PARTIES, PERIODS AND THE PATRIARCHY: PREDECESSORS TO THE MODERN-DAY PERIOD PARTY

Abstract. The celebration of a girl’s first period (menarche) may appear as a modern attempt to normalize and de-stigmatize bodily functions like menstruation. Yet, the celebration of a girl’s first period is a widespread event in indigenous cultures around the globe. This paper analyzes the cultural and social implications of these events. The analysis of the modern-day period party, the Pelazon, the Tamil Bathing Ritual and the Hupa flower dance will show that traditional celebrations of menarche are often tied to concerns of pollution, matrimony, and fertility. Nevertheless, even traditional celebrations have been updated to address more contemporary issues like identity and self-care.

Keywords: Menarche, body-positivity, anthropology, purity, pollution, feminism, menstruation, ritual.

Hardly any woman will forget the day she had her first period. The realization that one is now mature enough to bear a child hits hard for many menstruators. So do the potential for embarrassment, the physical pain, and the hormonal ups and downs that often accompany the monthly cycle. In addition, the fact that society treats periods as a taboo, something to be hidden away and concealed from the public eye in general, but the male eye in particular, has added an extra burden to the young woman undergoing this natural experience for the first time. With awareness of the stigma and shame surrounding menstruation, many young women also experience a new apprehensiveness – an inkling that our bodies are somehow deficient, diseased and no longer serving us reliably. As a case in point, research has shown that a girl’s self-esteem plummets during puberty [21].

Recent years have seen an effort to normalize menstruation by hosting so-called “period parties” for new menstruators. This paper will focus on social events and rituals that celebrate a girl’s first period (menarche). In doing so, this paper will go beyond modern-day celebrations of this milestone by exploring non-Western rituals focusing on menarche. I will begin by discussing the modern-day “period party.” Then I will present cultural-anthropological models that have been applied to ceremonies that celebrate menarche. Subsequently, I will analyze three rituals of this type: the South American Pelazon, the Tamil Turmeric Bathing Ceremony and the Flower Dance of the North American Hupa. It will be shown that these ceremonies were, in fact, often enacted in patriarchal cultures in which women’s fertility had to be controlled and guarded. Yet, with our modern-day efforts to normalize periods, more contemporary performances of these ceremonies are reinterpreted and reshaped into expressions of body positivity and feminism created to build confidence and self-esteem.
Modern Day Period Parties

Various online forums advertise the modern ritual of a “first moon” or “period party.” The trend, which was first introduced by celebrities like Bert Kreischer and Tyra Banks, is now catching on and so are discussions of whether these parties are really worth it. For example, the website “familyreduction.com” claims that first moon parties are “a great way to start to break down the stigma surrounding menstruation and instead empower our daughters to be proud of their bodies” [22]. Such informative sources also explain what types of gifts guests are expected: Motrin, uterus-shaped cakes, and pomegranate juice are popular acknowledgments of the event. At the same time, “experts” warn, “If all of your daughter’s friends are having period parties, she will probably be excited about her own, but if she’s the only one, she may not feel comfortable.” Similarly, in a Washington Post article, Cori Howard shared how she threw her daughter a First Moon party with the help of a Shaman who led meditation sessions and story time in a “red tent” set up for the occasion [27]. Yet, a period party does not need to be a grand-scale or expensive event. First Moon celebration kits are readily available online. And for those parents and daughters who favor arts and crafts, Pinterest and Instagram offer endless ideas for providing the appropriate decoration and designs for the perfect period party. Yet, what is really behind this trend? A glorified acknowledgment that may initially appear as a newfangled celebration of feminine body positivity turns out to be an ancient custom well established in indigenous societies of Africa, Asia, Latin- and North America. This observation begs the question as to what these ancient predecessors of the modern-day period party actually celebrate and how these often-elaborate rituals define femininity in cultures that are far removed from the societies of the industrialized West.

Rituals and Menarche from a Social Anthropological Viewpoint

Before I delve into the cross-cultural study of menarche and its various ceremonies, it is necessary to provide a brief analysis of the meaning attached to these rituals. First, the custom of celebrating menarche can be understood as a rite of passage. This rite is significant because it involves a bodily process associated with impurity and fertility. Both of these concepts have larger implications for women and the roles they are expected to fulfill in society.

