleness and womanhood (Winslow, 605). Young boys entering puberty are not celebrated the same way. In conjunction with the focus on femaleness is individualism of each ritual. Each ritual's individuality of the family, but to the girls the major similarity between these commencement of menstruation is social status. For this reason, girls not as members of a social set, physiological maturity do not correlate with the onset of menstruation would also be and self-identification as a woman a group of girls, that may not always development, the girl-specific nature of, for lack of a better term, specifically womanhood.

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The major differences in the ritual practices are within the Catholic and Muslim rituals. Catholics do not believe killa but the girl is still isolated. The isolation in this case is for the girls own protection rather than that of the men (Winslow, 610). While in isolation the girl is kept with an image of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin held the position of protector for the girl. It is also believed that the Virgin presides over the ceremony to help clean the girl (Winslow, 610). The Muslim ritual possesses a few more differences. Winslow describes the basics of a Muslim ritual. She Wrote,

"The minimal ritual for the Muslims consists of isolating the girl-to avoid the bad luck of seeing men-in the 'third room', a non-communicating room off the kitchen where grain is stored and traditionally women gave birth. The girl must be accompanied by a female person or brother, and a piece of iron or a broomstick kept nearby to ward off demons (pey, the Tamil equivalent of yaksha). She may be given
doses of oil for pain; have turmeric applied to her body for purification, cooling and to prevent future skin diseases; have her back poulticed with hot rice for strength; and be restricted to a diet of vegetables, milk, and eggs, without the meat and fish she would normally eat. When the flow stops, she is taken to the well and bathed by her mother, older sisters, and/or female cross-cousins, who use a mixture of water and turmeric,” (611).

In the Muslim tradition there are more precautions taken for the girls comfort. The basics of isolation and the ritual bath remain the same just with different surrounding beliefs. Throughout the research, there is a prominent connection between the first menstruation rituals and marriage. Specifically among the Muslim population it is seen as more favorable if the girl is married prior to the first menstruation or soon after (Winslow, 611). If there is no immediate plan for marriage the girl's family may choose to hide the fact that she is menstruating. This has become increasingly common with regards to girls staying in school and postponing marriage. Since marriage is losing its place as a primary goal the first menstruation ritual is being ignored by families (611-612). Winslow noted that some girls are still allowed to behave as they did when they were children because they would not be undergoing the ritual. By not partaking in the ritual these girls do not achieve “woman status as quickly as those that do. To be able to identify as a woman, and experience the shift in social status, one must acknowledge menarche and prepare for marriage.

At first glance, first menstruation rituals appear to be a celebration of life and a rite of passage. Upon deeper study it is seen that menarche is celebrated, but it is done privately. With male puberty not being seen as a subject of celebration, it can be peculiar that female puberty is celebrated with fear of demonic attack a Ritualizing menarche serves natural and not a sign of disportraying females as potenti menstural blood asserts that Asian countries the culturally menstruation serve the dual purify women for husbands the

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with fear of demonic attack and repeated notions of needing to be clean. Ritualizing menarche serves as an acknowledgement that menstruation is natural and not a sign of disease. However, the demonizing of blood and portraying females as potential victims of demon attack because of their menstrual blood asserts that this bodily function is dangerous. In Southeast Asian countries the culturally constructed rituals surrounding the first menstruation serve the dual purpose of signifying that a girl has entered womanhood as well as encouraging the reinforcement of gendered ideology. The ritual that seemed like a sign of social transition acts as a means to purify women for husbands that are either already present or forthcoming.

Works cited


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