

menstruating women touching the fires of nonmenstruating women emerges as part of a wider system that associates cold with fertility and heat with sterility.

Other anthropologists have previously noted a connection between culturally specific ideas about menstruation and fertility (compare p'Bitek 1966:99). For example, Novak (1916:273) writes of the Germanic countries that

the function of menstruation was commonly designated by some term equivalent to "flowers," indicating, perhaps, that it is a species of blossoming, with the possibility of bearing fruit. German peasant women, for example, according to Schurig, speak of menstruation as the "Rosencrantz," or rose wreath.

Despite such statements, anthropologists have repeatedly stressed the polluting power of menstrual blood rather than its potential as a symbol of fertility, or life. As the other chapters in this collection show, however, the specific meanings of menstruation in a given culture can by no means be presupposed, even in the presence of menstrual taboos. They can be determined only through sustained and particularistic analysis of the case at hand.

Source:

Buckley, T., Gottlieb, A., eds. / Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation, 1988, pg. 75-93.

### 3

## Mortal Flow: Menstruation in Turkish Village Society

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As an introduction to the taboo nature of menstruation in Turkish society, which is predominantly Muslim, I relate the history of my initial fieldwork goals. In order to conduct ethnographic research in Turkey a proposal outlining the topics to be investigated is required by the government. Before submitting my proposal I consulted with a Turkish colleague who advised me to omit the section on menstruation. Birth, circumcision, marriage, and kinship are recognizable and acceptable topics, but menstruation is unmentionable. He also suggested that some of the young unmarried men processing my permission to conduct research might not know what I was referring to. The veil of silence is drawn over the ethnographic literature on Turkey,<sup>1</sup> lifted only rarely to reveal that menstruation may be a reason for proscribing certain activities.

The official silence may be a result of specific cultural notions of propriety. But taboo, rather than repelling anthropologists, has generally attracted them. Their silence on this matter demands some explanation. That is not the purpose of this chapter; nevertheless I suspect this ethnographic silence is related to researchers' own perceptions of menstruation as a "natural"—that is, physiological—process having to do only with women and therefore not of significance culturally.

Yet despite the fact that it is a universal physiological process among women, perceptions, meanings, and practices related to menstruation are not universal. In order to under-

stand the meanings and practices of menstruation in a particular society, certain crucial questions need to be raised and answered: What is menstruation? How is it perceived? What is its function? Why do women menstruate? In other words, how is menstruation culturally defined, how is it viewed, what are the attitudes toward it? What is the cultural understanding of its function? This is related but not identical to reasons given for why women menstruate. Perhaps because the questions have seemed so obvious and the answers self-evident, they have rarely been asked. Yet the answers take one immediately to more general beliefs about the body, sexuality, and procreation. These in turn are inextricably intertwined with the set of cosmological beliefs about the nature of the world and the place of humankind in it (see Delaney 1987a for the relationship between theories of procreation and cosmology).

In Muslim Turkish village society, I suggest, menstruation is a fecund symbol for both condensing and expressing a complex set of notions about women, life, and the world. As an index of fertility, it heralds the possibility of life in "this world" (*bu dünya*), as seen in Islam. But earthly life, as the earth itself, is characterized by its mutability and susceptibility to corruption, decay, and death. Existence in this world is juxtaposed to that in the "other world" (*öbür dünya*), considered to be one's original home and the one to which all true Muslims will return.<sup>2</sup>

The other world is a potent reality to villagers, heightening the contrast to life in this world. In the other world there is said to be food and drink of an ambrosial sort. However, metabolic processes do not occur: the "body" is incorruptible and self-contained. As we shall see, that is the ideal image of the self, and it is associated with and can be approximated in this world only by men. Women, on the other hand, are associated with the physical and perishable aspects of life—that is, with corporeality.

Like Mary Douglas (1970), I believe that the body is a rich source of "natural symbols" that are, however, neither universal nor equally distributed between the sexes. But unlike

Douglas, I do not believe that the "body is a model which can stand for any bounded system" (1966:115); in Turkish village perception the female body is relatively unbounded—or, more accurately, the boundaries fluctuate, are diffuse and permeable. In other words, although both men and women have bodies, male and female bodies mean different things and are differentially associated with notions of corporeality.

In the other world, voluptuous pleasures for the satisfaction of men are believed to exist, but there is no sweat and no issue. Sex in the other world is recreational; in this world it is for the purpose of procreation. Indeed, procreation is what this world is all about. Procreation is felt to be an intimation of Creation and is the locus for the articulation of intimate and ultimate concerns. Contemplation of the process of procreation is felt to reveal the deeper meanings of gender and of the distinction between this world and the other world.