In Hindu culture, for example, the parents of a girl can declare that their daughter has become “available” as part of the menarche ceremony. The girl’s future husband will then present her family with a dowry so that she will be transferred from her original family to her husband with financial benefits [7]. Originally, declaring a girl’s availability was also a central factor in menarche ceremonies as they were celebrated in the Fijis before colonization. As researcher Marijke Sniekers has shown, tattoos were associated with womanhood and availability for marriage among Fijian women. However, these descriptive acknowledgments were applied only after the menarche ceremony. The tattooing process was followed by a feast attended by the future in-laws [12]. Similarly, among the non-Brahmanical castes of India, menstruation horoscopes are used to predict the nature of a girl’s future marriage. Non-Brahmanical castes view menarche as a source of great joy since it signals that a girl is fertile and available for marriage. The menstruation horoscopes are created based on the time of the bleeding, which older women determine by the degree of clotting. For non-Brahmins, the menstruation-horoscope could even supersede the birth horoscope. Still, historically, menarchal women required special protection because they were vulnerable to astrological dangers. Both Brahmins and non-Brahmins viewed menstruating women as a source of danger, although the risk associated with menstruation was much higher among Brahmins [15]. A similar phenomenon was observed in India, where a menarche ceremony, referred to as a Gauna, was carried out. Girls were married at an early age, but only with the onset of their periods were they released to live in their husband’s houses.
These examples illustrate how the emphasis on marriage and reproduction led patriarchal cultures to ritualize and celebrate menarche. By contrast, in industrialized societies, girls are encouraged to pursue higher degrees and full-time employment before getting married. Consequently, menarche in these cultures signifies nothing more than “a particular transition in the life of a young woman, which serves to indicate maturation” [3].

Apart from signaling eligibility for marriage, menstrual blood also appears as a source of danger. The above-noted observation already implied that certain Hindu castes viewed menstrual blood as a threat. The fear of menstrual blood is in no way isolated to Hindu culture but is deeply rooted in many different societies, including Judeo-Christian cultures. Yet, the dangers associated with menstrual blood are especially pronounced in cultures that celebrate menarche. In a study on menarche rituals in Sri Lanka, for instance, Deborah Winslow discusses the experience of a girl called Kanti. When she begins menstruating, she is confined to her residence, guarded by her siblings, who keep her company to avoid attack by blood-hungry demons (yakshas) [20]. All other males, including the father and grandfather who live in the house, are not permitted to see her. According to popular belief, the killa (pollution) of the first menstruation is the strongest of all killa and is especially dangerous and harmful to men [20]. The association between menstrual blood and pollution can also be observed among Fijian women and the broader Pacific region [12]. Thus, it is believed that if a woman engages in activities like fishing or molding ceramics during her period, she or her family will become subject to misfortune [12].

The above-cited examples illustrate how menstrual blood is frequently considered a source of danger. What remains unclear is where and how this notion evolved. Perhaps, as author Mary Douglas argues, menstrual blood is considered impure because it is a bodily secretion that crosses certain physical boundaries, making it an anomaly – “a matter out of place” [9]. Yet, as authors Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb argue, pollution theory is not always the best model for understanding rituals surrounding menstruation, as becomes apparent in their introduction to Blood Magic:

One has the impression that most, if not all, societies view menstruation as a source of pollution, in extension of Douglas’s general theory, and that there is no more to be said. Yet it is clear that the situation is hardly that simple, and that the very power of pollution theory, coupled with Western societies’ own codings of menstrual blood as a pollutant, has perhaps created “dirt” where none previously existed, or existed only for some people and/or in some contexts in a given culture [5].

As an alternative to pollution theory, Buckley and Gottlieb advance the theory of “shared substance” to explain the inherent danger of menstruation. According to this theory, “culturally constituted symbolic anomalies such as menstrual blood may gather meaning from two directions at once to be both negative, or polluting, and positively powerful.” (Blood Magic, 34). Menstrual blood is frequently considered dangerous because it is powerful. It can be used in love potions, in apotropaic contexts and as a symbol of fertility.

