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MA Ecology and Spirituality

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Menarche Ritual in a Secular World

Introduction

During our MA module Indigeny Today we were exposed to a range of indigenous traditions offering the opportunity to experience vigil, pilgrimage, divination, drumming, singing, dance, chanting and prayer. My reflective journal writing was impacted by these practices and I was able to consider the importance of ritual in my modern, secular life. In this essay I seek to engage with the revival of secular coming of age rituals for girls by drawing on my personal experience as a teacher and circle facilitator. I will also share the thoughts of women leading ritual in modern times and contrast this with an enquiry into the history of rituals dedicated to menarche and rites of passage.

When I reached the age of forty I was given the opportunity to experience a coming of age ceremony called the 'Maiden Rites' while training to be a women's circle facilitator with Karen Ward of Slí an Chroí, Ireland. This ceremony offered a space in which I reflected on my menarche in a positive, loving and celebratory manner and allowed me to dispel the shame and confusion I experienced as a teen. This experience had a profound effect on me and initiated an enquiry into rites of passage. During our Indigeny Today module our teacher, Colin Campbell (2018), explained that in the Botswanan cultures he has experienced, the menstrual cycle is considered a ritual of its own and that women are understood to become closer to the divine each time they bleed. Another teacher on our module, Pat McCabe (2018), highlighted the creative power of the womb space and explained that in her American Diné culture the womb of a woman connects to the womb of the cosmos. During menstruation, or in McCabe's words, 'Moontime', women have the ability to connect and receive information from the Earth. In Diné tradition menstruation was a time for women to rest and nourish their intuition. Women slept with their heads to the centre of a lodge sharing communal dreams that inspired key messages for their communities. Menstruation symbolism is common in many cultures and is a varied anthropological study (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988) but for the most part this celebration of the female form is not being upheld in western society and is disappearing in traditional cultures worldwide. In this essay I seek to explore a variety of menstrual rituals, ancient and modern, in order to establish the benefits a rite of passage brings to both the participant and the community at the moment of menarche.

The term rite of passage was introduced by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, who concluded from his observations of aboriginal communities in Australia, that a rite of passage ritual has a three part structure – separation, transition and incorporation (Van Gennep 1909). The concept of ritual is complex and encumbered with negative religious or superstitious connotations for many in modern western society. There are a number of practitioners in the UK redefining the experience of ritual and offering secular variations to highlight their belief that ritual and rites of passage are basic

human needs. UK based ritualist, William Ayot (2015), purports that there are three types of ritual: rituals for continuity, alignment and growth. In his book *Re-enchanting the Forest* (2015), dedicated to bringing ritual to secular society, he refers to rituals as symbolic experiences of transformation through which we can communicate with our soul or psyche. He sees ritual as life-affirming, bringing a sense of connection with the numinous. Ayot describes life's initiations as 'gateways' to each stage of human development and asserts that by marking these points with ritual, offers 'psychological and emotional tools' for navigating life. Working in secular environments, he acknowledges the strong religious implication of the word ritual and the cynicism our rational culture feels towards spiritual experiences. This has led to a culture almost devoid of ritual. Ayot adds that war and industrial progress have diminished our understanding of these 'sacred technologies' and their necessary role in society (2015: 75).

Author and nature based teacher, Glennie Kindred, suggests that ritual can fulfil a desire to feel interconnected with the world and to understand our place within it. She promotes ritual as a tool that helps us take time out of our busy schedules to listen to our inner wisdom (Kindred 2014). UK based celebrant and author of *Birthrites*, Jackie Singer, describes ritual as an inherently human activity that allows us to assimilate pivotal changes in our life, bringing shape and coherence to our existence. Singer describes ritual as a robust framework presenting us with a container for all of our emotions, lending 'majesty to our unfolding,' and letting 'each individual know they are valued within their community and part of the human family.' (Singer 2009: 2)