In cosmological perspective, menstruation pertains only to this world and is an ambivalent symbol. In both its positive and negative aspects, it represents carnal existence. Menstruation opens the way for the possibility of life in this world and is an apt symbol for the messy flux or mortal flow of life. Menstrual taboos, on the other hand, express the incomprehensibility of this world and the other world. Rather than an insignificant outpost on the cultural map, menstruation may well lead directly into some of its major arteries. This chapter is a preliminary attempt to chart some of these connections. My implicit aim is to argue for the central role of symbols as motivational factors in society (Geertz 1973). In the concluding remarks I contrast this approach with that of Mary Douglas as a contemporary representative of sociological determinism.

#### SETTING

The research on which this chapter is based was conducted from August 1980 through June 1982 in a central Anatolian village. There are more than 30,000 villages in Turkey, some extremely remote and isolated, others more or less so. Many

have been debilitated by emigration of men or families to urban centers or to Europe. In the village in which I worked, however, this is not the case. While there has been gradual migration to urban areas, no one has emigrated directly to Europe. A fair percentage of young people have married relatives or fellow villagers living outside the village, but more than half of the newlyweds have chosen to remain in the village. There are approximately 850 people evenly divided by sex and between adults and children, and all profess to be Sunni Muslims. The village is a viable one and survives by a combined economy of wheat cultivation and animal husbandry. Wheat provides the flour for bread, which is the most important ingredient in the village diet. The surplus is sold for profit. Sheep and goats are raised primarily for their wool and world-famous Angora hair, and to be sold as meat. Along with cows they provide villagers with occasional meat but are valued especially for their milk to be used in the form of yoghurt, butter, and cheese. Milk products form the second major component of the villagers' diet.

The village boasts both a primary and a middle school, although the latter is not well attended and very few girls are sent. In addition to about eight nonlocal but resident teachers there was, during my time in the village, a government-trained and appointed midwife. She has since left. Many villages are rarely visited by a doctor or midwife, others only occasionally; thus in the villagers' own estimation their village is a "modern" one. Nevertheless, in spite of her training, the midwife's knowledge about human physiology, the mechanics of reproduction, and the function of menstruation was not modern, if by that we mean scientific.<sup>3</sup> Her views did not differ significantly from those of the villagers. In any case, the educational function she performed or could perform was restricted to married women.

#### BELIEFS AND PRACTICES RELATING TO PUBERTY AND GENDER

Silence on the topic of menstruation is kept until a girl has begun to menstruate. While I cannot say with certainty that

this is true throughout village society in Turkey, or more generally in the Muslim world,<sup>4</sup> the few published sources do appear to confirm it. For example, Saadawi, an Egyptian physician, laments that "ignorance about the body and its functions in girls and women is considered a sign of honor and purity" (1980:45). She recalls her own shock at menarche. Thinking there was something terribly wrong with her, she took to her bed for several days before confiding in her mother. Similar reactions were recounted by village women. The response of Saadawi's mother led her "to understand that in me there was something degrading which appeared regularly in the form of this impure blood, and that it was something to be ashamed of, to hide from others" (1980:45). Especially it is to be hidden from men, including one's father and brothers, but even older sisters do not necessarily share information with their younger sisters. It is not a topic of conversation in mixed-sex groups, and if Turkish men speak about it among themselves, I do not know. What I do know of men's attitudes about menstruation comes partly from a few private conversations with men, but more generally from their elliptical remarks. Women, however, once they cross the threshold to womanhood, talk quite openly about "blood and babies" (Good 1980).

According to village women, and as confirmed by men, menstruation is believed to have been given to women because of Hawa's (Eve) act of disobedience against Allah in Cennet (Garden/Paradise). Her susceptibility to the persuasions of Satan that led her to eat the forbidden fruit is a sign of her moral weakness and thus provides the rationale for women's being under the protection of men. But there were more serious consequences.

Hawa's transgression against the command of Allah is also responsible for bringing *pisitlik* (dirtiness) into existence. Referred to here are the creaturely functions of defecation, urination, and sweating which characterize metabolic process and change but also transgress bodily boundaries. The "definition of dirt as matter out of place" (Douglas 1966:35) is apposite here since these functions contravene the ideal of the contained self.

In addition, women were singled out by menstruation, which contributes further to their closer identification with carnal existence. The closest physical ties, constituted by women's blood, are those that exist between siblings—those nurtured in the same womb by the same blood. As will become clear later, however, these physical bonds are superseded by the "spiritual" bond incorporated in seed (semen) which provides specific identity and transcends time. Blood, almost a universal symbol of life, is also in Turkish worldview a symbol of mortality, for the primary opposition is not between life and death but between earthly existence and that in the other world.

Procreation and birth are utilized symbolically in the conception of the "spiritual" birth for which this life is only a prelude. In Islam the end of life is conceived as a return to the beginning (compare Meier 1971), giving the impression that earthly life is not only an exile from the divine realm but is also only a temporary condition, as is life in the womb. At the same time, there is no concept of original sin in Islam, and children are considered sinless until puberty. Children who die before puberty are thought to go directly to Cennet. They have not yet reached the age of reason, which is why it is said one cannot reason with them. Sin begins to accumulate with the onset of puberty, described as the production of semen in boys and menstruation in girls. After puberty one is held accountable for one's sins. The attainment of reason—that is, the ability to distinguish right from wrong—is thus intimately related to the attainment of adult sexuality, signified by the production of different sexual substances. Consequently sin lies in the improper use of sexuality and the lack of understanding about the function and meaning of these substances.