For example, the Nigerian Tiv people mix menstrual blood with the blood of a sacrificial child in the im-borivungu (“owl pipe”) ritual. This ritual procures blessings for the farms around the ritual center enhancing the fertility of the women living in them [5]. A similar phenomenon can be observed among the Asante people of Ghana, who believe that the power of menstrual contamination can help protect the priests. Although menstrual blood has great negative effects, it can be controlled by those who are spiritually powerful enough to manipulate it by changing its value to something more beneficial [5]. Also among the Native American Cherokees, blood had the power to ward off evil, as is apparent in Cherokee mythology, where seven menstruating virgins helped destroy a monster [24].
the Cherokee regard for menstruating women and menstrual blood finds expression in mythology, the Yurok of California present a more practical attitude toward menstruation. In their view, a woman’s power is at its peak during menstruation. Therefore, women should focus all their energy on meditation on the meaning of life during this time and should not be distracted by socializing or the opposite sex, so they isolate themselves [5]. Thus, some cultures insist on secluding menstruating women not because they are viewed as polluting, but rather because their bodily discharge is regarded as powerful and in need of spatial and social restrictions.

In short, rituals that celebrate the onset of menstruation display body positivity or embrace femininity, although this is only one possible interpretation. Typically, these celebrations are associated with patriarchal societies that focus on fertility, marriage, and reproduction. Some cultures consider menstruation a source of pollution while other cultures view it as a source of power. In both cases, menstruation and menstruating women are viewed as inherently dangerous. The following sections will examine three case studies of menstruation rituals. The first two are from societies that have consistently marked menarche by elaborate events. The last is from a native American tribe which has only recently reintroduced this ritual. We will see how certain aspects are reinterpreted to support young girls to become independent, strong and self-determined young women.

Pelazon

We begin with the so-called Pelazon ritual (or Yüüechíga/Worecüchiga), celebrated by the Tikuna Tribe in the Colombian and Brazilian rainforests. The name “Pelazon” can roughly be translated as “nipple ceremony.” Scholars disagree about the particulars of the Pelazon and whether it humilates or uplifts the girl in question. The ritual begins with a period of seclusion which could last anywhere between three months and a year [11]. Elderly women are enlisted as teachers and lecture the girl about the traditions of their tribe as well as the obligations and responsibilities of her as a woman, wife and later, a mother [19]. In some cases, we are informed that girls do not cut their hair during this period [11]. The seclusion serves two goals. For one, a girl who has entered puberty is considered frail and vulnerable, like a newborn. She, therefore, must be kept away from any source of potential harm. At the same time, she might harm the community, as the blood spilled outside of her body could attract disaster [29; 30]. The second reason for seclusion is more practical and has to do with the need to procure food and drink for the celebration [33]. No matter the length of the seclusion, the sources all note that the subsequent celebration entails constant music, singing and dancing that can last between three and four days [11]. In addition, the girl’s body is painted black with a natural pigment called uito. The application of paint too serves as a protection against harmful spirits [29; 30]. Finally, the girl is ordained with a headdress that shows the emblem of the girl’s tribal association. The headdress is decorated with feathers and shells that symbolize fertility. Identifying the exact tribe is important because the ceremony also signals that the girl is eligible for marriage, and members of the Tikuna always marry outside of their tribe [29; 30]. Traditionally, the girl’s hair would be pulled out by the root – a very painful procedure. To mollify the pain, the girls would drink alcohol and were instructed to cry silently if it was necessary [29; 30]. Nowadays, however, the hair is cut by scissors. The girl is expected to jump over a fire after the ritual. Finally, the celebrant is bathed in the river, which symbolizes the final stage of purification and welcomes the girl into the world of adulthood [19].

In conclusion, Pelazon can raise the status of girls and initiate women into new obligations and responsibilities with an emphasis on marriage and fertility. Yet, according to some sources, certain aspects of the ceremony could appear humiliating, painful, or even
dangerous [16]. Overall, however, the celebration of menarche is considered a positive event. The whole community rallies around the girls as they embrace their new roles as adult women and take on new responsibilities within their tribe [11].

**Turmeric Bathing Ceremony/ Manjal Neerattu Vizha**

The next ritual for discussion hails from South Asia, where it is celebrated among various ethnic groups [23]. For example, in Tamil Nadu, in South India, young girls who have started menstruating participate in a ritual called “Manjal Neerattu Vizha.” This term roughly translates into “Turmeric Bathing Ceremony” and is regarded as a precursor to marriage [23]. Like the Pelazon, this ritual may both benefit and harm the young women in question.

