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## **Goddess of the Blood of Life**

### **Part One**

by Judy Grahn, Ph.D.

In a series of articles for *Metaformia* I want to explore what seems to me a pressing question in Women's Spirituality circles, with implications for women and gender relations overall. That is the two part question of what the relation is between the goddess and menstruation, and why the goddess was or is considered "bloodthirsty." By "goddess" I mean various female deities in a number of traditions, both historic and contemporary. And by "bloodthirsty" I mean the innumerable accounts from both antiquity and contemporary practices of goddesses in particular needing to be propitiated with blood sacrifice.

This question is avoided, is "the elephant in the middle of the room" for Women's Spirituality. There is shame, and its sister, fear, attached to the subject. There is a great deal of denial that a female deity could be violent or desire blood. In the women's movement as in the culture at large there is also a deeply rooted phobia and a contempt toward menstruation, which all of us who research the subject have confronted repeatedly. I can't help but believe the two shames may be related, and that there is a rich store of information within them.

In my series I will address the subject of menstrual shame, and broader questions of blood sacrifice, animal and human sacrifice, men's rituals, and a metaformic study of goddesses and their association with menstruation. I begin with an essay on horticulture, menstruation, and blood debt.

### **Menstruation and (No) Shame**

I was visited by two engaged and engaging women, Rachel Fitzgerald and Margaret O'Rourke, who teach women community leaders from all over South America. These women are using literature, psychology and new theories of consciousness to re-mythologize their minds in order to change the restrictive roles of women in society. They want to do this, one of my visitor's said, particularly to address the disillusioned feelings women have, after devoting decades to liberation theology, that women have not progressed - not on the left, not on the right, and not in the once-bright promise of liberation theology. Their school, in Santiago, Chile, is called *Encuentro de*

*Espiritualidad Ecofeminista: Mitos y Arquetipos.*

As remains true in both the South and North American women's movement, new theory is needed to revitalize old movements, and in particular many of us agree that both spirituality and women-centeredness have been missing from progressive movements. Metaformic theory posits women-centeredness without kicking men out of the center; the theory is inclusive, yet radically different than other theories of human origins and cultures. And I believe it goes directly to the roots of what has been most sacred for human beings. (See my article "[The Emergence of Metaformic Consciousness](#)" in this Journal, and read the theory in its entirety online in [Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World.](#))

One of the women who spent the afternoon in my living room, Rachel, had read *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World* several times, and wanted to use the ideas in Santiago. The women had been discussing metaformic theory and particularly wanted to talk with me about shame and menstruation, asking me what I thought caused the shame. I was excited by their interest, and we launched a vivacious general discussion.

We covered much territory: how dissatisfied most women are with their bodies, the increasing global emphasis on being slender; the vague sense of shame I think most women have about being female and being told their kind has never contributed to human development - of not being recognized as an important part of culture, and of not seeing themselves reflected as sacred. In addition we touched on the intense shame many women feel toward their monthly periods; the compulsion to hide the pads and tampons because they are considered 'nasty,' the remarks people make about menstrual smell as a 'bad' smell; the real fear women feel about spotting their clothing with their blood.

Our conversation naturally turned to the religious origin story of Eve in the Garden of Eden, a story central to Jewish and Christian beliefs,<sup>1</sup> and the blame put on her, a blame that is interpreted as menstrual in many cultures. 'Menstruation and pain in childbirth are God's punishment for original sin' - this is a sentiment we have heard so many times, in the classroom and out of it. The Garden of Eden, geographically located in the Mesopotamian river valley, was an origin point for the development of agriculture in that part of the world, posited at ten or twelve thousand years ago.

One of the two South American teachers ventured that her idea of the origins of menstrual shame lay with the Neolithic origins of agriculture and its production of abundance - for the first time we began to hoard, and select who could and could not eat, and this gave us the guilt for raising more than we could eat, yet not distributing it properly and therefore depriving others. This brought us again to the Garden of Eden story and Eve being blamed for original sin, which many women experience as shame.

