

Shedding Old Skin : A Search For New Origin Stories

By Luisah Teish

So there I was meticulously dressed in my can-can slips, hot starched and ironed under a spotless dress. I was the kind of little Black girl who loved to dress up and also enjoyed craw fishing, hanging from the willow tree and shooting marbles with the boys. On this day I was just about to win another cat-eye marble when my mother called out, "Heifer, come on in here!"

I couldn't imagine what I'd done to be called "heifer." I raked my mind for the source of her irritation. I hadn't stolen anything, the dishes were washed and my homework done. I got up from my squatting position and walked into the house.

Moma paraded me to the bathroom, stopping only to reach her hand in the mysterious box she kept in the hall closet. This box had caused an uproar in our house once before. After Moma gave birth to my baby sister, she'd asked "grouchy bear" (my father) to go buy a box of these things for her. He'd screamed at the top of his lungs, slammed doors, and said that he "wouldn't be caught dead buying them things".

Finally a neighbor-woman brought my Moma a box of "them things" and discreetly hid it behind the green closet door in the hallway. Now Moma was reaching into that fuss box to give one of them things to me!

Out of the closet came a sanitary napkin and an elastic belt with metal clamps. She handed me the things, pushed me into the bathroom and said, "Do what you supposed to do."

What was I supposed to do?

Dear Abby, the women's news advice columnist in our local paper, had not said anything about this! I stood there looking at the napkin and the fantastic elastic belt.

Then I remembered. There had been rumors that something went on under big girls' dresses that didn't go on under mine. An older girl had told me that it would happen to me one day but I'd doubted it.

Now, at ten years old, "it" was happening to me.

Nervously, I pulled my white shorts down and found myself soaked in red to my outer garment. Rumors started swimming through my head. This was going to hurt, (as I recall it did not hurt until I remembered that it was supposed to), it was going to keep on happening to me, and it would make me sick.

I'd also heard that if I took some of it and rubbed it "you know where" and gave it to "you know who" then it would do "you know what!" These whisperings foreshadowed that I could learn something concerning old African beliefs about menstruation. For instance, I learned later that women in New Orleans made charms using menstrual blood to control the behavior of men.

I ripped the gauze edges of the pad, tied a knot around the front and back of the belt (forgetting about the metal clamps), and stepped into the contraption like a pair of pants. I wrapped a towel around my bottom and rinsed the rich red stains from my soiled clothing.

In fear and trembling, I put on a new pair of pants and went back outside.

I tried to act as if nothing had happened. The onset and cessation of the menstrual cycle is an important feminine passage. Menstruation represents the onset of puberty, the blossoming of sexuality, and the power of fertility. And I have found that difficulty with menstruation has a major impact on women's self-image. Menopause, the passage to freedom, wisdom, and authority, also "changes" many things in a woman's life. Yet the culture inclines us to act as if nothing has happened.

Shades of Red:

During the next few weeks I tried to get explanations for what was happening to me. The sentence was handed down: "You're a woman now!"

How on Earth could I be "a woman now?" I wasn't thirteen, I wasn't even twelve. What happened to adolescence! My trust in the natural order of the Universe had been turned upside down! I was a woman! What did that mean?

It meant lots of warnings but no explanations: "Don't take a tub bath or wash your hair when it's that time". "Don't climb trees." "If you don't stop playing with them lil' boys you could get pregnant." "Don't bring me nothing I can't eat (meaning a baby)." "Don't wear light colors, wear a red skirt."

It is interesting to note that in my community a "red skirt" was taboo except under certain circumstances. Girls with deep Black skin were admonished to avoid wearing red because it made them "too intense." Brown-skinned girls avoided red for fear of being identified as a whore. And most fair-skinned girls wore pastels in order to affirm their "gentility". But wearing a red skirt was permissible under three circumstances: if you were menstruating, if you were in fact a prostitute, or if you were calling someone out for a fist or knife fight.

Suddenly all the rules changed and I felt as if I'd done something wrong.

Weeks of pushing for an explanation turned into months. Finally, I asked some of my schoolmates and they gave an answer.

The Curse of Eve:

You see there was this place called the Garden of Eden, and this woman named Eve lived there with a fellow named Adam. Now God had told these two not to mess around with a certain tree in the garden. But a slimy ole snake came along and sweet-talked the stupid woman into eating an apple from the forbidden tree. Then she turned around and convinced poor Adam to bite that apple too. God got all pushed out of shape 'cause that was his own personal tree and the fruit on that one made him smart. So he got mad and cursed them.