Menstrual blood and semen are both powerful and potentially polluting substances (compare Dwyer 1978), and great care is taken to avoid contamination. They are different, however. By tracing the logic of the different ways they pollute and the rituals attached to them, a deeper understanding of sexuality and of the different nature of men and women is obtained.

Semen released in nocturnal emission is polluting, and a man must perform an *aptes* (ritual ablation) afterwards. Semen accumulated under the foreskin is felt to be extremely unclean and is the reason given that *sünnet* (circumcision) is performed at some time between the ages of seven and twelve, before the first seminal emission occurs. Yet if cleanliness were the only issue, there would be nothing to prevent *sünnet* being done at birth, but it is not. To experience and survive this ordeal is the first test of manliness (compare Erdentuğ 1959:40) and a matter of pride, for male pride is focused on the penis. This one-time, permanent operation renders a man invulnerable and self-contained, approximating the ideal of self.

Women, on the contrary, controvert this ideal and constitute a threat to the social order. Only in childhood and old age do women approximate the ideal. Between menarche and menopause women's bodily boundaries are periodically transgressed. The most general terms used to refer to menstruation express this periodicity: *adet* (habit, custom) or *aybaşı* (beginning of the moon or month). Because this periodic flow is not under her control, she cannot be self-contained. She is "naturally" open (*açık*). It is important to point out that "naturally" or "by nature" does not have quite the same sense in Turkish as it does in English. The Turkish word in this context is *yaratılış*, which, although translated as "nature" or "temperament," means "by creation" or "created nature." It is related to *Yaradan* (Creator) and *yaratmak* (to create). All created things have a divine purpose: they are created for the purpose of instruction. In this case the lesson to be learned is that women are created differently from men, and their differences reflect and express the order and ordering of Creation. The fact that a woman is not self-contained and self-controlled but is instead open is interpreted as a sign that she must be socially controlled and closed, or covered.

Neither *sünnet* nor its analogue for girls coincides with the actual physical event of puberty but rather marks the social recognition of its imminence (Van Gennep 1960); however, they are differentially marked. The honor and pride of male sexuality is revealed by the removal of a covering (foreskin),

whereas female sexuality must be hidden by covering. Like Saadawi, a Turkish girl learns that "the female body is an obscenity that must be carefully hidden" (1980:46).

Female genitals, unlike the male's, are not a source of pride but a reminder of her shame and are unmentionable. The meaning of female shame will be taken up later in the section on procreation, but I note here that it is because of this shame that the focus of attention of female sexuality is displaced from the genitals to the head.

Like flowers of the field, a young girl's hair grows freely, representing the rampant fertility, beauty, and seductiveness of the world, as well as the entanglements by which men are ensnared. Around the time of menarche, when a girl's sexuality ripens, it must be enclosed; it is not free for the plucking. The hair and the girl must be domesticated. At the end of primary school (when children are about twelve years old) a girl must put on the headscarf. The headscarf binds and covers her hair and symbolically binds her sexuality, which is henceforth under the cover of her father and brothers until stewardship is transferred to her husband upon marriage. The term used to describe a woman who wears the headscarf is *kapalı* ("closed," "covered"); an uncovered woman is referred to as *açık* ("open," "uncovered"). A woman who walks around *açık* is open to sexual advances from men. It is as if she were exhibiting her private parts in the open.

The uncontrolled mixing of the sexes, like the mixture of sexual fluids during intercourse, is felt to be *bulaşık*. *Bulaşık* means soiled, tainted, contagious, and is the word used to describe both dirty dishes and contagious diseases. The city (as well as Europe and America), in which this kind of mixing takes place, is considered *bulaşık*, unlike the village, which is *temiz* (clean). The village, where the sexes are relatively segregated, is clean because it is *kapalı*, as are its women.

Particularly, pubescent girls and boys before marriage are kept strictly apart. This applies even to brothers and sisters outside, but not inside, the home. Social intercourse between unmarried men and women is practically equivalent to sexual intercourse; however, the shame of dishonor falls mainly on

the woman. A woman's chastity is compromised by even a glance or casual conversation with an unrelated male. More serious, of course, is the loss of virginity to a man other than her husband, and absence of a hymen at marriage is reason for repudiation. Such repudiation is warranted not only because the bride has given to another man what it is the husband's right to possess but also because she is irreparably soiled by contact with another man's semen. Semen is a powerful and polluting substance that is mitigated only by marriage, but its polluting potential is different from that of menstrual blood. As we shall see, semen (seed) carries a person's essential identity. Since sex is said to take place inside the woman but outside the man, some indelible imprint is left within the woman during intercourse. After intercourse both partners should perform *aptes* (ritual ablution), but it is recognized that the *ciñtib* (ritual uncleanness) comes off the man more easily than the woman. No matter how careful she is, residues are bound to remain, leaving her permanently defiled.