My thoughts about shame traveled along the lines of patriarchal history - in suppressing menstruation, and women's sexuality, and co-opting the sacred blood power as strictly male, the patriarchies have forced women into states of shame, not only about menstruation, but everything to do with the body, especially the female body. In researching menstruation in South India I found that the Syrian Christian puberty rite is identical to the one most of us raised in Christian homes experienced: menstruation is to

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<sup>1</sup> Eve's seduction and transgression are emphasized in the origin story of both religions; in the Koran, in contrast, Adam and Eve are held equally culpable. See Sherif Abdel Azeem, "Women in Islam Versus Women in the Judeo-Christian Tradition," <http://www.islamworld.net/compwomen.html>, accessed February 16, 2006.

be hidden, at first onset the maiden is not to speak of it, and there is no celebration of the event. In complete contrast, most of the Hindu people I spoke with were eager to tell me about their menarche celebrations, to show me the announcement sent out (like a wedding card), to describe the festivities, to reminisce about their own parties, to say how they had missed out if they had not had a menarche celebration.

I have become convinced that lack of celebration about menstruation in Jewish, Christian and Muslim cultures is more about male monotheism and the necessity for female blood power to be suppressed in order for male blood power to dominate (a situation that is obviously a problem as it has thrown us out of balance). But this does not explain the shame itself, for that we must dig deeper into the collective human psyche.

So, to continue this exploration of such an important subject as women's blood, to see what we can learn, and because we had brought up origins of farming as a possible source of women's shame toward menstruation, I want now to take a look at some horticultural practices in areas of earliest horticultural development, among people whose maternal ancestral lines have passed along cosmogonies and rituals completely interwoven with the intimate act of cultivation of plants. Among these peoples, menstruation is *not the object of shame. Menstruation is at the heart, mind, and soul of what they are doing.*

## **Manioc and Menstruation**

The Aguaruna Jivaro people of Alto Rio Mayo, Peru use what Western anthropology calls "magic" in hunting and horticulture, their most important crop being manioc roots which the women cultivate, using ritual practices and a relational cosmogony. Researcher Michael F. Brown was fortunate to have a woman researcher, Margaret Van Bolt, with him for his study, and she talked to the women about their practices. Though men are understood to have more status in the society, emphasis is on the interdependence between the genders, whose economy is based in both hunting and horticulture.

Women of the Aguaruna keep the swiddens, the garden areas, growing more than seventy crops.<sup>2</sup> The most important crop is manioc (tapioca, cassava), a root crop that has spread around the world and become a cultigen on which millions now depend. In the Amazonian forest culture where manioc is believed to have been originally cultivated, among the Aguaruna it is women who grow the below ground, root crops such as manioc, yams, peanuts, and sweet potato, while the men (who are also hunters) grow the above ground crops, imported from elsewhere. The word for manioc is the same as the general word for food in their language.<sup>3</sup> This implies that the original horticulture consisted of the (ancestral) women growing manioc roots, so in considering their rituals we may be witnessing rituals fundamental to horticulture in its beginnings.

The women have intensely personal relationships with the plants, understanding some of them, and especially the manioc, as "people". The gardeners are mothers of the plants. Nugkui is the earth spirit and a primary force for the women (as Esta, the sun, is

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, *Tsewa's Gift: Magic and Meaning in an Amazonian Society*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

for the men). A song sung to her asks, “Mother Nugkui/Mother Nugkui/ Let me know your manioc.”

For Aguaruna people, “As animals are spirits, so too are the plants; both are understood to have similar feelings to humans. Sometimes the largest plant in the garden is understood to be the Manioc Mother (Mama Dukuji), who walks about the garden.” You must not look at her or “she gets angry and shits weeds.” If you don’t look at her, she is happy and produces manioc.<sup>4</sup>

The relationship of the women to the manioc and the language they use to sustain it is menstrual, that is to say, metaformic. “The sanguinary themes so prominent in Aguaruna garden magic are part of the feminine concern with regulating reproductive power through the control of blood.”<sup>5</sup> Blood, the blood of humans, plants, and stones, is the medium of expression, along with song. “Another property of blood is that it is the medium by which thought is conveyed within the body.”<sup>6</sup> Blood carries thought, according to the Aguaruna, and the songs they sing impart meaning which the blood carries to the manioc plant.

As I understand Brown’s account, the Aguaruna consider the manioc plant as a being, a powerful being with a soul, and they treat her and approach her as both a mother and a child. Their child, whom the gardeners tend, sing to, and feed. At the same time, she is Manioc Mother, so they are her children. As a further example of how closely these mother to mother and mother to child bonds are forged between the women and the plants, the Aguaruna women give birth in their manioc gardens<sup>7</sup>.

They nurture their gardens metaformically. Menstruating women do not go into the swidden, lest the power of their menses “burn” the plants. At planting time the women paint the tubers red, and they also paint their own hands and foreheads with red so to the plants they will be known as friends. The plant will recognize them as “blood kin” - as menstrual beings.