Since Eve took the first bite and ate the apple's skin, her curse came out red; Adam bit the apple in the same place Eve did so his curse came out white. Because Eve was the first woman, and all the girls would grow up to be women, we got Eve's curse every month. All the boys got Adam's curse and it could come anytime, but it was white.

Usually the men's curse came and scared them when women tempted them in their sleep.

But the whole mess of human life and sexuality was Eve's fault. When Eve ate the apple she got her period, then she invented sex, birth, and life on Earth.

If only Eve hadn't eaten that apple her two boys, Cain and Abel never would have been born, Cain would not have killed Abel, and Black people (the descendants of Cain) would not be cursed with dark skin and the effects of racism.

If it weren't for Eve and that apple and we'd all be angels with fluffy white wings floating around heaven drinking milk and honey. This was the mythology surrounding menstruation that I grew up with.

We in western and modern culture have had ambivalent relationships to these passages. We've treated them as if they were grave illnesses, socially shameful and bothersome; or pretended that they are nothing of importance. This response represents a kind of "neutering" of the female body and a numbing of the female spirit.

A Forked Tongue:

My mother and her best friend exchanged daughters in order to talk about menstruation.

I was sent down the street to talk to Miz S. And her daughter was sent to talk to my mom. Years later I found out that this business of sending your daughter to her aunt, or mother's best friend was a retention of African customs. In many African cultures mother wouldn't be the one to explain menstruation to her own daughter. The girl would receive that information within her age-grade group's rite of passage under the guidance and direction of a passage priestess.

It's easier for some people to speak of sex to someone else's child rather than their own. In this way the adult avoids the possibility of their child asking embarrassing questions about their private life and this avoidance relieves their anxiety. But they transmit their own fears nevertheless.

Miz S. explained to me that I had a great sore in my womb. She said that every month the scab would come off and I'd bleed. She told me not to be alarmed because this was the only way that I could have babies, which was, of course, my main reason for being born a woman.

Birth in a Basket:

She went on to say that when she first got married, her mother didn't tell her anything about life. So when she found herself pregnant, she thought the baby would be brought to her in a basket. She was totally shocked when the pains hit her and she went into "labor". Then she repeated the story of the Garden in Eden to justify "the suffering of woman". As I recall my mother told the other girl a different personal story, but one that was equally absurd.

Both stories however began and ended with Eve.

The Search for Meaning

None of this or the other stories I was given as a good little Catholic girl made much sense to me. In the coming years, I went on a quest for some spiritual knowledge that I could make sense out of, looking for the origin of things, trying to understand why my life was the way it was.

In the course of that search I began to read West African folklore and mythology; there I discovered the Orishas, the gods of the Yoruba religion. They put me in contact with a spiritual system that saw the earth as alive, that had respect for the past, that taught human beings what was important through stories of animals, trees and ancestors.

Most important the system had deities that included females. I was enthralled to encounter the Goddesses Yemonja, Oya and Oshun. In relationship to menstruation, I learned that Yemonja, whose Catholic representative in the New World is La Virgen de Regla, was believed to regulate women's menstrual cycles.

Oya, the Yoruba Amazon queen is associated with a grass skirt often dyed bright red; she is said to be the heart pumping blood through the body and a fierce warrior. And the most popular proverb for the Goddess Oshun is "Success is in your blood."

Furthermore, the cowrie shell through which the sacred oracle speaks is regarded as the vagina of Oshun, the Goddess of love, art and sensuality. So when I went looking for the Yoruba concept of the beginning of menstruation, I was shocked and disgusted to find this story:

Ode, the Hunter

Ode was a hunter who lived with his wife. All the game that he caught was deposited by Ode under a tree. Almost immediately Olofi would come and drink the animal's blood. Ode would then take the animal's carcass and bring it home to his wife, who would prepare the meat for dinner. The woman, who had noticed that all the animals were drained of blood, asked Ode to explain this strange situation. Ode answered her angrily that this was something that did not concern her and that she should temper her curiosity and give her attention to her wifely duties instead of her husband's affairs. The woman said nothing, but became more determined than ever to unravel the mystery. That night, as Ode slept, she made three holes in his knapsack and filled it with ashes.