That is why not only an unmarried girl is defiled by intercourse but a married woman who has intercourse with any man other than her husband is permanently defiled as well. Such a woman is considered *pis* (dirty, defiled). A series of miscarriages or the birth of a deformed child sometimes gives rise to the suspicion that the woman had been so defiled. A woman's sexual life is restricted to intercourse with one man unless she wishes to invite serious consequences; a man is not so restricted. Because a man is invulnerable, he is not susceptible to defilement by women, not even by a defiled woman (Engelbrektsson 1978:137).

While generally true, this statement must be qualified. A man can never be permanently defiled as a woman can, but he can be temporarily defiled by intercourse with a menstruating woman. Sexual intercourse is forbidden during menstruation:

They question thee (O Muhammed) concerning menstruation.  
Say: It is an illness, so let women alone at such times and go  
not unto them till they are cleansed. (Koran 2:222)

This directive is given to men, telling them how to view women. Menstruation is to be viewed as a female illness and as a powerful reminder of women's constitutional infirmity, rather than as a normal function. Menstrual blood, like other exudates, is unclean. It is *kirli* (soiled, blemished, canonically unclean) or *lekeli* (spotted, stained, dishonored) for it is believed to be saturated with impurities accumulated in the course of the month. What these impurities are is never specified.

When asked whether men have such constitutional impurities, the immediate response of both men and women is that they do not and therefore they have no need to rid themselves of them. Deeper inspection revealed a different view, however. A few men made reference to the fact that with age their blood becomes increasingly *zayıf* (weak, thin). Despite the fact that many women are anemic, the normative view is that women's blood is *gümrak* (rich, abundant, luxuriant) and *bol* (full), for it is periodically renewed and refreshed. Like all processes subject to taboos, menstruation arouses ambivalent attitudes and provides an intimation of an underlying contradiction in the system. In general the system of beliefs expresses the notion that menstruation is a sign of women's weakness, but implied in men's statements is a certain amount of jealousy at women's power of revitalization. Women are considered naturally—that is, by creation—physically stronger. This is exemplified by the practice of nursing boy babies longer than girls, for it is felt that boys are weaker at birth and need the additional sustenance. Women, because of their strength, are also expected to shoulder the heaviest burdens, to do the most backbreaking work in the fields, and to haul heavy containers of water from the fountain as well as huge bags of animal fodder, wood, and dung fuel. When visiting in town or city, women carry all the baggage. Indeed, it became clear that the weakness of women is to be understood in moral, not physical, terms.

Women appear to accept the view that menstruation is a sign of their moral weakness and susceptibility to sin, but they also consider it beneficial. It is a source of renewal that

leaves the *döl yatağı* (womb; lit. "seedbed") an immaculate ground or virgin soil for the reception of seed (*döl* or *tohum*).

### PROCREATION

The theory of procreation in the Turkish village (as in Western society until relatively recently) is monogenetic. *Tokum'dan* *şoçuk gelir*—the child comes from the seed. The woman is perceived as a *tarla* (field) in which the seed is planted.<sup>5</sup> "Women are given to you as fields, go therein and sow your seed" (Koran 2:223). The woman's womb, like soil, is a generalized medium of nurture that contributes to the growth and development of the fetus but in no way establishes its specific identity. As a Turkish villager put it:

If you plant wheat, you get wheat. If you plant barley, you get barley. It is the seed which determines the kind (variety) of plant which will grow, while the field nourishes the plant but does not determine the kind. The man gives the seed and the woman is like the soil (Meeker 1970:157)

The Turkish word *döllenmek* (to inseminate) incorporates the word *döl*, which means "seed," "fetus," "child." As the etymology of the English word also implies, *döllenmek* does not entail merely fertilization of the ovum, or provision of half the genetic material; it includes the entire process. That the theory is monogenetic is also conveyed by the words *gebe kalmak*, usually glossed as "to be pregnant." *Kalmak* means "to stay" or "remain"; *olmak* is the verb "to be" and is not used in this context. What is implied is that the seed remained in the womb and therefore the woman is pregnant. The fact that this is not the way the process of conception takes place physiologically but rather is the way the process is imaged should give pause to those who do not recognize the symbolic dimension and its power to structure belief, action, and institutions in the world.

Procreation is felt to teach the lesson of Creation. Hawa was taken out of Adam; thereafter, men have had the power of creation or self-perpetuation within them. Woman's crea-

tion is also intended to show that women are subordinate to and dependent on men, implying that they should be *muslim*, or obedient, to the will of their husbands as the world is to Allah.