They feed the manioc with powerful red stones, the *nantag*, who in turn are fed (once a month) by the blood of the *achiote* plant. It is irresistible not to believe that the red stones are the blood of the earth spirit, Nugkui, who lives in the garden. The *nantag* stones help the manioc to grow, and are placed in the garden for this purpose. As the planting is prepared the stones are kept wrapped and in seclusion, sometimes even being placed in a “little shed” for a while. The more powerful the stones are, the more dangerous as well, requiring the skill of the gardener to control. A plant with conspicuously red fruit, a variety of papaya, is planted next to the manioc to help it grow, though the people do not eat from this plant.

After the tubers are planted, the gardener sprinkles blood in the form of the red water colored with the *achiote* pods; she sprays this onto the manioc plants to feed them. “Upon arriving in the garden, the woman crushes a pod of *achiote* and uses the red pulp to paint lines on her cheekbones and on those who may be accompanying her, e.g., her children. This is done because the *nantag* stones (and the manioc plants, if some have already been planted), are potentially dangerous and it is important that the woman and

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<sup>4</sup> Paper, 122.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, 129

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>7</sup> According to Irving Goldman, cited in Paper, 119.

her companions identify themselves as friends by being painted.”<sup>8</sup> The red pulp in the *achiote* is not just blood, however; metaformically the red pulp is the menstrual blood of the *achiote* plant, her pulp and seeds. The recognition of “friends” is thus, “we are all beings who menstruate.”

So, we can see that not only is the subject of menstruation not about shame, for these people it is the vocabulary of a dialogue and a reciprocal economy based in familial mother-child relations of love, respect, negotiation of powers, and exchange of the central life force: blood.

### **Other Horticultural Examples of Metaformic Relationships**

Not to try to make the Aguaruna rituals carry the entire argument of the origins of a menstrual blood economy and cosmogony in horticultural practices, let us also consider an account by Denise Arnold of Bolivian potato farming, and connections to menstruation. Potatoes are believed to have first been cultivated in this region, the Andes Mountains, so once again these may be the originating rituals of horticulture itself. Arnold begins with a description of what she calls “Lunar Cosmology” among the Aymara, a people who have lived for thousands of years in the Andes Mountains of Bolivia:

Both human reproduction and potato production among the Aymara are closely linked with the periodicity of the moon. The most common name for the moon in Aymara is *p"axsi*, meaning both moon and month. There is no doubt that the moon is female in Aymara astronomical symbolism and that her periodicities are closely tied to the periodicities of the female human body, particularly with the female menstrual cycle. The word for menstrual blood in Aymara is *p"axsi wila*, meaning moon blood. In Aymara astronomy, the phases of the moon are important for timing various activities, and predicting weather conditions... there is a suggestion that the sequence of moon phases is likened to the stages of a human life-cycle.... Another *name* for the first glimpse of the new moon is *p"axsi wila*, or moon blood, the menstrual blood of women.  
([www.brandonu.ca/Library/CJNS/7.2/arnold.pdf](http://www.brandonu.ca/Library/CJNS/7.2/arnold.pdf))

Arnold’s intricate and detailed report (which can be read in its entirety through the URL above) is of an entire cosmogony of matrilineal bloodlines involving female generations, mountains and other elements, and the earth as a menstruous womb receiving the plantings. In the Aymara view, the new potatoes are a form of earth’s menses, as “eaten blood,” and the potatoes are asexually “conceived in the girdle or *k'inch"u* of the earth”. Only women plant the potatoes, holding them in a girdle around their bellies that is like a womb. The women carefully keep their own menstrual regulations, and if they break them, the “eyes” of the potatoes, which form new roots, are believed to close up, rendering the plant sterile. So, by keeping their menstrual rules, they stay in appropriate relationship to the plants on which they are dependent, they maintain the dialogue.

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<sup>8</sup> Brown, 118.

In both of the South American examples, the Aguaruna and the Aymara, maternal lines of women connect root crops to their own menstruation and to the menstruation of both earth and plant. In South India, where I did an application of metaformic theory to both goddess rituals and menarche rituals, the connection between blood, agriculture and menstruation of the earth was explicit as recently as fifty years ago. At that time major annual festivals celebrated the onset of the menstrual period of Bhumi Devi, “goddess earth.” Goddess Maryamma, a village goddess, is worshiped in a South Indian festival in the form of rice, the staple crop of the region. A single grain of rice is carefully wrapped in thread, to “dress Her”. The rice is understood as “red” and gives a red coloring to water in which it is soaked; red rice is explicitly a form of the essence or blood of the earth,<sup>9</sup> and according to the tantric teacher Amarananda Bhairavan, red rice is “the menstrual blood of the goddess.”<sup>10</sup> At planting time, following the hot season during which Bhumi Devi is in her menstrual season<sup>11</sup> the monsoons turn the earth red and the rivers run red and were/are said to be menstruating.

