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Menstrual slaps and first blood celebrations. Inference, simulation and the learning of ritual

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Much of what follows is a first attempt to conceptualize Neopagan and New Age ceremonial in relation to ritual activity of a more classical variety. Present-day ritual crafting is approached as a means to test and reconsider certain ideas regarding the nature of ritual action in general. Relying on data drawn largely from the Internet, I base my analysis on a contrast between episodes that mark a young woman's first menstruation in two different modern Western traditions: ritualized face-slapping and contemporary menarche rites. In both cases, participants rely on inferential interpretation and on empathic simulation in order to make sense of these exceptional events. They do so, however, in quite different ways. Taking this divergence into account prompts speculation regarding the principles governing the organisation and transmission of ritual behaviour.

Inference and simulation

The arguments presented here proceed from the idea that it is useful to envisage ritual behaviour as enacting special patterns of relationship, at once between participants and, in an embedded fashion, with other human and non-human entities: spirits, ancestors, objects, liturgical pronouncements, places and so forth (Houseman and Severi 1998; Houseman 2000, 2006). These enactments are efficacious in that they provide the participants with indisputable grounds for subsequent discourse and action, both within and beyond the ritual frame, that presuppose the relational configurations acted out in the course of the performance itself. How are such ritual relationships acquired and passed on?

There is a commonplace notion that learning consists in a transmission of knowledge where the relationship between the communicating parties provides the context for a transfer of information between them. This paradigm, however, is not very helpful insofar as the acquisition of relational patterns is concerned, for it is precisely the connection between the communicating parties – the 'context' – which is the object of transmission. Indeed, the transmission of relationships relies less upon conveying specific information than upon partaking in particular interpersonal situations. Circumstances in which relational patterns are communicated thus tend to instantiate the patterns themselves: 'What is a secrecy?' 'I can't tell you', 'What is competition?' 'I can define it better than you can', and so forth. What one may be said to learn through such interactions is not so much a role or a way of behaving associated with one or the other of the positions occupied by those involved, but both positions at once as they relate to each other. In short, one acquires a pattern of relationship. Recognizing that what holds true for relationships in general applies to ritual relationships as well, avoids splitting into two separate issues what are in fact interdependent aspects of peoples' continued commitment to ceremonial events: developing the capacity to perform them and acquiring the personal inclination to do so.

Coordinate involvement in ritual, or in any activity for that matter, implies the participants' ability to make sense of their own and others' behaviour. This is what allows them to react appropriately to each other's reactions and underlies their commitment to the

reality they jointly enact. However, in order to make sense of what they are doing, the interacting parties must be able to appreciate their and others' actions as linked to their and others' intentional and emotional dispositions. A growing body of research suggests that this involves at least two, quite different communicative operations, neither of which is entirely conscious or infallible (for an overview, see Davies and Stone 1995; Carruthers and Smith 1996). The one, usually referred to as 'theory of mind', consists in drawing inferences about others' mental states from their observable behaviour. Such inferential interpretations rely on the (adult) human capacity to mentally entertain representations of (other's) representations, that is, meta-representations. Consider George and myself. He and I evaluate each other's dispositions, and react, as a result of inferences founded upon the perception of each other's actions. Because I know something about George, and because my encyclopaedic knowledge tells me that crying often connotes sadness, and because I have some general notions about what emotions, intentions, beliefs, actions and so forth might be, I am able to infer from George's tears that he is feeling sad and react accordingly. Authors differ as to what extent this implies the possession of a high-level, overall folk-psychological theory (school of thought called 'theory theory'), or of low-level modular mechanisms for the processing of various types of meta-representation (e.g., Sperber 2000). They all agree, however, that some sort of inferential interpretation of others' behaviour is involved.

Another type of operation, recently corroborated by the discovery of mirror-neurons (see, e.g., Blakemore and Decety), consists in a process of empathic simulation. According to this view, persons do not so much represent others' mental states, as they are led by other's behaviour to approximate these states themselves, thereby putting themselves as it were in the other's place. Here, it is the subject's own experience that provides the basis for understanding others' dispositions and reacting appropriately: not 'what do I think she thinks' but 'what do I (as her) think'. Consider once again George and myself. Each of us is involved in an internal simulation of the other's perceived actions; we evaluate each other's dispositions, and react, as a function of our own emotional and intentional experiences arising from this simulation. My own experience of sadness as occasioned by my simulation of George's crying, allows me to recognize his sadness in his tears. Here again, authors differ considerably as to the nature of the mental processes involved. For some, it entails the elaboration of complex simulative models implying differing degrees of conscious introspection, off-line cognitive functioning and/or agency-ascription devices (for a recent example, see, e.g., Jeannerod and Pacherie 2004); for others it is a passive empathic experience amounting to the direct perception of others' intentional and emotional dispositions (e.g., Gallagher 2001).