The next day at dawn, Ode took the knapsack and his hunting implements and left the house. His wife, following the trail of ashes left by the knapsack, followed him stealthily and saw him kill a deer, which he promptly deposited under the sacrificial tree. Olofi arrived immediately to take the blood, but as soon as he came upon the scene his face clouded ominously.

"Why didn't you come alone as usual?" he asked Ode.

"But I came alone, *baba-mi*," said Ode.

"Then who is the woman hiding behind those bushes?" asked the Creator in a thundering voice.

Ode's face paled perceptibly. He glanced at the bushes nervously but saw no one.

"I don't know what woman you are referring to, my father" he insisted. "I see no one."

"I refer to your wife," said Olofi. "She followed you this morning to find out why the animals you bring home are drained of blood. You, in the bushes," he added, pointing his staff in the direction of the place where Ode's wife was hiding. "Come forth and show yourself."

Trembling with fear, Ode's wife came out of the bushes and immediately threw herself at Olofi's feet.

"Mercy *baba-mi*," she cried, kissing the hem of the Creator's robe. "I didn't know the blood was for you."

Olofi's face darkened with anger.

"A curious woman does discredit to her husband," he said coldly. "It shows she does not trust or respect him. Since you are so intent in seeing blood, you will see blood in yourself every month, as long as you are young."

This was how menstruation was first visited on woman.¹

Needless to say, I neither trust nor respect this tale. Like the story of the Garden in Eden we have a male god who creates woman with a curious mind, who puts her in a powerless position, and who punishes her for using her mind by attacking her body.

A Red Tale

This story of Ode the Hunter is the most popular and erroneous story regarding the African attitude toward menstruation. This story is very popular in America because it is the one that has been kept and colored by the imposition of Catholicism upon original African thought in the cultures of the Caribbean, especially Cuba. Because of this story, many self-respecting women have walked away from the Orisha tradition or passively accepted unreasonable taboos placed upon them regarding menstruation. On at least one occasion, I had the experience of living in a community where a menstruating woman was not allowed to cook food, to speak among men or to hand any object directly to a male. The belief was that her menstrual blood would nullify male power. Oh if only this were true, I'd stop the bloody wars today! For the fact is male bleeding is associated with injury, war, and death.

The practice of isolating a menstruating woman, limiting male contact and relieving her of common household duties are the privileges of the bleeding times, not the punishments of them. In order to find information carrying a better attitude toward menstruation, I have consulted Ifa (as it is my right to do, as an Iyanifa, mother of destiny, within the Yoruba tradition). I was guided to share with readers this poem from the sacred Orature:

Slender Menstrual Flow and Slender Semen
When the top of an ant-hill is broken,
it retains water inside its trunk
Oruru tree wears a garment of blood all over
When powdered chalk falls on the ground,
it scatters all over in fine particles.
Ifa divination was performed for slender Menstrual Flow,
who was a girl of heaven.
Ifa divination was also performed for slender Semen,
who was a boy of this earth.
Slender Menstrual Flow

¹The Pataki Eyioko from *Introduction to Seashell Divination* by Migene Gonzalez-Wippler, (New York: Original Publications, 1992), pg. 26-27.

we sought you in vain,
you refused to come back.
but you grew hands and feet, and turned into a baby.
You, offspring of blood;
we saw you no more.
You did not return.
But you grew hands and feet,
and turned into a baby
(The Holy Odu Iwori Meji)²

Oh what happened to slender Menstrual Flow, the girl of heaven and to slender Semen
the boy of earth?

Of particular interest are the first five lines of this poem. "Oruru tree wears a garment of blood all over...When powdered chalk falls on the ground...it scatters all over in fine particles". I mentioned earlier the red skirt of the Goddess Oya. This skirt, worn by initiates dedicating their lives to that Goddess is colored with *irosun*, a red powder made from camwood bark. Irosun is an integral part of most rituals performed in honor of the strong and aggressive deities. Here we see a red substance associated with menstrual blood holding a position of prominence in ritual as menstruation does in the formation of human life.

The Orisha tradition requires animal sacrifice as an integral part of the initiation process. Prior to my own initiation, I, like millions of other women, questioned, "Is it possible to use menstrual blood instead of the blood of animals in this process?" Over the years, many women who would have become wonderful and important priestesses walked away from the tradition because this question was not answered. Based on the strength of my knowledge and experience, acquired over 22 years of service to Oshun, I now take responsibility and address this issue.