Maryamma takes many forms, one of them being a stone, which is painted red. A stone that bleeds when struck with a lunar crescent-shaped sickle is a frequent, even ubiquitous, foundational story for the founding of goddess temples in the state of Kerala. All kinds of metaformic offerings are brought to the temples, to “feed” the goddesses.

I bring in these examples from Bolivia and South India to show that the Aguaruna are not alone in the associations they make between women’s blood, blood of plants, and blood of the earth. Horticulture perhaps all around the world began and was sustained for thousands of years as a blood negotiation, an economy involving both science and religion, both relationship and ritual, and both love and dread.

### **Horticulture as a Metaformic Relationship Using Menstrual Logic**

The potato horticulturalists of Bolivia hold that the potato plant’s menstruation forms up into her children, the potatoes. Only women can plant potatoes, which they do from a womb-like sack worn around their waists, making a clear connection between their own wombs and the children of the potato plant and the womb of the earth that receives them, and they make an explicit their understanding that the potatoes are from the menstrual blood of the mother potato plant.<sup>12</sup>

Assuming this same kind of what I call “menstrual logic” or menstrual thought is equally part of the worldview of the Aguaruna if not also other horticultural peoples, the long, slender reddish colored roots of the manioc plant would have come to the attention of ancestral women with their already well-developed metaformic perspective. They would have seen the roots as the menstrual blood of the manioc, that formed up into the tuber roots and which were therefore her “children.”

Far from simply digging up and eating the roots, the women established an intense and complex relationship with the manioc as a mother like themselves, who menstruates new life, like themselves. In this relationship, which I call “merged

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<sup>9</sup> Jayakar, 60.

<sup>10</sup> Personal Communication.

<sup>11</sup> Caldwell, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold.

identification” and which is a form of synchrony, a way of connecting one blood flow with another, the women see the manioc plants as people like themselves. In caring for her as if she were their own child, and communicating with her as though she is their own mother, they establish the mutual negotiation of care and exchange that is horticulture. The rituals they use for communication in their relationship to the manioc are the rituals that establish horticulture. I call this “menstrual logic” because the rituals are surely derived from menstrual rituals: during planting the women abstain from sex; they do not touch the plant; they separate the manioc plants from menstruating women, whose powers could interfere with the manioc’s powers. They feed her, they bring her presents. They give her companion plants. They sing to her. They drink beer while they do the planting, as a way of increasing her power.

They shower the manioc with metaformic substances. These include the making of what they consider a blood substance from the pods of the *achiote* plant, put into water in a bowl. They mix this red water with herbs, and into this potent mixture they put special powerful stones, called *nagtans*. The *nagtans* are understood as red, whether they actually are or not. Once a month the stones are “fed” with blood, the blood of the *achiote*.

When the women go to the garden to plant manioc roots, they take *nagtans* with them, carefully covered in cloth. From a metaformic point of view the *nagtans* are an old form, probably a pre-horticultural form, of the menstrual blood of the earth, which as I interpret this, will nurture the manioc the way menstrual blood of the women nurtures their own fetuses in the womb.

The gardeners are communicating in a language of empathy and likeness, and that language is metaformic. They paint the tips of the roots blood red before planting. They pour *achiote* blood on the stones, and they sprinkle drops of it onto the plants. They paint themselves red with the *achiote* menstruation so they will be recognized by the plant.

The songs they sing reveal why they do this. You have blood, they sing to the manioc plant. You have children. I have blood, I have children, my child has blood. They establish the connection, the empathic cord. They say that the blood carries thought, expressed in the songs - so the blood of the *achiote* carries the thought of the songs directly to the manioc mother plant. “Take my enemy’s child, not my child; take the blood of the rodent, not the blood of my child”. They sing as mothers, protecting their own children, aware of the fierceness of mothers, the terrible capacity of mothers to kill in behalf of their own children. They understand the manioc as having capacity to be a vengeful mother, in her grief at losing children. And they also sing as empathic mothers, loving mothers, aware that the manioc is a person, a mother just exactly like themselves. Even though I take your child, I eat your child, please don’t take my child, don’t eat my child, their songs say. They sing to impart this meaning. And they feed her the blood, the red pulp surrounding the seeds, of the *achiote*, the potential children of the *achiote*, instead of their own children.