Inferential interpretation and empathic simulation are often presented as rival explanations, implying very different conceptions of how the mind works (e.g. Berthoz and Jorland 2004). However, it is generally assumed that in the course of ordinary, everyday (adult) interaction, both these ways of communicating are continually in play, each providing a measure of correction for the other. But is this also true in the case of ritual? There are good reasons for thinking that things may be somewhat different, if only because the pragmatic premises that implicitly underlie peoples' participation in ritual and non-ritual events are not the same. Everyday interaction proceeds in large part from the tacit assumption that, in principle, the participants' outward behaviour expresses or notifies their emotional and intentional states. However, because this equation is often uncertain (dissimulation is always possible), everyday interaction inevitably entails a process of negotiation in which the participants' positions with respect to each other are being continually worked out. In a ritual situation, however, in which the patterning of behaviour is sharply constrained, the presumed connection between private dispositions and outward behaviour is oriented in the opposite direction. It is indeed one of the hallmarks of ritual that the participants' emotional and

intentional dispositions do not so much inform their actions (other than the intention to carry out the actions in question, Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994), as they are informed by them. Whereas the underlying question in ordinary interaction is ‘given what I feel (and what I evaluate others as feeling), what should I be doing?’, in the case of ritual it is ‘given what I am doing (and what I perceive others doing), what should I be feeling?’ While ritual participants are expected to experience emotional and intentional states in the course of their performance, the exact nature of these states is largely irrelevant to the organisation of the ritual performance itself. In short, under the special conditions of ritual interaction, emotional and intentional dispositions are presumed to proceed from actions rather than the other way around.

With this issue in mind, let us consider two very different types of ritual events, both occasioned by a young woman’s first menstruation in modern Western societies.

Menstrual slapping

The first is the still fairly common though increasingly abandoned custom one researcher (Thompson n.d.) has called the ‘menstrual slap’: a mother (or in some cases a grandmother), upon being informed by her daughter that she has her first period, slaps her daughter’s face. This practice has been portrayed in several commercial films (e.g., Kurys’ [1977] *Diabolo Menthe*, and Goldwyn’s [1999] *A Walk on the Moon*) and I have found close to a dozen references to it on the Internet. It is alternatively held to be of Greek, Turkish, Jewish, Lithuanian, Slavic or Eastern European origin.

Even when the unexpected slap is not very hard – one witness described it as ‘firm tap’ (Appel-Slingbaum 2000) – it still comes as quite a shock. The women subjected to this practice retain a vivid memory of the smack they received in large part because of its apparently unwarranted, incongruous character. The slap’s anomalous nature is indeed heightened by the positive attitude shown by the slapping party. Witnesses mention that the slap was preceded by congratulations and/or followed by a show of affection; one third-party account recalls that ‘As Helen reeled from shocked disbelief, shame, anxiety and confusion, Grandma [who had slapped her] smiled and invited her for tea’ (Rayni n.d.). When the slapping party is prompted to explain her behaviour, the results leave much to be desired: ‘It’s for good luck’, ‘It’s an old Jewish custom’, ‘I don’t know but my mother did it to me’, ‘Don’t ask me why you get slapped! YOU JUST DO!’ (Pogrebin 1994; Appel-Slingbaum 2000; Howell 2001; Rayni n.d.; Satterwaite n.d.). Some women, reflecting back on the experience, often later in life, try to figure it out: might it have been a punishment for pride at menstruation? an indicator of ‘Eve’s legacy of childbirth and pain’ (Hoffmann 1996)? a warning not to disgrace the family by becoming pregnant out of wedlock? (Taylor 1988), ‘something to do with introducing a girl to the pain of womanhood’ (Rayni n.d.)? One mother told her daughter it was ‘to open [your] eyes’ (Costos et al. 2002), while another woman wonders if it were not ‘to “slap sense” into a newly fertile girl [...], to “awaken” her out of her childhood slumber’ (Appel-Slingbaum 2000). Several accounts maintain that this practice aims to bring blood and colour back to the cheeks of the menstruating girl, ‘[to] keep her looking healthy despite the fact that she is bleeding’ (Rosenblatt and Frame 1996; also see anonymous testimony at www.mum.org/slap.htm). The *Anthology of Lithuanian Ethnoculture* also suggests something along these lines:

‘[...] the mother having learned about her daughter’s first menstruation would slap the girl’s face and utter a ritual formula: “bloom like a rose, be beautiful” or similar words. The ritual practice was intended to predestine the girl’s physiological development. It was believed that even the manner in which the act of slapping was performed could determine the duration of menstruation’ (Jurkus n.d.).