For those of us living a secular modern life there is often a lack of community preventing us from gathering or a reduced awareness of the importance of ritual, reducing the seminal moments in life to a social gathering such as a baby shower or a birthday party. For evidence of the impact ritual can have on individuals and their communities, it is thus necessary to consider traditional indigenous cultures that have maintained initiation rituals and to reflect on the various thresholds humans pass through in a lifetime within these customs. Historian, Professor Manu Ampim (2003), identifies five major African initiation rites: birth, adulthood, marriage, eldership and ancestorship. He describes how these five themes can be commonly found throughout traditional African culture, providing an 'integrated initiation system' that creates an enduring unity in African culture. He adds that these rites are tools to deter different age groups from the problems found in western culture such as conflict and marginalising women, children or elders (Ampim 2003). If we consider western culture within these five thresholds of life, there are three acknowledged by ritual in western society – birth, marriage and death. The remaining two thresholds, namely a child starting the journey to adulthood at puberty and an adult entering his/her senior years, are both areas of life that happen without ceremony or celebration in contemporary society.

Writer and mentor Gail Burkett (2016) is an advocate for the return of female rites of passage in modern culture believing that these key moments in our life need to be witnessed and celebrated. Burkett extends the five initiation points outlined by Ampim and, through her life spiral, she suggests that there are nine passages for women and girls: birth, middle childhood, first blood, first flight, womanhood bloom, deepening womanhood, elder encore, spiritual elder, death (2016: 12). Burkett describes passage rituals as a 'natural intersection where an internal biological clock meets a spiritual longing', seeing these ceremonies as a celebration of 'accumulated change and growth' (Burkett 2016: 10). Burkett (2016) asserts that in modern life we have lost the language of these

rites and, as most adults were not initiated at the time of these physical and emotional transformations common to all humans, we are bereft of traditions.

Burkett's assertion of losing the language of ritual and the aforementioned negative impact the word ritual holds for secular society, recognises the semantic barrier between the modern human experience and the self-actualisation opportunities rites of passage can offer for both the individual and one's community. Religious historian, Mary N. MacDonald (2011), acknowledges the paradox associated with linguistics when explaining that indigenous communities see their spirituality as part of daily life and have no need for the word religion in an existence shaped by ritual. In the absence of religion, ritual can thus be accepted as a cultural category and for secular society to return to a life punctuated with ritual it is important to consider the origin of its study in the western tradition. Ritual theory was formalised in the nineteenth century and is considered by ritual theorist, Catherine Bell, as a 'universal category of human experience' (2009: 3). Bell posits in her book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* that there has been a consistent acknowledgement of ritual as a 'type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing or cultural forces come together' (2009: 16). In his efforts to understand how societies would be impacted by modern life French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, saw ritual as having an integral role, representing the collective consciousness and a path to solidarity (Durkheim 1915). The discourse surrounding ritual was also the subject of anthropologist, Victor Turner's career. Influenced by Van Gennep's rites of passage work, Turner wanted to understand the liminal space during a ritual where participants may seem disorientated and time appears suspended yet full of potential. Turner (1969) used the term *communitas* for the moment when a community shares this numinous experience during a rite of passage. Perhaps new language surrounding ritual is key to its survival in a secular world so that the tainted connotations disappear and individuals can gain from such experiences.

To discover the reasons behind the denial of secular ritual rites in modern European life, one can start with the establishment of Christianity as the dominant belief system. Anthropologist, Mary Douglas, states in her book *Purity and Danger* that by the end of the Reformation ritual outside of church life was condemned, particularly in protestant countries. In her view this impact has remained and subsequently, 'With every new century we become heirs to a longer and more vigorous anti-ritualist tradition' (1966: 62). Douglas refers to ritual as recognising the 'potency of disorder' in which special healing powers can be obtained. She aligns her thinking with Van Gennep's views of the danger present in transitional states and the journey from life to death to rebirth. Thus by ritually acknowledging life's thresholds and venerating this transition in terms of a resurrection, the ceremony is powerfully symbolic and if this takes place outside of church life, it could be a threat to the authority of Christianity. In a patriarchal system, if this ceremony concerns women and affords certain powers to participants, suppression is vital.