When a girl first starts menstruating, she enters a period of ritual seclusion that may last between nine, eleven or thirteen days. The exact length of the seclusion is irrelevant – as long as it is an odd number [25]. One of the girl’s relatives, most commonly an uncle, will build a “kudisai” hut with coconut, mango, and neem leaves. The small enclosure can be inside or outside the girl’s residence [31]. The seclusion may point to a state of impurity that endangers the individual in her environment. At the same time, the seclusion may be necessary not because the girl is polluting her environment in the strict sense of the word, but because the menstruant’s body is filled with power that may easily harm if it is mismanaged [6]. Whatever the case may be, the young woman remains isolated within the hut, where neighborhood women occasionally visit her and prepare ceremonial meals [28]. At the end of her seclusion, the women will color the girl’s feet with a mixture of red ochre, turmeric, and limestone.

The concept of pollution plays a major role in the event. The girl must adhere to certain rules in the week before the ceremony. For example, she may eat only vegetables. She is not allowed to talk with males or enter a temple because she is considered impure at that time. According to popular belief, talking with men and boys will lead to facial acne [17]. Again it is not clear whether this points to a state of pollution or a condition of enhanced power. At the end of her time in seclusion, the hut is torn down, and the space is purified [28]. The girl then has a first bath in water that is colored with Manjal (a yellow powder). Following the bath, the young woman wears a traditional garment called Saree – her first Saree. She is also adorned with a Mala necklace made of wooden beads that represents womanhood. Following this rite, the girl sits in the room and recites incantations with a priest, who makes predictions about her future. Next, everybody moves in a circle in front of her to conjure good luck for her future. After that, friends and relatives present her with gifts [31]. The ceremony is not only meant to mark the transition of a girl into womanhood, but also signals that she is now of marriageable age [25]. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the treatment of the menstruant recalls the treatment and worship of goddesses, implying that menarchal girls are inherently powerful and the restrictions on a celebrant’s conduct are meant to protect the people around her [14]. Nevertheless, although the occasion appears festive and the young woman is celebrated and honored, it has also been observed that the recipients of all the attention, namely the menstruating girls, are deprived of education. That is, they are not prepared for their onset of menstruation, nor are they later educated about their anatomy, feminine health, or proper hygiene [17]. Thus, even though the occasion is one of joy, the girls do not always benefit from the ritual in question and emphasize their status as potential brides rather than on self-awareness and empowerment.

**Flower Dance**

So far, we have explored menarche rituals that boast long traditions and have been celebrated for uninterrupted periods. Now, we turn to the Native American Hupa, who settled in Northwestern California. This tribe celebrates menarche through a ceremony called Flower Dance. Contrary to the Pelazon or the Turmeric Bathing ritual, the Hupa ritual had been discontinued for decades before being revived
several years ago. Its revival has presented the tribe with the unique opportunity to remove outdated or harmful aspects of the ritual and to reinterpret the respective traditional steps following contemporary challenges faced by members of the tribe.

This ritual celebrating menarche involves running, ritual bathing, dancing, and communal singing [1]. As already mentioned, the ritual itself is called “Flower Dance” or “Ch’ilwa: l,” which means “they beat time with sticks” and refers to the rattles and sticks that are pounded as part of the ceremony. The girl is known as a “kinahldung,” which means “girl having her first flower dance.” She typically wears a veil of blue jay feathers that cover her eyes [13]. The ceremony is said to last somewhere between three to ten days. Each ritual stage embodies a specific meaning, the most important of which is the running, which shows how the young woman will navigate her life [1]. Like the Pelazon and the Turmeric Bathing Ceremony, the ritual also has educational and purifying components. Older women visit the young girl and tutor her concerning her conduct as a woman. They instruct her in prayer, song, and skills such as taking care of herself and maintaining a proper demeanor in public [26]. The ceremony itself also includes an element of self-care, as the girl immerses herself in a river and burns herbs that she has prepared for the special occasion [10]. The sections of the river in which the girl is to undergo immersion are referred to as “tims” and are considered “lucky.” The ceremony ends with a large feast, where the celebrant receives gifts and uses her power and unique state to extend blessings to her tribe [18].