Behind the Veil

A veil covers the door to Igboodu; the room where Ocha, the initiation process for the Orishas, occurs until the secret ceremonies have been completed. This is true in Africa, the Caribbean and North and South America.

As a practicing priestess, I have walked through the door and stood on the other side of the veil. I have witnessed, participated, and directed the process for most of the major deities. Based on this experience I have come to the conclusion that it would not be wise to attempt to conduct an initiation for the deities using women's menstrual blood. Such an attempt would endanger the woman and result in the birth of something other than Orisha.

However, it is important to know that within the tradition, any woman who is seven months pregnant during her initiation gives birth to a child who is born a priest. In this way, the process of birthing the deity and birthing a child are done in accordance with natural law and cultural tradition. This information is not widely known.

Further, it is clear to me that in the distant past all our ancestors practiced animal sacrifice. Imitation of menstruation is being enacted with a now unspoken understanding

² Babalawo Wande Abimbola, *Ifa Divination Poetry* (Nok Publishing International, 1977.)

that the birth of everything, at the mammalian level, occurs in blood. Blood and its bright red color equal life and vitality. This is true everywhere for everyone.

However, it is important to understand the logic and reasoning behind the preference against human blood in the ritual. When we are born we pass through the first Portal of Life, the Womb, preferably head first, surrounded by the blood of our mothers. Once we are born, and separated from the mother's body, growth and life are processes of strengthening the head (Ori) of the person who has been born. Most of the important rituals done immediately after birth and throughout one's life involve washing the head, medicating the head, addressing the head, and adorning the head. There are precious few rituals beyond those of puberty and birthing that address the genitals to the same extent.

So when we perform ritual sacrifice, it is with the blood taken from the throat of the animal with its proximity and connection to the head, rather than the genitals of the animal. I know only of one ritual wherein the genitals of the animal are addressed. It is the castration of a male goat done to placate the "Our Mothers" especially the Goddess Oshun.

While this information serves to address the mystery behind the Veil, it does not address our need to recover and re-create rituals honoring the power of menstruation.

My Sister the Stranger

During the course of my priesthood, I have been privileged to learn many things and experience many rituals. Each new piece of knowledge is earned through the rigors of initiation, which include social isolation, study, educational and ritual expenses, and oaths of secrecy.

Acquiring "secrets" is quite a task. When I encounter women who have come to maturity in indigenous cultures, I have to prove that I am worthy of sisterhood before they will tell me anything. They also test my knowledge to determine whether or not I am teachable. And most importantly, as a western woman, I must be humble enough to respect their right to secrecy. It's their protection.

Far too often they have opened themselves to explorers from the western world only to be ridiculed or exploited. Our presence brought on disease, destruction and death. Often our presence brought with it a religion that imposed itself upon them, changed their worldview and attached shame to the very thing that I now come to reclaim. So even my desire to know is suspicious behavior.

And last but not least is the power of secrecy itself. Secrets are capsules of information. The power of a secret lies in the fidelity of its adherents. When the capsule is broken the energy dissipates and becomes common knowledge. Sometimes this is a good thing, sometimes not.

What I have learned is that African women keep their knowledge within the women's secret society, share it with society members, and expect members to keep the secret. To the sister outside it may appear that there is no secret.

Western women, who do not have secret societies, are eager to discover and uncover secrets. Whatever we learn we quickly expose it to prove that we have it. And unfortunately we sometimes expose too much, too soon, and to the wrong people. Nevertheless I have come to understand the principles involved, and have successfully given enough spiritual direction that I offer the following ritual with confidence. This

material adheres to the classical components of a rite of passage as outlined by the anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep.³ I have, however, extended the stages of the rite of passage to compensate for the challenges and conditions we face as Western women.

This rite of passage is designed to honor the menstrual cycle. Choose the right time, place, and elements according to your environment and circumstances. Of course qualified people should impart an education about nutrition, hygiene and the nature of menstruation.

Shedding Her Skin

1. IDENTIFICATION

This rite may be performed for a young woman individually, or for an age-grade group. It may be done anytime after the appearance of the "first moon show" of blood. It may also be performed for older women whose first menstrual cycle experience was absent or abusive.

In a sexually integrated village all roles would be fulfilled by the persons who stand in that role. So the girl's mother would be her birth mother and the father her birth father. However if the ritual is conducted by the women's society, in the absence of men, I recommend that a post-menopausal woman play the male role. In any event participants can "stand in proxy" for absent community members. From this point on the celebrant will be referred to as the "Red Daughter".