The logic suggested by these latter explanations recalls F. Héritier's (1989) ideas of the upper and lower halves of the body being virtual mirror images of each other. The reddened cheek belies the loss of vaginal blood, an externally applied pain standing in the stead of an internally occasioned suffering. The slap acts as a suction pump, as it were, drawing to the face blood that would otherwise flow from the womb: the harder the slap (i.e., the redder the cheek), the shorter the young woman's menstrual period and, one might add, the longer the time during which she is held to be fertile. Thus, even such fragmentary material suggests that quite a lot is going on here on the level of possible symbolic interpretation: not only the face/womb analogy, but also the evocation of awakening and opening one's eyes and the mention of blooming roses (both classical metaphors for the onset of menses in Western European cultures).

However, the complexity of the menstrual slap is above all relational. As Costos *et al.* (2002) put it, 'The tradition of a mother slapping her daughter's face upon learning of her menarche is among the most contradictory messages that can be transmitted'. Indeed, at least three different relationships seems to be acted out simultaneously in the course of this short episode. On the one hand, the slap is an explicit acknowledgement of the fact that in one essential respect, as a biologically mature woman capable of bearing children, the daughter is henceforth the mother's equal. It is their shared identity that prompts the daughter to confide in her mother in the first place, and it is a recognition of this that accounts for the mother's congratulatory attitude. On the other hand, this symmetrical relationship is associated with at least two other, clearly asymmetrical ones. To begin with, the purposeful infliction of violence by the mother upon the daughter bears witness to a radical, hierarchical difference between these two parties: one is the offspring of the other. At the same time, the slap also attests to (may indeed be seen as a tacit reaction to) a reverse asymmetry: whereas the mother's aptitude for procreation is in decline, the daughter's is in ascendancy, such that the daughter is destined to replace her mother in the latter's child-bearing role.

By combining these different, contradictory relationships in a single sequence of action, the menstrual slap gives rise to an exceptional relational configuration in which womanhood and motherhood are inextricably connected. Mother and daughter jointly act out this complex relationship in the course of the ritual, and this affords them with a novel experience that stands as a legitimizing touchstone for behaviour and discourse – the menstrual slap included – to the effect that adult female status and an aptitude for child-bearing go hand in hand. In this way, menstrual slapping does not so much create certain ideas and values pertaining to female procreative function as it contributes to their perpetuation by packaging them, along with the ambiguities they imply, in a partially inscrutable yet highly memorable and eminently transmittable form.¹

So how do mother and daughter (and other witnesses) make sense of this event? The degree of emotional arousal and bodily commitment it entails surely prompts them to attribute some measure of meaning to it. At the same time, menstrual slapping is typical of many rituals in that it makes systematic use of what Carlo Severi and I (1998) have called 'ritual condensation', in which nominally contrary patterns of relationship are acted out simultaneously. This feature, whereby ritual acts may be readily recognized as distinct from mundane activities, has important consequences for the functioning of empathic simulation and inferential interpretation.

Menstrual slapping is plainly a source of intense emotional and intentional bewilderment. As one woman put it: 'a lot of mixed feelings here!' (Costos *et al.* 2002). As a result, empathic simulation plays but a limited role in the participants' appreciation of this episode. It is indeed difficult to see how the mental replication of such an attention-grabbing yet paradoxical performance might allow the participants to evaluate each others' dispositions in such a way as to provide them with a clear understanding of the situation. This is especially

the case for the newly menstruating daughter who is stunned into hurt perplexity. However, as the mothers' lame and often despairing justifications suggest, they also share in the emotional and intentional confusion that menstrual slapping entails. There is really only one, overarching simulative operation that all the participants (and observers) may be presumed to be engaged in, and that is the diffuse but shared feeling that those who undertake this ritual are personally implicated in doing so: the identities of those who give and receive the slap are not fortuitous.

The situation is more complicated for inferential interpretation. As demonstrated by the women's and others' conjectures regarding the meaning of the menstrual slap, the latter is highly evocative. Violent punishment, procreative power, the loss and circulation of blood, personal accomplishment, feminine rivalry, uterine continuity and more provide the grounds for a variety of (often after the fact) inferences regarding the possible significance of this exceptional event. Ritual condensation, however, not only endows menstrual slapping with a rich, polysemous symbolism. It also combines its disparate and partially contradictory aspects into a performative totality whose enigmatic nature remains unexplainable by the participants themselves, and difficult to account for in terms of ordinary intentionalities and patterns of interaction. As a result, interpretative speculation, however elaborate, is revealed as incomplete and conceptually unsatisfactory; the explanatory urgency elicited by the face-slapping experience remains unfulfilled. The participants are thus led to infer that these anomalous actions, irreducible to the interpretations they may occasion, are in some difficult-to-define fashion meaningful in and of themselves. The menstrual slap takes on a markedly self-referential character: its presumed significance, which resists being put into words, is held to be totally accessible solely by its performance, whose enactment may thus be said to provide the conditions of its own reiteration.