Although the ritual is ancient, it has not been celebrated regularly during the past century. As part of an effort to assimilate the tribal traditions of the Hupa into American mainstream culture, government programs and agents forced the flower dance ceremony into obscurity by arguing that only “dirty, stupid, primitive people” would engage in a ritual that celebrates menstruation [2]. Nevertheless, some elders can still remember the event from their childhoods. For instance, a member of the Hupa tribe known as “Thelma” recalls: “I felt real good about myself going through this flower dance, going into womanhood” [26]. She advocates for reviving this ceremony because, in her view, this event leads women through their adult lives. In fact, recent years have seen a push to reinstate this ceremony and the new participants respond mostly positively.

For one, the revitalization of this custom presents a form of “decolonization” which restores the Hupa’s identity and nationhood [2, P. 8]. The ritual helps to counteract the often unstable and broken homelife experienced by many Native Americans. For example, Kayla, a girl who had just held a Flower Dance ceremony, said that the ceremony allowed her to heal emotionally from her parents’ divorce. After the event, she remarked that the various rituals illustrated how “we were all still working together as a family for myself and for my other siblings, for the children. So in a big way it’s family medicine.” [2, p. 133]. Also, the ritual can help to install a sense of confidence and strength in young members of the Hupa tribe. According to a 2008 CDC study, 39 percent of Native American women report being victims of domestic violence [2, p. 127]. The high domestic violence and sexual assault rates have caused great suffering for Hupa women. Several possible solutions may lie in governmental support or educational programs. However, as Cutcha Risling Baldy, the main advocate for the resurrection of the Flower Dance, observes: “Ch’il wa: l is a tangible, physical, spiritual, and communal act of healing and decolonization” [8]. It can help strengthen the Hupa because it “provides a clear rejection of dominant colonial narratives that seek to disempower and victimize Native women” [2]. Thus, women are provided with a ritual tool to reclaim their independence and assert themselves in their private and public lives. Risling Baldy stresses that this ritual is helpful even for young men, as they are taught that they are not “the center of the universe” [4].

Unlike the Pelazon and the Turmeric Bathing Ceremony, the Flower Dance has fallen into disuse.
and has been revitalized only in recent years. Consequently, as it is performed now, the ritual emphasizes identity building and strengthening girls’ confidence and is less focused on marriage, fertility, or pollution. As a result, this ritual, although ancient, appears to be closer to modern-day period parties.

**Conclusion**

In recent years, many new menstruators have marked the important developmental milestone of menarche by celebrating so-called “period parties.” These parties can take the form of anything from a small informal gathering to an elaborate, carefully planned event with a long guest list, a tent, and even a shaman. This paper set out to explore the more ancient predecessors of this modern-day phenomenon together with their rationales, symbolisms, and histories.

As shown, rituals marking a girl's menarche are widespread across the globe. The popularity of this type of event can most likely be explained by the close association of mensturation with fertility, marriage, and reproduction. Furthermore, menstruation and menstrual blood were often considered polluting in nature or powerful to the degree that menstruating women needed to be isolated for their own and society’s protection. The tendency to associate menstruation with pollution, power, fertility, and matrimony was apparent in the Pelazon as well as the Tamil Bathing Ceremony. Although these rituals have been slightly reinterpreted in recent years, they traditionally announce that a young woman is now available for marriage or stress the danger inherent in the body of the young menstruant. Only the Flower Dance celebrated by the Native American Hupa tribe focuses on building self-confidence and instilling a sense of cultural belonging. This difference in interpretation is likely because the Flower Dance ceremony has only been recently revived after having fallen into disuse for almost a century. Thus, its meaning has also shifted to reflect more contemporary concerns related to young women's lives.

Also, as shown, the custom of period parties has a long tradition. Nevertheless, the meaning and rationale behind this custom are ever-changing. What was once an opportunity to announce a girl's availability and to warn society of potential dangers is now reformulated to meet the needs of the twenty-first century. As such, modern-day parties mark a stage of life and present an opportunity to strengthen a girl's self-esteem, to normalize menstruation as a healthy function of the female body that one should embrace rather than fear.

**References:**

2. Baldy, Cutcha Risling. We Are Dancing for You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women’s Coming-of-Age Ceremonies (University of Washington Press, 2018), – 20 P.
27. “To celebrate my daughter’s coming-of-age, we had a First Moon party,” last modified October 28, 2016. URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2016/10/28/to-celebrate-my-daughters-coming-of-age-we-had-a-first-moon-party
33. Cure “Woreküchiga – Ritual Ticuna De La Pelazón O De La Moça Nova”.