In this construction of procreation it is men who give life; women merely give birth. Although children, especially sons, are greatly desired, birth itself is somewhat shameful for it is by means of the female genitals that life is made manifest. Primary identity, however, is transmitted by seed. By means of seed men give the spark of life, which is theoretically eternal, provided they continue to produce sons to carry it down the generations; hence the tremendous importance attached to producing sons.<sup>6</sup> *Sulale*, the Turkish word for patriline, is, according to Rahman (1980:17), derived from the Arabic meaning "reproductive semen." If a man has no son it is said that *ocağı sommuş*, his hearth is extinguished: the name and the flame of the patriline have died out.

The creative self-perpetuating essence concentrated in seed allies men with Allah. As Allah is author of the world, so too are men authors of children, and upon this their authority rests. Indeed, villagers say the husband-father is the second god after Allah.

The female body is perceived as life-supporting and sustaining like the earth; it is not life-generating. The rich and luxuriant climate or fertile ground of the womb supports the growth of the seed-child and provides for its nurture with blood; but this is something any woman can provide. A woman's value lies not so much in her fertility, given that all women are presumed fertile until proven otherwise, but in her ability to assure the legitimacy of a man's seed. It is here that the complex of honor and shame, about which there is a vast but unsatisfactory literature, becomes relevant. According to Meeker (1976:264), male honor is essentially concerned with the legitimacy of paternity, yet he does not explore the relationship of male honor to the pertinent Turkish theory of procreation. In order to guarantee that a child is his own—that is, from his own seed—a man must have possession and control of the field. Women's shame, as I have argued else-

where (Delaney 1987b), is related to the view that she does not contain the power of creation within her. Her fertility is basically a kind of indiscriminate fecundity that is redeemed only by being "enclosed" and "covered" by a man.<sup>7</sup>

The guarantee of paternity is more easily assured if the girl is married before any contact with men may have occurred, and indeed most village girls are married young. Today this means between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, but in the near past it was even earlier. A number of women confided to me that they had been married before menarche. The custom of *beşik kurtme* (cradle engagement) also occasionally obtains. Given the foregoing, I would object that "menarche does not represent the earliest point in the life cycle at which bargaining over rights to a girl's fertility becomes critical," to both paraphrase and argue against Paige and Paige (1981:79). Again, such practices underscore the fact that meanings of gender and marriage strategies are constructed not from universal physiological facts but from the ways these are interpreted in light of a particular logic of procreation.

Villagers recognize that a girl cannot become pregnant before menarche, but they have no knowledge about ovulation and its relation to menstruation and no knowledge of the relation of both to conception. Although cessation of menses is generally taken as a sign of pregnancy, it is not always.<sup>8</sup> All women, however, were insistent that the blood the fetus suckles in the womb is clean blood and is not the same as the blood that flows out in menstruation. This contrasts with beliefs of certain Iranian women who, according to Good (1980:150), believe that "the dirty blood (*kusif qan*) of the menses is consumed by the fetus, thus ridding the mother of her natural pollutant." Women in the Turkish village were shocked by such an implication. The source of the blood is the same but it has two quite distinct destinations and valences. On the one hand, it constitutes the physical substance (as opposed to the spiritual essence) of the growing fetus and sustains it; on the other hand, when the blood flows out in menstruation it carries the impurities resulting from the processes of life. It cleanses the body periodically but is itself

unclean. As a general capacity, then, menstruation signals the possibility of life, but menstrual blood in the specific is impure and serves as a reminder of life's corruptibility. The periodic flow of blood exemplifies the waxing and waning of earthly existence, its temporality and ultimate perishability. Menstruation condenses the conceptual cluster having to do with corporeality, time, and decay—unlike seed, which carries meanings of creativity, spirituality, and the eternal.

#### MENSTRUAL TABOOS

With the foregoing as background we can now approach the Anatolian villagers' menstrual proscriptions. Those directly related to the practice of Islam are most easily comprehended.

During the menstrual period a woman may not touch the Koran, enter the *cami* (mosque), or keep the fast of Ramadan (Ramadan).

To touch the sacred Book or to enter the sacred precinct while menstruating would introduce an element of the profane where it does not belong; it would besmirch the spiritual domain. Especially during the sacred month of Ramadan, when one's mind and body should be devoted to Allah and concentrated on the other world, the juxtaposition is too obvious. While menstruants are listed along with others exempt from keeping *oruç* (fast) during Ramadan (i.e., pregnant and nursing women, people on a journey, the old and the sick), there is a great difference that is often overlooked. The exemption of the latter is in recognition of hardship. They may keep the fast if they so desire and often do, for it is felt to bring even greater *sevap* (blessings). Even though Ramadan fell in August and July, respectively, during the two years I was in the village, many pregnant and nursing women kept the eighteen-hour fast from dawn to dusk for the full month. Menstruants *must* be exempted, for menstruation by itself makes the fast *bozulmuş* (ruined). Because menstruation is unmentionable, women must eat secretly when they have their periods during Ramadan. Regardless of the reprieve it offers, their eating and drinking is considered shameful. On

occasion my house became something of a "menstrual hut." Because I lived alone and people knew I was not keeping the fast, a few of my close female neighbors came to my house when they were menstruating to share a cup of tea. Ironically, they signaled what they were doing by drawing the curtains. Normally this kind of menstrual commensality would not occur during Ramadan and it was actively discouraged by the men.