As already suggested, ritual performances are typically organized along lines similar to those sketched out for the menstrual slap. Making sense of such ceremonial events relies largely upon interpretative inference, whose necessarily unfinished character prompts the participants to invest their actions with special, albeit difficult-to-grasp meaning. In such cases, the transmission of ritual relationships consists essentially in the replication of these partially inscrutable actions themselves. A very different situation obtains in the case of Neopagan and New Age menarche ceremonies.

Menarche celebrations

Neopagan or New Age first menstruation rituals are called 'first blood celebrations', 'menarche rites', 'red parties', 'womanings', 'coming of age rituals', 'first moon celebrations' and so forth. Scripts for such undertakings can be found on the Internet as well. Often they are associated with advertisements for specialized books, magazines or 'passage to womanhood ceremonial kits'. The latter come complete with candles, pendants, easy-to-follow ritual scrolls, moon calendars, herbal teas and other paraphernalia. My favourite is a two-inch tall 'Menstrual Goddess' produced by the Bell Pine art farm of Oregon ('she is absolutely adorable, and even better in person' gushes the birthwithsol.com Internet site) in which, once again, face and lower body are combined in a single image:



Figure 1. Instructions for use: ‘Fill your goddess with a drop of menstrual blood and seal with candle wax’

Some of these scripts are so liturgically elaborate as to cast doubt upon the likelihood of their ever having been performed, whereas others, on the contrary, are too vague or whimsical to merit much attention. Still others amount to somewhat atypical but otherwise perfectly ordinary events, such as the baking of a red cake or the granting of three wishes (e.g., Davis and Leonard 2003); menarche parties also deserve mention (e.g., Crossman 2003). There remain, however, a fair number of outlines and descriptions that deserve serious consideration.

One Internet site describes menarche ceremonies in the following general terms:

‘Different rituals can take place during the ceremony, reenacting the transition from childhood into womanhood. Often a special altar is built with little goddess statues, seashells, red roses and other symbols of menstruation and womanhood. Sometimes the girl will choose a favorite childhood toy to throw into the fire, symbolizing the release of her child-like ways, and receives a special piece of jewelry as a token of her new role as a menstruating woman. The girl can also be tied together to her mother with rope or ribbon, representing the bond of mother and child. The maiden then wiggles free or is released by the grandmother and runs to a special place away from the party to sit in seclusion and reflect on her new role as a young woman. When she returns, the older women take time to recall their own first periods, share stories about the joys and pains of menstruation, offer advice regarding sex and sensuality and have many laughs and tears about being a woman. Gifts are given to the young maiden such as chocolate, jewelry, fancy clothes and menstrual products. Parents sometimes offer the girl special privileges, such as a later curfew or permission to wear makeup or get a body piercing. After the ceremony is over, a great feast takes place with song and dance late into the night, followed by a slumber party with her closest friends’ (Mystical Mountains n.d.).

Men are occasionally involved in these ceremonies in a peripheral fashion, by giving a red flower to the girl (Narhala 1995) or by preparing a meal beforehand (*cf.* Bhran n.d.). In some cases, the girl’s father has a role to play as well: after having spent some time with the adolescent going over childhood pictures and choosing a stuffed toy, he formally hands the girl over to her mother, acting as the guardian of her childhood state, keeping the toy ‘as I will

keep the memories of your childhood' (Beyond the Realms n.d.). However, for the menarche rite itself, whether a community-wide festivity, a family celebration or limited to the girl and her mother alone, the participants are women. Here, for example, is the coming of age ritual for girls as performed by the Binghamton Pagan community of upstate New York :

'The coming of age ritual for girls we do here in our community is very beautiful. All the women of the community are part of the circle. The young woman (girl) is given a ritual bath of herbs (by her mother) and then dressed in white. She is told to bring a reminder of her childhood with her to the circle. She is then blindfolded and lead to the circle by her mother. The women in the circle stand one behind the other with their hands on the hips of the woman in front of her and spread their legs to form a "birth canal". The young woman crawls through the birth canal symbolizing her rebirth into womanhood. She is then un-blindfolded and her mother says whatever words she would like to share with her and then asks her if she is ready to leave her childhood behind (but also reminding her to always remember the child that lives in all of us). All the women in the circle wear red and bring a gift for the young woman (the gift is traditionally something red – candles, flowers, etc). Then we share red grape juice and jelly filled donuts (symbolic). Each woman in the circle then shares the story of her first menstruation. Some stories are sad, funny, but each is our own experience. Then we all gather around her and chant "She changes everything She touches and everything She touches changes". Then the circle is opened' (Binghamton Pagan Community n.d.).

Finally, M. Fellous provides a short description (Fellous 2001:119-123) and film (Fellous and Renard 1993) of a family-scale menarche rite she observed in Portland, Oregon (USA) in 1993:

'At the foot of the couch, Tess, 14 years old, a stuffed animal [...] held tightly in her hands, is curled up against Hannah, her godmother, two years her elder, who underwent a similar rite two years earlier. Seated on the floor, surrounding Suma, Tess' mother, are a group of her friends. On the rug next to them are various objects symbolising femininity and fertility'.

