

Chapter 3

Menstruation and Fertility

To understand modern contraceptive practice from an ethnographic perspective, one must have some understanding of the domains of daily life that are affected by the use of the pharmaceutical contraceptive methods. All of the major pharmaceutical methods used in government clinics in the Philippines, except condoms, can and do influence menstruation and of course, fertility. The major reasons not related to pregnancy that women give for discontinuing a modern method of contraception are health concerns and side effects. Thus, women's practices and understandings of menstruation and, to a lesser extent, fertility are contextualized and explained in terms of how they relate to health and illness in this chapter. The understandings and practices of Ilocano, Ifugao, and women from other ethnic groups who participated in the study did not vary significantly; thus, their responses are analyzed as a whole below. The menstrual practices of women we interviewed in Quirino Province bear a striking resemblance to the practices of Malay women as described and interpreted by Laderman in the early 1980s (Laderman, 1983). They are also similar to those among women in a southern Tagalog community described by Jocano (1973) and more recently, those of women living in Manila described by Michael Tan (1999). These practices are for the most part derived from humoral theory as practiced in peninsular Southeast Asia. Although these practices may be more abbreviated in some areas of Quirino Province, the assumptions about the body, menstruation, and fertility underlying these practices influence couples' interpretations of the effects of modern contraceptive method use and thus their decisions to continue or discontinue a method.

3.1 Exposure to Cold

When we asked women how they care for themselves during menstruation⁴ most women said that to varying degrees, they avoided eating sour fruits and vegetables and other "cold" foods during their menstrual period. For example, Josie⁵ from Debibi said the following (translated by Mary):

"I'm avoiding sour and cold foods because when I eat sour fruits, my menstruation stops, and it causes me headaches. Then, my menstruation is not continuous."

Like Josie, those who avoided sour and cold foods during menstruation said they did so because eating them caused the menstrual blood to stop flowing.

Laderman summarizes the humoral concepts of hot and cold as follows:

"The Malays, in common with people from many past and present cultures, categorize foods, diseases, and treatments according to intrinsic qualities, which they refer to as

⁴ Menstruation is commonly referred to as "regla," a borrowed term. "Agsangali" is the Ilocano term for menstruation and is also used sometimes.

⁵ Pseudonyms are used for all study participants and interviewers.

'heating' or 'cooling.' Although temperature may be one consideration (e.g., using a fire to heat the beds of women in the puerperium), they are not equivalent to thermal measurements. In the Malay system, humoral qualities of foods are not changed by altering their temperature. Thus, squash boiling on the stove is still humorally 'very cold,' while alcohol, even if iced, is still 'extremely hot.' Since illness is thought to occur when the equilibrium of these opposing elements is disturbed, the practical application of this theory aims at restoration of the body's balance, using foods and treatments that decrease the element in excess and/or increase the deficient humor."

The aim of humoral prevention and treatment, in other words, is to restore the body's balance. It follows that by avoiding humorally cold foods, such as sour fruits and cold drinks, these women are preventing further increase of the cold element during menstruation.

In addition to avoiding cold food, women also said they avoided taking a shower, either on a certain day or time of day during menstruation, and/or avoided washing certain parts of the body.⁶ For example, Jovie from Saguday said,

"I don't take a bath during the first day of my menstruation."

Like eating cold foods, bathing is considered a cold-inducing activity and was said to cause menstruation to cease.

Laderman's interpretation of the natural dynamics of blood in relation to illness among Malaysian women may explain the theoretical underpinning of these women's observations that eating sour and cold foods and bathing can slow menstrual flow.

"Malays consider blood so hot that it cannot clot within the body, though it can when it comes into contact with cold air. Changes in body temperature, however, can affect the speed of blood flow. A hot illness produces a rapid pulse and a cold condition a slow pulse, since cold thickens the blood."

Thicker menstrual blood moving closer to a bodily orifice, it follows, will not flow as easily. Thus, one would not want to expose oneself to cold in the form of food, bath water, or weather because it could further inhibit the flow of blood. In daily practice, the sign that may indicate overexposure to cold during menstruation is a sluggish or absent menstrual flow that produces headache and dizziness. Avoiding cold, however, does not fully explain other aspects of Quirino women's daily practice during menstruation.