This set of rituals in caring for the manioc is what is called “magic” - and when a child sickens and dies, and the manioc is blamed, the “magic” has failed. The communication, the trade, the sacrificial economic contract, has broken down.

I am very moved by this account. I feel as though I have a glimpse of the relationships our ancestors (all ancestral peoples) forged with nature, that have made our lives possible. And, it seems to me that the metaformic horticultural negotiation is the

perfect balance of the understanding of good and evil, and of the human condition. Our consciousness, which is metaformic, allows us (brings us into an ability) to cultivate plants but only through identifying them as mothers like ourselves, and therefore we have empathy and caring, and then - following from this, we cannot help but know ourselves as cannibals devouring the young of another being, and therefore fear the plant mothers' retribution for the pain we cause them. And so, we try to compensate them for their losses, by giving them blood - someone else's blood.

Here we are, brought far from our discussion point of menstrual shame. The examples I have given show menstruation as power, power to effect a change of relationship between humans and plants, and bring about the horticultural practices that would lead to farming. And the questions remain: what has brought about the shame attached to the subject of menstruation? Perhaps it is the paradoxical nature of our consciousness itself. At any rate within the power of our rituals, we appear to be creatures with a blood debt, which we are always paying. This debt appears to be interwoven with the development of horticulture.

### **Blood Debt from “Merged Identification”**

The merged identification between the Aguaruna gardeners and the manioc plant is a poignant one, an economic pact that seems to consist of an understanding that they are both menstrual beings, and both mothers who care for and fiercely protect their children. The assumption is that they are in a reciprocal relationship in which both plant mothers and human mothers are principles of life and death. They both produce children and they both eat - and what they eat are each other's children. The women therefore engage in a negotiation with the plant soul, feeding her blood that is a substitute for their own blood, while at the same time singing songs asking that she not eat the blood of the human children. They ask her to spare their own children even though they intend to eat her children.

So the dilemma: human consciousness, through menstrual consciousness, led the women to form an identification with the manioc plant (among others). Their ancestors perhaps initially made this connection from synchrony - seeing the red tubers as the “blood” of the plant and associating it with themselves and their own fertility patterns. By seeing the plant as “people” like themselves, they fell in love with the manioc as their own ancestors had fallen in love with other beings and with the earth and with the moon, before them. They saw a kindred being and established a kind of family relation. However, the catch is that they also became dependent on eating the children, the offspring of the manioc. And they became certain that when their own children fell ill, the manioc was eating their souls, devouring the women's children as they had devoured the tuber children of the plant. They saw themselves as eating the blood, the life force, and as needing to make a payment in kind, a blood payment.

It seems to me that herein, trapped between forces, is the enormous blood debt shouldered by human beings. If we were not conscious of our relationship to the plants we could never have cultivated them, but in cultivating them as primary food we also inherited the guilt of knowing we murder the plant being's children. And won't she, like any furious bereft mother, take vengeance?

This horrific blood debt, substantiated by illness and accident, is held in balance in the Aguaruna and (I am supposing) at least some other horticultural systems, by the “feeding” of the mother, the earth, the plants, the beings, with (various forms) of blood. All of these gifts are the blood of life, blood associated with both menstruation and thought, with nurturance and negotiations with death.

What a debt we of mass culture who so take for granted the grains, roots, and other foods that sustain not only us but all of the world’s burgeoning populations, what a debt we each owe to the swidden gardeners and other indigenous farmers at the sites of earliest cultivations. It seems to me, we owe these peoples to protect and nurture them whenever and however we can, as our “mothers.”

To return to my subject, menstruation is not hidden, and *not the object of shame* in matrilineal horticultural societies that have used it to create horticulture itself. *Menstruation is at the heart, mind, and soul of what they are doing.*

However, an economy of blood debt - to the earth, to the plants, to the stones, to the elements that make life possible - this is clearly discernible. How, if at all, is this pattern related to the intense shame that so many Western women experience or report their mothers experiencing, along with the body hatred that accompanies such self-despising? How is it that the substance that has given us all life, and has helped to create us as such powerful beings, is the object of so much contempt and dismissal?

I will take this on more deeply in a discussion of origin stories in which women appear to have taken on a “blood debt” from or in behalf of the men and the men’s blood rituals. And I will take on the, to me, ever-intriguing question of why the goddess is so associated with blood sacrifice, and her complex relationship to menstruation.

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