The belief that a menstruating woman can ruin a sacred ritual applies also to the *Hac* (Hajj), or pilgrimage to Mecca. For the few days before Kurban Bayram (Festival of Sacrifice), hundreds of thousands of pilgrims gather in this most sacred city. Every precaution is taken to ensure that the minds and bodies of the faithful are purified. A menstruating woman may not perform any of the rituals or enter the sacred precinct. But not to be able to perform the rituals is, in effect, not to have made the *Hac*. No doubt this is one reason that most women who go on the *Hac* are postmenopausal. There is a coherent logic behind these proscriptions. Menstruation is a symbol of fertility, process, and change has no place in unchanging ritual directed toward the eternal.

There are, however, other taboos that do not relate specifically to religious ritual but do highlight the notion of creativity/generativity, which is a primary attribute of Allah. Intercourse, the act of procreating, is forbidden during menstruation. Recalling that the seed carries the spiritual, generative essence relating men to Allah, and that the act of procreation is the earthly equivalent of Creation, it becomes clear that intercourse during menstruation would constitute a most flagrant mixing of the two domains. Menstrual blood, contaminated with impurities, would impede the creative and essentially spiritual process of conception. This creative act must be performed in a pure environment. After menstruation, an *aptes* (ritual ablution) is made with the purpose of "*cani bedeni bütünüce pak yapmaktır*"—to make "the earthly body totally clean and holy."

The period of incubation of the seed (pregnancy) is a precarious time, for the new seed of life is taking root. A woman



who is pregnant should not be approached by one who is menstruating. Menstrual blood is laden with impurities, as evidenced by its noxious odor. This blood is not contained in the body but flows from inside to outside, transgressing the bodily boundaries. Implicit in this menstrual prohibition is the belief that the noxious elements in menstrual blood are released into the air, where they have the power to penetrate bodily boundaries and bring about a miscarriage or deform the fetus.<sup>9</sup> The first forty days after birth are analogous to the first forty days of gestation. It is a creative and precarious time when life is held in the balance, and thus precautions against the deleterious effects of menstrual blood are also taken during this time.

This logic, never entirely explicit, is transferred to bread making, which, in the village imagination, is metaphorically similar to the process of procreation. Both sons and bread are needed to *çoğaltmak* (increase and multiply) the family. Unlike cooking, which comprises daily reiteration, bread is reproduced. In order for bread to increase and multiply, sourdough or *mayıa* (yeast, root, origin, essence) from the previous batch must be introjected into the inert flour and water of the next batch, in which it incubates overnight. The *mayıa* is the live germ transmitted from batch to batch as seed from generation to generation; thus is bread self-perpetuated. Bread is the staff of life, it is the quintessential food; all else is considered *katik* (additional). Bread is regarded as almost holy. It should not be thrown out, and if it is found on the ground it is picked up. Although bread making is not a sacred activity, the creative, engendering process is. The rising of dough is a mysterious and creative process similar to pregnancy, and it is feared that the powerful impurities in menstrual blood may inhibit the process.<sup>10</sup>

One more prohibition must be mentioned which relates not only to the times women menstruate but to the entire period of a woman's life during which menstruation occurs. During a woman's reproductive years, until menopause, she may not "cut"—that is, slaughter—an animal. Generally this has been perceived as a menstrual taboo, but if so, why is it

not restricted only to the specific days a woman is menstruating? Once the flow has stopped and an *aptes* performed, what prevents a woman from "cutting" an animal?

Behind the idea that men give life lurks the corollary that they therefore have the right to take it. Indeed, this was the essence of the ancient Roman *patria potestas*. In rural Turkey this power has been mitigated but at the same time symbolically reaffirmed. In Islam, and vividly in the village mind, this is expressed in the story of Abraham. "In ancient times we used to cut our sons. Allah gave Abraham a ram, now we don't cut our children." This story is central to Islam, as well as to Judaism and Christianity (Delaney 1977), and is reenacted every year on the most sacred day of the Islamic calendar, Kurban Bayram (Festival of Sacrifice).

Men in performance of the Kurban ritually reproduce this metaphor of power over life and death. Women's exclusion from this rite cannot be adequately accounted for in terms of pollution by menstrual blood, for women are forbidden to slaughter not only when menstruating but throughout their entire reproductive lives.