⁶ Some parts of the body are considered hotter than others and some times of the day are likewise considered hotter than others. See Laderman for a detailed explanation.

3.2 Dropped Uterus

Another common response to the question of how a woman cares for herself during menstruation was that heavy work, such as lifting and carrying heavy things or scrubbing the floor, was put off during menstruation. For example, Josie continued her discussion of how she takes care of herself during menstruation by observing,

“I don’t do heavy chores like washing clothes [when I am menstruating] because I will feel pain and cramps all over my body.”

Another woman from Saguday observed that both

“Eating sour foods and carrying heavy things . . . can stop the flow of your menstruation.”

Although women said it was often not possible to avoid heavy labor due to the demands of daily life, they tried to do so in the ways that *were* possible in order to avoid cramps and inhibited menstrual flow, such as putting off scrubbing the floor or doing laundry.

In addition to experiencing abdominal pain, women said that if they did heavy work while menstruating, it could cause their uterus to “drop” down, i.e., literally drop downward in the abdominal cavity. Orlando from Diffun explained how this was possible:

“Our uterus at that time is slippery, so there’s a tendency that it will slide down.”

Laderman’s observations about the body humors may provide some insight into the meaning of her observation about the slippery quality of the uterus during menstruation.

“The organizing principle of phlegm or lendir, the cold body humor, is that of sliminess: the mucus of a runny nose, lymph, semen, egg whites, the viscous matter in okra, certain bananas and other slimy fruits and vegetables, and the slime on the skin of certain fish.”

In other words, “our uterus at that time is slippery” suggests that the uterus itself is cold during menstruation, a condition in which one expects slowed blood circulation within the organ. Regarding displacement of body parts within the body, Laderman observed that

“When blood does not flow normally through an area, it [the area] becomes cold, and muscles move from their true places.”

Thus, when one strains to lift heavy things, the slippery, cold uterus may literally move down lower or be displaced in the abdominal cavity by the tensing of the abdominal muscles.

When asked “could the uterus actually slide out of the body?” another respondent from Saguday said,

"[It might] not actually come out, but I think the uterus will slide down because it's slippery. Yes, [I've experienced dropped uterus] . . . That's why I used to let my uterus be lifted up whenever I felt pain in my menstruation . . . Usually, the hilot will massage my uterus to bring it back to its normal position. Then after that, I don't experience painful menstruation anymore."

Other women also said that uterus slippage was indicated at times by the feeling of cramping during the menstrual period. Jocano also attributed the phenomenon of "cramping," also commonly experienced as "chest pain" in the southern Luzon Tagalog community, to an imbalance of hot and cold:

"Chest pains are due to puntada, a form of muscular cramps caused by the imbalance of hot and cold elements inside the body. It can appear in any part of the body, although the chest is most vulnerable to puntada attack."

Many women said that heavy cramping during menstruation (which could be said to result from an imbalance of hot and cold) could result in a dropped uterus. This type of displacement of the uterus from its upright, high position in the abdomen was said by some women (as well as hilots) to potentially cause infertility.

3.3 Eating Bitter (Menstrual Regulation)

Although eating sour foods can inhibit the flow of menstrual blood, the hilots we interviewed explained that eating certain potent bitter roots, which are used for medicinal purposes (and not consumed as food) and are considered to be "hot," induces menstruation. Thus, they can be used to regulate menstruation, especially for women with severe dysmenorrhea. Patricia, a hilot, explains,

"Especially those with abnormal menstruation or who suffer from painful menstruation, I just tell them to drink something bitter . . . especially makabuhay; yes, it is considered an abortive herbal . . . Cut it into small pieces and when the patient can endure the bitterness, then she'll boil it and drink the soup . . . The makabuhay is the one I let them take when their menstruation is delayed because if it is already one month, then I don't give them anything anymore because they might commit abortion."

She goes on to explain that

"The bitter taste brings on menstruation."

The bitter taste, in other words, is at least in part what makes the root efficacious.^{7, 8}

⁷ Jocano catalogued more than 20 formulas for menstrual regulation in Tagalog pharmacopia in the 1970s.

⁸ Other medicines that were mentioned in our discussions that bring on menstruation were mahogany, bitter cucumber, Kalachuchi roots, bitter grass, and makahiya.