The Red Daughter should be encouraged to interact with a group of youngsters of mixed ages and genders. At the sound of a bell "the Mother" (the passage priestess) should throw a white sheet, towel, or veil over the daughter's head.

Now she may be secluded in a cave, behind a bush or tree or place in a menstrual hut or room.

2. SEPARATION/ISOLATION

She is instructed to be quiet and to remember all that she can about her life up to this point. Give her water, milk or coconut milk to drink and a stick to scratch herself with. Books, music, cigarettes and other things that distract her from meditation should be declared taboo. Give her sufficient time to review her childhood (20-45 mins.)

3. PURIFICATION

Now the Red Daughter may be given any of the following purifications:

-She may be smudged with herbs such as sage, sweet grass, rose petals etc.

-She may be swept with a bouquet of leaves and flowers. Choose the plant that grows in abundance near you or leaves from her favorite tree. Add to this plum blossoms, white carnations, lilies or some other flower. Sweep her body down from head to toe. Be sure to clean her head, breast, and pubis.

-Bathe her in sacred waters. This may be collected from an unpolluted river, waterfall, or stream. You may want to collect water and expose it to the light of the Full Moon for this bath. If you are fortunate enough to live near the Ocean, go and bathe in

³ van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage* (University of Chicago Press, 1960.) Translated by Monika L. Vizedom and Gabrielle B. Caffee.

the Belly of the Mother directly. If you live in an urban setting fill the bathtub with water, and then add (inexpensive) powdered milk, salt or perfume.

Whichever purification method you choose should be done thoroughly and in an atmosphere of importance. While cleaning her, list the childhood activities that she can no longer participate in. (If you are documenting the rite, this stage should remain secret. It should not be recorded or photographed).

In my experience this can become an emotional time. Childhood fears, experiences and abuses may come to consciousness. Let her cry, scream and fight if necessary. Reassure her that the days of powerlessness are coming to an end. When she settles down ask the Red Daughter if she is ready to become the Red Woman. A yes answer means that the ritual can proceed. If she says no everything stops.

4. CONFRONTATION WITH FEAR

The Red Daughter is wrapped in a white sheet or gown. She is directed to walk, blindfolded, down a long path of red flower petals. The path is flanked on both sides by women of menstrual age, the Menstrual Mothers. A pre-pubescent girl walks behind her; a post-menopausal woman walks in front of her.

This path is the Sacred Portal, the vaginal canal.

The women call out both negative and positive statements about menstruation. At the end of the path the Red Daughter meets her Mother.

5. DEATH AND REBIRTH

Together the Mother and Daughter will destroy a symbol of girlhood. Perhaps they will cut a lock of her hair, smash an outworn toy or rip up an old piece of clothing. This act should be dramatic and accentuated by exclamations and lamentations at the death of the old.

Now it is time to slip out of her old skin and into the new one. The Menstrual Mothers surround the girl singing as she dances to remove her white garment.

The white garment should be hidden under a bush immediately. (She must never see it again). Now the Menstrual Mothers dress her in the Menstrual skirt (red palm frond) or a red dress.

6. TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Now the Red Woman must commit an act of creation. She may write a poem, weave a basket, plant seeds or make a human figure in clay. Whatever task is placed before her should be guided and supported by the Menstrual Mothers.

Encourage her to try something new or to succeed where she has failed in the past.

When she has accomplished the task, the women may paint her face and body, or arrange for an appropriate tattoo.⁴ At this point she should also receive a headdress. It may be a festive *gele* (African style head cloth), a hat adorned with leaves and flowers, a jeweled hair ornament, or a crown with horns. At this point she may change her name or acquire a title.

7. REINTEGRATION AND CELEBRATION

⁴ Personal note: The integrity of this practice has been all but totally corrupted in our culture.

A feast has been prepared at another location. Perhaps the menu includes special dishes from the Red Woman's ancestral culture. Seafood, home grown vegetables, multi-grain bread, juice, and wine. The table setting should reflect the connection between woman's blood power and the abundance of the Earth.

As the Red Woman approaches the door, she may be met by a male figure (father, brother, or representative) who declares "I Am He Who Bleeds and Dies".

The menstrual party stands firm behind the Red Woman as she responds "I Am She Who Bleeds and Gives Life."

Now she walks through the door, leading her party of women. Feasting and gift giving follow.

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