To focus narrowly only on the physical event of menstruation misses the point that menstruation also indexes fertility—that is, the capacity to bring forth life and sustain it. Nevertheless, as we have seen, menstruation in both its positive and negative aspects symbolizes mortality. Women, whose blood forms the closest physical ties, also represent the eventual dissolution of life and thus stand in stark contrast to those who share an enduring spiritual bond. Undoubtedly the notion of pollution is operating here, but it is not simply pollution by menstrual blood; instead it refers more to the contamination of the spiritual realm by the physical. Women's exclusion, I suggest, expresses the incommensurability of eternal life and earthly life.

#### CONCLUSION

As earthly life is bounded by birth and death, so is the possibility of this life bounded by menarche and menopause.<sup>11</sup>

Menstruation represents both the potential and the limits of life and symbolizes carnal existence. In the villagers' theory of procreation, however, life is not the result of the union of male and female but an unstable mixture that persists for a short time and upon death is resolved again into its elements—the physical dross and the eternal soul-body. Burial, the placing of the seed-body into the earth, is thought to be analogous to insemination. Understandably burial is a male ritual at which women are not present. The body buried in the earth's soil is the symbolic equivalent of the seed in the womb; after a brief period of incubation, it is reborn into the other world.

But the promise of another life in the other world implies a devaluation and sacrifice, at least emotionally, of the only life and only world we know. The entire system could be interpreted as an elaborate denial of the awesome power of women to bring forth life and a response to and a prophylactic against the mess, fluidity, and change that are its inherent characteristics. It could also be viewed as a projection of the ideal of invulnerability and incorruptibility. Instead of affirmation there is a fear of the mutability of life and a desire to keep it under bounds and under control.

The female body as a source of this fear becomes the focus and object of control. Since the female body is symbolically associated with the material and unregenerate aspects of existence, it is appropriated as the conceptual framework for configuring the structures and contours of lived space. As the woman's body encloses the seed-child in the womb, a house encloses the family, the village encloses a group of interrelated families, and the nation encloses all those born upon and nurtured by its soil. Men "cover" these entities. The notion of cover, of being *kapalı* (covered, closed), is not restricted to women but applies equally to the house, the village, and the nation. Attitudes and responses evoked by one are applicable to the others. In order to preserve the integrity and honor of these entities they must be kept distinct and separate. Access to and between similar units at the same level of structure or between different levels of structure

should be limited and controlled by men. Boundaries thus become a focus of anxiety, and exits and entrances are controlled and under surveillance. This is true no matter whether the point of reference is the boundary of the nation, the village, the house, or the bodily boundaries of women.

Mary Douglas, in her now classic study of pollution beliefs, has written that "to understand body pollution we should try to argue back from the known dangers of society to the known selection of bodily themes" (1966:121), but in this chapter I have argued the converse: that a particular cultural understanding of the body may generate the anxieties or dangers felt to be impinging on the society. In other words, notions of the body and corporeality are neither universal nor gender-neutral but change according to specific cultures. It is not enough to look only at specific pollutants, for one must understand them in relation to the entire cultural corpus of beliefs. In the case of Turkish menstrual pollution, this includes beliefs about the body, gender, procreation, and the place of humankind in the world. In place of a simple cause-and-effect equation, regardless of the direction, I have tried to show how the perceived dangers and bodily pollutants in Turkish village culture are both expressions of the same worldview. A full description of this Turkish village worldview must take into account the important realm that Islam designates the "other world." To ignore the invisible but omnipresent reality of the other world is to miss the deeper ontological meaning of menstruation.

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*.) My informants pointed out, however, that the boundaries of the Earth and the Sky are uncertain; the two are "friends" (*gwé*) 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."

10. It is useful to compare briefly the Beng treatment of menstruation with that of the Baule, the Bengs' immediate neighbors to the west and south. Although they belong to different language groups (Beng to the Mande family, Baule to the Akan family), Beng nevertheless claim 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 Baule women, at least in recent times, are not prohibited from working in the forest (Mona Etienne, personal communication). They are forbidden all sexual contact with any men, but this is because of any violation (direct or indirect) of the associated and not because of any violation (direct or indirect) of the Earth (Etienne 1981:29, n. 7). This accords with the observations in general Baule cosmology human actions and misfortunes are tied or attributed to spirits far more than they are to the Earth (Susan Vogel, personal communication; Mona Etienne, personal communication). All this, of course, is in direct contrast with the Beng situation as I have outlined it and thus serves as further confirmation that the elements I 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 main elements the Baule have developed to any large extent.

11. This is unlike other systems of hot/cold symbolism, such as those found throughout Southeast Asia, in which the aim is to achieve a *balance* between the two extremes of hot and cold (compare, e.g., Laderman 1981).

12. It is perhaps pertinent 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 was viewed more negatively and 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, once would have been equally polluting but is now seen as harmless. Rather, I believe that the Beng notions of fertility 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.

13. Women form exchange relationships with other women of their own choosing—normally friends or matrilineally 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 some men (see note 1 and below) might consume food cooked by menstruating women who are acting as their hostesses when they are visiting in other villages, or if they are eating with friends or kin in their own village.