The ritual begins after sundown and is orchestrated by a local ritual leader: 'So this evening we honour Tess' first step in becoming a woman'. Following her directions, the seven participating women sit in a circle, introduce themselves and purify themselves by smudging with lavender and mountain sage. Then to the accompaniment of drumming and singing ('Earth my body, water my blood, air my breath and fire my spirit'), they 'open a sacred space', convoking absent family members as well as Gods and Goddesses 'who are the archetypes of those psychic elements we will be referring to tonight'. After a time of meditation (the 'molten core of the earth' is mentioned), Tess' mother tells an African folktale. After a moment of silence, each woman begins to make a personal 'power object' held to 'symbolize' her relationship with her menstrual cycle.

'Tess and Hannah, go out into the night to find an object that is supposed to symbolize this moment in her adolescent life. The women remain inside, weaving a crown of flowers. When Tess and Hannah return, Tess is made to symbolically cross the threshold by passing under the raised arms of the women who, playing the tambourine, accompany her to the bathroom where Hannah will bath her, make her up and dress her in a new dress'.

During this time, Suma, Tess' mother, eyes closed, seated in a circle with the other women, is invited by the leader to 'call out a quality that you want to let go of [...] and then we'll speak it back'. 'Possessiveness' says Suma and the gathered women respond in chorus 'Suma is letting go of possessiveness'; other qualities follow: 'the past relationship with her', 'the control over Tessa', 'envy and jealousy of my own children'. 'And what are you opening to?

the leader asks. Suma answers 'My own aging process' and once again this is taken up by all the women together: 'Suma is opening up to her own aging process'.

When Tess emerges from the bathroom, washed, dressed and made up, she is greeted by cries of joy and the sound of drums, rattles and tambourine. The women stand in a circle around her and the crown of flowers is placed upon her head. 'Welcome back as a woman' says her mother, 'Welcome to the circle of women'. The women circle around her, chanting her name while clapping hands and playing the tambourine. Each woman then presents Tess with a gift 'that symbolizes her new-born femininity'. Finally, the circle opened at the beginning of the rite is closed and everyone shares a meal composed of red foods and drinks.

While both practices share a number of themes, Neopagan and New Age menarche rites contrast sharply with menstrual slapping. There is no unexpected bodily violence, little uncertainty and a tearfully joyous time to be had for all concerned. This is due in part to differences in the conceptions of womanhood these performances mediate. However, in order to identify the distinctive properties of contemporary menarche celebrations as instances of ritual activity, I would like to pursue the comparison on a more formal level. In what ways do the principles that underlie the organisation and transmission of these ceremonies – specifically with regard to the roles played by inference and simulation – diverge from those at work in menstrual slapping?

Menarche celebrations as ritual

Perhaps the most obvious difference (beyond considerations of length of performance and number of participants) relates to the texture of ritual action. The ceremonial behaviour of menarche rites, while at times unusual and fairly elaborate, is, in itself, remarkably unproblematic and transparent. There is none of the ambivalence and opacity to be found, for example, in the unexpected, unexplainable menstrual slap. In other words, the meanings of the participants' actions are, in principle, readily accessible to them and fully intelligible in terms of their everyday feelings, intentions and representations. Grape juice, jelly filled donuts and other red items are held to 'symbolize' menstruation, the women who spread their legs apart are deemed to 'form a birth canal', relating personal anecdotes is taken to educate the young girl about womanhood, sharing food is held to enact feminine solidarity, etc. This straightforward nature of ritual behaviour is further accentuated by the practitioners themselves who, in the course of the performance, often take pains to explicate the significance of their actions. One woman, for example, describes how, for her daughter's menarche ritual, she prepared a box wrapped in red paper:

'Inside, under many layers of tissue paper, lay a smaller box, crisscrossed by a red velvet ribbon. That box held a small clay statue of the Goddess of Menstruation. "Just as Tisa [her daughter] had to go through all those layers to get to the little statue," I said, "I would like us [the participating women] to go through all our layers and reach deep inside and share our thoughts with her." As we passed the statue around, we talked about some of the women we admired, our role models.' (Soster-Olmer 2001).

In short, there is not much to be found here in the way of ritual condensation understood as a simultaneous enactment of opposites. The abundantly commented upon actions that make up menarche ceremonies are markedly unambiguous. They lay no paradoxical 'thought traps' (Smith 1973) and are held to harbour little mystery in and of themselves.