All four of the hilot we interviewed were concerned not to cause their client to have an abortion. If the menstrual period was delayed more than a month, they said they would not provide the medicine. Women also said they generally go to the hilot for correction of the placement of the uterus rather than for menstrual regulation, as Josie pointed out:

"[I go to the hilot] only when I feel abdominal pain. Not when my menstruation is delayed."

Eating sour fruits and vegetables or doing heavy work may cause the menstrual flow to stop, and eating potent bitter substances brings it on. However, these practices should not be construed as hard-and-fast rules derived from a standardized view of how the body (either biological or humoral) functions.

3.4 Individual Variation

Humoral systems are dynamic rather than taxonomic, and an individual woman's practices during menstruation are derived from personal trial-and-error experiences rather than simply from an abstract knowledge of the social rules such as "do not eat sour or cold foods when you menstruate." For example, Jane from Zamora recalled why she started avoiding sour fruits during menstruation:

"They said you should not eat sour foods, so when I had my menstruation, I tried going against what they told me and I had a stomachache; my menstruation stopped, and from that time on, I did not do it anymore."

Although the majority of the women interviewed said they took some degree of precaution regarding exposure to cold during menstruation, there were variations in women's practices, influenced at times by subtle bodily sensations such as cravings for or feelings of warmth. Although many women said they felt a craving for sour foods before or during their menstrual period, others said they had no such cravings. Since they did not want to eat sour foods, no special effort was made to avoid them. Others said that they took a bath because they felt warm. One woman even had the exact opposite response as the majority of participants to eating sour foods. Loretta from Saguday said the following (translated by Jo):

"When I was still single, I usually avoided eating sour fruits. I had an experience before. I ate sour fruits, and blood continuously flowed for three days, and I was even hospitalized because of this profuse bleeding that I experienced."

That eating foods can affect one's menstruation is generally not in question among these women. The question is how a particular person reacts to these foods and under what conditions. These bodily responses are key for understanding how "the rules," such as not eating sour foods during menstruation, should be followed by a particular individual.

A few of the women said they did not avoid sour and cold foods or bathing (even though they knew others did) because they did not “believe” in those things. For example, Mary who lives in Saguday said the following (translated by Maria):

“I don’t believe that when you eat sour food and take a bath during menstruation, your blood will stop and you will become crazy.”

Although some women we interviewed distanced themselves from these practices, their experiences with the side effects of modern contraceptive methods indicated that they too held similar common-sense views of the body. One might wonder at this point why women are so vigilant about menstruation. To understand this issue more fully, one must look at the “nature” of the female body.

3.5 Dirty and Clean

When we asked women why they menstruate each month, a variety of explanations were offered, for example, it is a “sign of womanhood,” a sign that one was “not pregnant,” or “God’s will.” It was interesting that although women’s speculations on the ultimate reasons for menstruation varied, their proximal, functional reason did not. All the women interviewed said that menstrual blood was dirty and needed to come out for a woman to be clean.

For example, Gloria from Debibi said,

“It is natural for a woman to bleed so that she will be clean.”

Although her statement emphasizes the dirty nature of women, most women used the concepts of “dirty” and “clean” to convey a functional purpose to monthly menstruation, one that relates to the cleaning properties of blood. For example, Carmen from Debibi explained

“That [menstruation] is normal for women . . . to cleanse the dirt in our body.”

When the interviewer asked,

What do you mean by dirt?

Carmen answered,

“I mean the dirt in the blood will come out.”

Another woman put it like this:

“It [menstruation] comes from the inner part of the body; the dirty blood is accumulated, and then it comes out.”

In other words, menstrual blood literally cleans and carries the dirt out of the body.

When asked “what might happen if your period stopped?” women responded most often with their own symptomatic experiences of sluggish or absent menstrual flow. For example, Marissa from Debibi noted that

“If the blood does not come out, I am more irritable and hot-tempered.”

Elma from Diffun said,

“If your menstruation would stop, it could cause dizziness.”

Mary from Diffun responded with a more theoretical explanation, saying that

“The blood might clot inside the uterus, and it [menstruation] will cease later on.”

Then, she added her experiential reasoning:

“Besides, if the blood will not come out, it will cause a headache.”