14. 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 (*saf*) 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' vapors up her vagina. This remedy shows clearly that cooked palm nuts are associated on yet another level with menstruation.

### 3. MORTAL FLOW; MENSTRUATION IN TURKISH VILLAGE SOCIETY

1. It must also be noted that there is little, if any, mention of menstruation in the Turkish literature on health and family planning. Although there is no government policy on sex education, the passing of the Population Planning Law in 1965 made available information about and devices for contraception. The focus of these planners is on contraception, but very little attention has been given to education about the physiology of reproduction.

2. Although the other world (*öbür dünya*) is divided into *Cehennem* (Hell) and *Cennet* (Paradise/Garden), villagers normally mean *Cennet* when they speak of the other world. As the original and eventual home of Muslims, among many life is felt to be a kind of temporary exile. At the same time it must be made clear that Islam, to Muslims, is not a separate religion but the one true faith given in the beginning and thus the one to which all must submit (be *muslim*). Paradise is therefore not reserved for one religious group; it is not exclusive but inclusive. One need only return to the true faith.

3. Because of the lack of awareness of the discrepancy in understanding of procreation between the educated urban elite and the rural population, the education these midwives (young unmarried girls) are given is not made culturally sensitive. The scientific medical

knowledge they receive is little more than a veneer discarded quickly under the impact of more pervasive cultural notions. A midwife's primary duty is to deliver babies and to provide some pre- and postnatal care. She may give information about contraception to married women, but she must refer them to a town medical center for insertion of IUDs (the most prevalent method of contraception, for *coitus interruptus*).

4. With regard to Turkey, the ethnographic literature on this topic or anything relating to the body is all but silent. Engelbrektsson (1978) and Magnarella (1974) speak of menstruation as polluting, but they assume rather than explore the meanings of this. More general confirmation of attitudes toward and practices relating to menstruation in other Islamic societies can be gleaned from Dwyer (1978), Good (1980), Mernissi (1975), Minai (1981), and Saadawi (1980). The latter gives the most comprehensive account of the way the female body is perceived and of practices relating to it. An excellent recent article by Julie Marcus (1984) came to my attention too late to be referred to in the text. It confirms some of the observations made in this text.

5. The seed-field theory of procreation has been mentioned in a number of ethnographies of Turkey—Engelbrektsson (1978), Erdentug (1959), Magnarella (1974), and Meeker (1970)—but the full meaning and implications have nowhere been explored or elaborated. For a full account see Delaney (1984).

6. That the child is considered to belong to the man because he produced it and that this is a central concern is indicated by the following: (1) A father is often referred to as *çocuk sahibi*, lit. "child owner." (2) There is a widespread belief that no *man* can care for another *man's* child. (3) In the case of divorce or widowhood, the children do not normally accompany the mother if she remarries, remaining instead with their paternal grandparents. (4) There is no legal adoption until after the husband is age forty and proves that he has not been able to produce a child of his own. (5) In the past a man could take a second wife if the first was unable to bear a child; although this practice is now illegal, it still occurs in villages. Expressed in all of these practices is the belief that it is important for a man not just to have a child but to have one from his own seed.

7. The relationship between the "honor and shame complex" and this specific theory of procreation is taken up in Delaney (1987b).

8. Sometimes women inexplicably stopped menstruating but they were clearly not pregnant, nor were they menopausal. Conversely, a woman who was quite obviously pregnant was having blood taken from her finger by the village midwife as a check for anemia. The midwife had a difficult time obtaining even a drop of blood. A friend said to the pregnant woman, "You must be

menstruating," implying that menstruation draws blood away from other parts of the body. When a few of the other women laughed, she realized her mistake.

9. Most disease is felt to be airborne, which is why people protect themselves from drafts and certain odors and keep babies tightly swaddled.

10. Denise Lawrence (this volume) describes a similar kind of fear in relation to sausage making which, in Portuguese society, is metaphorically related to the process of procreation. For a very interesting discussion of the relation between the theories of procreation and food processing, see Ott (1979). Ott makes, however, no mention of menstruation or menstrual blood.

11. Because bearing children is what women were created for and is their primary function and role in life, the cessation of menses can be a traumatic time for women in Turkish society. The transition can be made more smoothly if the woman has fulfilled her proper role—namely, by producing at least one son. This son will marry and be expected to bring his wife to live in his parents' home, where she will help with the burden of domestic work and produce children to continue the line. With the disruption of rural society, however, particularly the outmigration of many young men for work, the trauma of menopause is intensified, leaving many older women embittered.

#### 4. MENSTRUATION AMONG THE RUNGUS OF BORNEO: AN UNMARKED CATEGORY

*Acknowledgments.* From 1959 to 1960 and 1961 to 1963 I carried out research among the Rungus on religion and women's activities. My husband, George N. Appell, was conducting research among the Rungus during this period under the auspices of the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies, the Australian National University. The brief description of Rungus social organization that follows is derived from the works of G. N. Appell (1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1976a, 1976b, 1978).

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