In menstrual slapping, the performance of richly evocative yet obscure behaviour at once encourages inferential interpretation and thwarts its satisfactory resolution. The behaviour in question thus acquires a self-referential quality and a measure of indisputable legitimacy. This is not what happens in Neopagan and New Age menarche rites where, on the contrary, inferential interpretation is systematically trivialized and therefore sharply curtailed.

What further understandings are there to be drawn from enactments that are made to be as self-evident and unequivocal as possible? As a source of meaning ‘beyond the information given’ (Brunner 1973) whereby participants make sense of these events as special, out of the ordinary yet efficacious performances, inferential interpretation plays but a limited role. The only inferences with sufficient relevance (Wilson and Sperber 1986) to be readily entertained, concern the connection between the ritual performance and analogous activities presumed to have been undertaken by others elsewhere or in the past.

The liturgical formulae, songs, gestures and objects employed, the exegetical commentary they elicit as well as the oral and written sources consulted, all bear witness to the idea that present-day menarche rites derive from the ceremonial behaviour of indigenous (and non Western) peoples and/or ancient (pre-Christian) civilizations (for an extreme example, see Stein 1990). Implicit and explicit reference to such precursors, presumed to be uncorrupted by oppressive (e.g., patriarchal) ideologies and the shortcomings of modern Western society, is indeed a constitutive feature of these ceremonies and a source of the authority the participants attribute to their performance. However, speculations as to the nature of these connections remain strikingly open-ended. To begin with, contemporary ritual crafters typically incorporate elements drawn from a variety of traditions. More importantly, however, and contrary to what one might expect, those who perform these rites are pointedly not trying to reproduce ancient or tribal ceremonies as faithfully as possible.

Neopagan and New Age menarche rites have some recurrent features: the relinquishing of a childhood toy, the prevalence of the colour red, bathing, seclusion, a moment of privileged communication between mother and daughter, episodes connoting transition such as crossing a line, entering a circle or passing under spread legs or raised arms, adult women telling stories about menstruation and womanhood, gift-giving, etc. They are nonetheless strikingly variable from one community or family group to the next, and even within communities and families, their performance is highly labile. One reason for this is that these celebrations are often cobbled together by concerned mothers and friends from diverse sources: books, Internet sites, commercial kits, amateur or professional ritualisers and so forth (see, e.g., Coon 1994; Rudolph 1998). More significantly however, and in keeping with the decentralized, personalized bent of Neopagan and New Age practice in general (Pike 2004), menarche rites are deemed to be most effective when consciously adapted to the peculiarities of the situation at hand and the individual participants concerned. Thus for example, the advice repeatedly given to those who would organize such rites is that the girl herself be consulted regarding who to invite, how they should dress, what food will be served, etc. (e.g., Davis and Leonard 2002; Thistle 2005; Soster-Olmer 2001). According to its practitioners, a menarche rite, often undertaken in explicit opposition to certain aspects of mainstream popular culture (menstruation as ‘the curse’, etc.), should be a harmonious and festive occasion, in which the gathered women endeavour to provide the newly menstruating girl (and her mother) with the means of assuming her nascent womanhood in the least traumatic and most creative way possible. From this point of view, what precise items of behaviour make up a given menarche rite is of secondary importance. What counts above all is the spirit in which they are carried out: the supportive intentions these items of behaviour are held to express, and the personal, ‘empowering’ effect their performance has not only on the girl herself, but on all the women present (e.g., Roberts 1994; Hobbs 2005; Zenack 2006; Reid n.d.).

Unlike menstrual slapping, Neopagan and New Age menarche rites are not partially unintelligible yet stipulated enactments held to harbour essential yet difficult-to-define realities, and alleged to be passed on more or less unchanged from one generation to the next. Rather, they are eclectically recomposed, largely self-evident performances, consciously tailored to particular circumstances and analogously linked to ‘traditional’ or ‘archaic’

practices that serve less as models than as resources. In view of these differences, many anthropologists would question their very status as rituals.

Might it be, however, that the complexity of Neopagan and New Age ceremonial, absent on the level of action itself, is to be found elsewhere? I suggest that this is indeed the case, that the complexity of these rituals resides not in the paradoxical properties of the items of behaviour undertaken, but in the ambivalent identities of those who undertake them. They are to be judged not by the condensed quality of their actions but by the enhanced quality of their agents. This is related to the fact that in rituals such as these, coordinate participation and understanding depend essentially upon empathic simulation.