Rose, a Barangay health worker from Diffun, relates the phenomenon to overall blood circulation (translated by Aurora):

“I think this [menstruation] is already normal in a woman’s life. Besides, it may clean the body of a woman because the dirty blood comes out every month, so there is a normal circulation of the blood.”

In other words, this provider is saying that women need to menstruate to have normal blood circulation.

Some women speculated about the potential long-term consequences of not menstruating. For example, Mila from Diffun said (translated by Jo),

“They say that if the blood doesn’t come out, it will be formed as tumor or cyst.”

Other responses included, “you will be poisoned,” “you could become insane,” or “crazy.”

3.6 Fertile Time and Sex

When we asked women when during the month a woman was most fertile, most women said that they were fertile when the uterus was “open.” Emily from Debibi explained this phenomenon saying,

“During our menstruation, it [the uterus] opens, and it closes after menstruation . . . During the days that the uterus opens and you have sexual contact, you will get pregnant; that is according to their [friend’s] experience.”

Although women generally understood that the uterus had to be open both to menstruate and to get pregnant, they were not sure about the exact timing of the opening and closing of the uterus. In addition, some couples said that they did not have sex when the wife was menstruating because it was unsanitary. For example, while discussing the extended menstruation caused by the pill, this husband said,

“There was a time that she had her menstruation continuously for three months. So we couldn’t have sex because it’s very unsanitary to have sex during her period.”

The days immediately following menstruation were also considered the fertile time.

“I think the uterus is open seven days after the menstruation and it is closed seven days before the menstruation. I am not sure of it. That’s why I’m not using the natural method.”

The responses of women who seemed more sure of the timing of this opening-closing phenomenon varied; one said the uterus was open from the third to the fifteenth day after menstruation, and another said it was open for a maximum of nine days after menstruation and then it closed. The nonfertile time according to the women who were able to give detailed answers to this question fell within the biomedically defined “fertile time.”

Fertility was not only related to the openness of the uterus but also to the position of the uterus in the belly. For example, Joyce, a hilot, explained it as follows:

“Our uteruses are different from one another. There are those whose uterus is turned in the opposite direction, that causes painful intercourse . . . I had to flip it the other way, so the opening would go in the right direction, which should be straight . . . There are those whose opening is tilted on one side. I had a patient before, and she’d been married for 12 years and couldn’t get pregnant. I learned later her uterus was slightly tilted on the left. After I fixed it, she was able to conceive. She now has three children.”

In interviews with hilots we found that “turning the uterus” was a method of contraception provided by them to women living in the study area, but no women mentioned that they actually used a hilot for contraception. When we asked whether they might prescribe something to bring on the menstruation of a woman who was taking contraception the hilot answered,

“If a doctor prescribed that to them, they should go see him if they feel something is wrong.”

Conversely, women who were having infertility problems might go to the hilot who could also massage a displaced uterus back into its proper position and increase their chances of becoming pregnant. The hilots provided infertility treatment for women that primarily involved massaging the uterus upright to a high position in the abdominal cavity. Valarie, a hilot from Diffun, explains,

“I help those who are about to give birth and those wanting to have children but cannot conceive. They will come to me for advise. I would check whether her uterus is in place. If it is down, then I have to massage it to get the right placement. They would complain of painful menstruation, and I suspect their uterus is not in its proper place. They would ask what they should do, and I tell them to massage it, and if the good lord permits it, they will have children. They will ask me to do it myself since I am known in the area to handle such cases.”

Clearly, menstruation is part of what makes and keeps women living in Quirino Province healthy. Most likely, this holds true for women living elsewhere in the Philippines as well. Theoretically speaking, menstruation is important for good circulation of the blood and for keeping the bodily humors in balance. Although most women would not refer to the humoral theory that underlies their embodied common sense, they incorporate practices into daily life that will ensure a consistent menstrual flow, such as avoiding exposure to cold foods and bath water and heavy work during their menstruation. Sexual practices are modified by the occurrence of menstruation for some of the couples due to the “unsanitary” nature of menstrual blood. The fertile period occurs when the uterus is open, i.e., during menstruation, and for a variable period of time after menstruation. Hilots treat women mainly for problems related to infertility (rather than contraception) although they may also prescribe herbal medicines to bring on menstruation. The next chapter explores the experiences and speculation of women and couples about the use of contraceptive methods.