As with indigenous traditions, birth, marriage and death remain part of church and secular celebrations but recognising the path to adulthood in a coming of age ceremony is not an aspect of church or modern secular life. Menarche, menstruation and menopause all relate to the flow of blood and in some cultures these 'blood mysteries' are full of potent power, however, in the Judeo-Christian traditions menstrual blood is considered unclean (Bolen 1994:67). These conflicting attitudes to the nature of women's womb biology are described by Janet Hoskins (2002) in *Blood Mysteries: Beyond Menstruation as Pollution*, surmising that 'Menstrual blood can be conceived as simultaneously polluting and purifying, as a wound and a normal sign of good health.' The cultural

repression of women in Judeo-Christian history and the degrading of menstruation could signify a fear of women's power within a patriarchal system.

The patriarchal religions that have shaped western history consider their deity in masculine form with most teachings conveyed through men (Abraham, Moses, Jesus), providing validation for men's privilege to most leadership positions (Starr Sered 1986). The subordinate role played by women within this structure has led feminists to attribute the treatment of women as central to comprehending the origins of male dominance and the female social identity. Feminist theologian, Carol Christ (2016), concludes that the control of female sexuality is fundamental to the patriarchal system and scholar Silvia Federici (2014) explains in her book 'Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation' that the removal of women's power was an essential requirement for the transition to capitalism, instigated by the violence of the witch-hunts. In communities that did acknowledge the onset of puberty, it is evident that Christianity coupled with colonisation have had suppressive roles. Anthropologist, Edith Turner, has dedicated her career to understanding the journey of women's spiritual experience, in particular in Zambia. Having studied the puberty rites of passages of girls in the Ndembu tribe of Zambia in the 1950s, Turner returned in the 1980s to find that this female initiation had been altered beyond recognition by the influence of Christianity. Acknowledgement of a girls' nubility and changing physicality were no longer celebrated due to pressure from the Christian missions and the rationalist government school system (1987). Similarly in nineteenth century North America the Yurok puberty rite, known as the Flower Dance, was a significant ritual celebrating a participant's journey to womanhood and the central position women hold in this culture. The demise of these menarche ceremonies among the Yurok culture is attributed to the arrival of Europeans and their Christian, dualistic influence (Rojas 2003).

However, Douglas (1966: 63) elaborates that 'As a social animal, man is a ritual animal' and that if ritual is inhibited it will appear in another form elsewhere and indeed these rites of passages are reappearing. The Red Tent movement offers a monthly retreat space representing the menstrual huts from traditional societies and has become a global phenomenon since Anita Diamant's book *Red Tent* (2001). DeAnna L'am has been at the forefront of menstrual empowerment since the 1990s. She is a promoter of the Red Tent movement and writes on all aspects of women's spiritual connection with their womb. L'am (2010) asserts that girls experiencing the onset of menarche have a tendency to lose their confidence due to the taboo associated with menstruation. This is a phenomenon I have witnessed as a teacher and led to my training as a facilitator of girls' circles specifically aimed at offering space for discussions related to emotions, body change, puberty and menstruation. In my experience, changing the culture around the path to womanhood has a profound impact on the child, family and community. Shifting the narrative from shame to celebration and offering openness and understanding around this threshold has allowed my students to relish the secular menarche ritual we hold. When life's transitions are welcomed and the female body is embraced in a positive and empowered way, young people feel honoured and supported. My experiences concur with women's leadership coach, Alexandra Pope, who is co-founder of Red School and views menstruation as a means of accessing female authority, claiming that approaching menarche with ritual can empower women (Pope 2013).

In April 2016 *Newsweek's* front cover focused on menstruation for the first time in an article that stated 'the period is one of the most ignored human rights issues around the globe—affecting everything from education and economics to the environment and public health.' There is no doubt

that it is a topic worthy of enquiry and discussion. There are debates surrounding the unfair taxation of menstrual merchandising, the health and environmental dangers of certain sanitary products and the lack of open discussion. Carol A. Bailey states in her article, Equality with Difference: On Androcentrism and Menstruation, that negative attitudes to menstruation demonstrate 'the oppressive nature of the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism on women's experiences' (1993: 123). By focussing on young people's first experience of menarche and ensuring this is a moment of celebration, removed from notions of taboo and uncleanness, communities are not only preparing adolescents in an empowering way, they are also turning the tide on the suppression of women and the inequalities of our capitalist systems.

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