For Neopagan and New Age practitioners, their ceremonies are directly linked to ancient and/or tribal societies. The ritual performed here and now is taken to echo others performed previously and/or elsewhere. However, as mentioned above, the overriding concern of Neopagan and New Age ritualists is not to replicate these antecedent rituals, but rather to recapture the spirit in which they were performed. The idea is not to do now what a Celtic priestess, say, did in her day, but to do what such a priestess might do if she were practicing today as a middle class European-American. In short, creative adaptation is preferred over strait-out reiteration.² In acting out in this way the imagined behaviour of postulated prior performers, Neopagan and New Age ritualists are engaged in simulating these prior performers' intentional and emotional states. The items of behaviour they undertake are presumed to proceed less from their own personal dispositions than from those they attribute to such pre-eminent if largely hypothetical others. However, when these items of behaviour are enacted, it is of course the participants' own intentional and emotional dispositions (and not those of the simulated parties) that are affected by their performance. At her daughter's menarche rite, a woman and her close friends each contribute a flower to make a crown that is solemnly placed upon the girl's head. For them, these particular actions do not so much reflect their own feelings and beliefs as they express the sentiments and convictions of wiser ilk than they – Arthurian magicians? Dionysian priests? Native-American shamans? – whose attitudes they seek to emulate and in whose ceremonial footsteps they try to follow. However, as they add their flowers and as the crown is placed upon the young woman's head, all of them, each in her own way, is personally affected and transformed.

This more or less explicit simulation of postulated forerunners entails a 'vertical' refraction of the participants' agency: paradoxically, the participants' private emotional and intentional states are informed by ritual actions which are held to express the dispositions of antecedent others as these are conjured up by the participants themselves. A similar, largely implicit and more markedly empathic 'horizontal' refraction also takes place between participating persons. In order to make sense of their collective undertaking and to interact accordingly, the participants rely to a large extent upon an ongoing replication of each others' dispositions. Their actions are dictated above all by what they feel the other participants might be feeling. In this way, the participants are led to assume, and react as a function of, multiple, potentially contrary, points of view. The mother is prompted to identify not only with her daughter, but also with her own mother and with the other women present. These other women identify both with the mother, with her daughter, with each other, and perhaps, with their own mothers and daughters. Fellous' observations regarding Tess' mother's introspective ruminations echoed by her surrounding friends are directly relevant here:

'Later, [she] developed her thoughts further, saying how this separation was like a cycle in her own life, re-enacting her own adolescence and her separation from her own mother. It was as though time had contracted: [she] was, in turn, herself, her mother leaving her, her daughter leaving her, and her daughter emerging from her womb' (Fellous 2001:121).

The daughter is led to identify with her mother (in one case she wore her mother's wedding dress), with the other women present, with the female role models they represent and tell stories about, with 'the child inside' she is enjoined to never forget (e.g., Soster-Olmer 2001) and with the Goddess herself (she is often told that she *is* the Goddess, e.g., Hawthorne 1993).

The salience of Neopagan and New Age menarche rites derives, then, less from the singular character of the actions performed than from the exceptional intentional and emotional and sharing their performance entails. What counts above all is not the execution of certain odd sequences of behaviour, but the institution of certain unusual intentional and emotional configurations. In short, the ritual efficacy of enactments such as these relies more upon the patterning of agency than upon the organisation of action. In menstrual slapping, the participants' private dispositions are presumed to proceed from the behaviour they carry out and not the reverse. As I have mentioned, this is one of the distinctive hallmarks of ritual. It is also the case in Neopagan and New Age ceremonies, but with a simulative twist that implicitly discriminates between the participants' personal intentions and emotions (occasioned by the actions they undertake) and their simulations of the intentional and emotional states of others (that provide the basis for these actions). The vertical and horizontal refractions that arise from this discrimination set up an ongoing reverberation between the participants' replication of others' dispositions, the collective representations of emotions and intentions realized in their joint enactments, and the private feelings and understandings these enactments bring about. In doing so, these refractions define a novel interactive context in which ordinarily contradictory patterns of agency come into play at the same time: intentional and emotional experiences are made to circulate among participants increasingly endowed with multiple subjecthood. Within the relationships acted out in this context, the participants become very much more than what they may appear to be: mothers, daughters, fellow women, moon children, goddesses, priestesses, worshipers, lovers and friends. What their individual feelings and convictions lose in precision they gain in multi-faceted convergence; they are instilled with additional if partially unintelligible significance as the interdependent aspects of an exceptional totality instantiated in the ritual performance itself.

Condensation and enhancement

Menstrual slapping and first blood celebrations both enact special relational patterns in which nominally contrary modes of relationship are simultaneously enjoined. This is what makes these performances so difficult to account for in terms of everyday interaction and intentionality. Moreover, both these enactments are held to be efficacious in their own right: by informing the participants' emotional and intentional states, they provide them with unarguable, experiential grounds for subsequent discourse and behaviour that presuppose the exceptional relational patterns acted out in the course of their performance. For these reasons, both types of events deserve to be recognized as rituals.

They are structured, however, according to different principles. Menstrual slapping is founded upon 'ritual condensation' in which a concurrence of opposites pertains chiefly to the organisation of the actions undertaken. Menarche celebrations, on the other hand, are founded upon what we might call 'ritual enhancement' in which this concurrence pertains above all to the constitution of the agents involved. In the first case, singular agents undertake composite, pluralistic actions, whereas in the second, singular actions are undertaken by composite, pluralistic agents. Thus, while the complexity of the menstrual slap, and correlatively, the symbolism it's performance gives rise to, relates to the participants' outward behaviour, that of menarche rites relates to the participants' emotional and intentional dispositions.

I have argued that the participants' capacity to make sense of the relationships they act out in the course of action-centred rituals such as menstrual slapping, relies heavily on

inference. While their respective identities are not in themselves problematical, the behaviour they pursue (a celebratory infliction of unexpected pain by a trusted family member) is designed to be at once unquestionably attention-grabbing and intrinsically ambiguous. Inferential interpretation of this condensed behaviour is thus strongly stimulated, but prevented from reaching a satisfactory conclusion. This gives rise to the supposition that the anomalous behaviour in question is imbued with some special, difficult-to-define meaning accessible only by means of its performance. In ritual enactments such as these, the participants' intentional and emotional dispositions are held to be largely contingent. As a result, empathic simulation is of subsidiary importance in their understanding of these episodes. Mainly, it induces among participating parties the shared feeling that the anomalous behaviour they undertake is directly relevant to them, that those who are engaged in these performances are personally implicated in the relationships they enact.

In agent-centred rituals like Neopagan and New Age menarche celebrations, empathic simulation intervenes in a more obvious fashion (this had led several authors to liken their performance to [pretend] play, theatre or art, e.g., Luhrmann 1989, Pike 2001, Magliocco 2004). The items of behaviour that compose these events are made to be as straight-forward and accessible as possible. However, because these items of behaviour are animated by the explicit and tacit simulation of intentionalities and affective states attributable to postulated forerunners and co-participants (entailing vertical and horizontal refractions of agency), the identities of those who undertake them are rendered inherently equivocal. It is the performers themselves rather than the actions they pursue that become imbued with special significance that is hard to define in ways that do not refer to the performance itself. In situations such as these, inferential interpretation intervenes in a subordinate fashion, principally as a means of legitimately accounting for the enhanced quality of the ritual performers: drawing on disparate ceremonial and exegetical features, it prompts the participants to entertaining hazy speculations regarding the supposed link between the special relationships they enact and those realized in the course of ceremonial activities previously undertaken by others.

It should be emphasized that while inferential interpretation plays a leading role in events founded upon ritual condensation, and empathic simulation plays a dominant role in events founded upon ritual enhancement, in either case, both communicative processes are required. Whereas inferential procedures allow participants to invest their performances with additional meaning and authority, simulative operations commit them to the personal relevance of the relationships they enact.

While the two ritual styles outlined here are not strictly incompatible, they do imply divergent orientations in the organisation of ceremonial activities.³ Correlatively, they also suggest two quite different ways of thinking about learning ritual, that is, about how ceremonial enactments capture the minds of those who participate in them in such a way that these persons acquire not only the ability to undertake them but also the incentive to do so. On the one hand, within the context of action-condensing performances, learning ritual consists in acquiring the capacity to carry out certain highly evocative, partially incomprehensible actions, all the while sharing with other participants the feeling that those who accomplish these actions are personally concerned by them. On the other hand, within the context of agent-enhancing enactments, learning ritual consists in acquiring the capacity to pursue multiple empathic simulations while sharing with other participants the conviction that the activities undertaken are equivalent to those previously performed by others. These two modes of transmission, in turn, imply divergent conceptions of tradition or 'deference' (Bloch 2005) whereby ritual performances may be appreciated as necessary recurrences rather than as arbitrary inventions. In cases such as menstrual slapping, where ritual relationships are transmitted through the reiteration of ritual actions, tradition is construed as a set of practices whose perpetuation relies on unaffected repetition. In cases such as Neopagan and New Age

menarche celebrations, where ritual relationships are transmitted by means of the reproduction of ritual agents, tradition is taken to refer to a set of intentional and emotional dispositions whose perpetuation derives from acts of conventional imagination.

Notes

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¹ The issues addressed in this episode can be found in any number of cultures, particularly those in which adult female status is closely associated with the ability to bear children, and becoming a woman is deemed to be predicated upon the relationship between a young woman and her own mother. In such conditions, the attainment of womanhood may become problematic, for the acquisition of procreative capacity whereby womanhood is defined is often held to follow a zero-sum rule according to which every winner implies a corresponding loser.

² See Fedele (2006a, 2006b) for an example pertaining to menstruation. For political issues raised by 'cultural borrowing', see Pike 2001: 123-154; Magliocco 2004: 205-237.

³ It might be thought that a newly invented rite necessarily starts out as agent-centred and acquires action-centred qualities over time. While the emergence of new action-centred rituals in many parts of the world belies this idea, it is obviously necessary to document agent-centred rituals elsewhere than in contemporary European-American culture.

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