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IN NEW WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY**

Volume 11

**Weaving Histories:
Women in Mesoamerican Culture,
Society and Politics**




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CONTENTS

- 7 From the editors
- 9 Pact and marriage: Sociopolitical strategies of the Kanu'l Dynasty and its allies during the Late Classic period
Verónica Amellali Vázquez López
- 49 Variedad de títulos usados por la nobleza femenina maya del periodo clásico
Boguchwała Tuszyńska
- 83 'The heart and stomach of a king': A study of the regency of Lady Six Sky at Naranjo, Guatemala
Christophe Helmke
- 131 Why 'he/she' is not a relevant distinction in Classic Mayan: How grammar reveals patterns of thought
Agnieszka Hamann
- 143 Maya female taboo: Menstruation and pregnancy in Lacandon daily life
Milan Kováč, Tatiana Podolinská
- 149 Virgen de Guadalupe y su papel en el proceso de construcción de la identidad de los indígenas mexicanos
Radoslav Hlíšek
- 

MAYA FEMALE TABOO: MENSTRUATION AND PREGNANCY IN LACANDON DAILY LIFE

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Resumen

El artículo está enfocado en dos tabús femeninos entre la población de lacandones en la actualidad, vinculados con la menstruación y el embarazo. A pesar de la referencia a un único tabú femenino, relacionado con la variedad de restricciones para las mujeres (a los lugares sagrados, participación en los rituales u otras actividades específicas), en esta investigación se analizan dos categorías sobre las razones de estos tabús. La primera relacionada con la menstruación, toma en cuenta la esencia espiritual de la sangre y la necesidad de su control para los rituales. La menstruación en este caso representa una salida de las fuerzas espirituales que no se pueden controlar, con posibles riesgos para la comunidad. En el caso del embarazo, la razón del tabú sería distinta, ya que es por falta de sangre. En este sentido, la teoría presentada se apoya en los conceptos de nagualismo, indicando que la existencia de dos almas/seres en un cuerpo presupone un poder de hechicero y posibilidades para curar, con un alto riesgo de ataques mágicos. Las evidencias obtenidas durante un largo trabajo de campo, finalmente aclaran que el llamado tabú femenino está compuesto de razones diferentes. No se trata del mismo fenómeno, porque son distintas tanto las expectativas como las consecuencias. En conclusión, el fenómeno formalmente comparable con otros semejantes al mundo viejo, podría tener orígenes muy distintos.

Palabras clave: lacandon, tabús femeninos, sangre, menstruación, embarazo

Abstract

The article is focused on two female taboos linked with menstruation and pregnancy existing among the contemporary members of the Lacandon community. Despite the references about one female taboo associated with different restrictions for women (sacred places, participation in rituals and other specific activities), in this research we analyse two categories of reasons for these taboos. The first one related to menstruation takes into account the spiritual essence of blood and the necessity of keeping it under control during rituals. Menstruation in this case represents an outflow of spiritual powers that cannot be controlled, with possible risks for the community. In the case of pregnancy, the reason for it being a taboo is different because it concerns the lack of blood. In this sense, the presented theory is based on the concepts of nagualism, indicating that the existence of two souls/beings in one body presupposes magic power and healing possibilities with a high risk of magic attacks. The evidence obtained during long-term fieldwork clarify that the so-called female taboo is composed of two different reasons. It is not the same phenomenon because the expectations, as well as the consequences, are different. To conclude, a phenomenon formally comparable with other similar phenomenon from the Old World could possibly have different origins.

Keywords: Lacandon, female taboo, blood, menstruation, pregnancy

INTRODUCTION

In studies on the Maya, knowledge on the Lacandon women is still incomplete. Because the majority of researchers—Alfred Tozzer (1907), Robert Bruce (1965, 1979), R. Jon McGee (1990), Didier Boremanse (1984, 1998)—offered an exclusively male perspective, the hidden world of women remains underdeveloped. One exception is presented in the work of Marie-Odile Marion. She examined in detail the female world of the Southern Lacandons community from the settlement of Lacanjá (Marion 1999a). However, in that settlement the status of women was slightly marked by the influence of Protestant missions operating there.

Therefore for our field-research we chose the community of Northern Lacandons from the settlement of Nahá, which is much more traditional and conservative. Our research ran in two long-term stays between 2000 and 2005 and was based on the participative observation of male and female researches, dealing with combinations of perspectives as described by the male and female informants in the same domains. We published a detailed study focused mostly on pregnancy among the Lacandons back in 2001 (Kováč and Podolinská 2001).

MENSTRUATION

Lacandon girls become sexually mature approximately between 11 and 13 years of age. At that time, they usually get married and soon after they have their first child. Despite this, the girls are neither prepared for menstruation nor for sexual life. They know nothing about conception, pregnancy and childbirth. They just learn everything gradually when ‘the right time comes’, which means in fact that no one gives them any advice before the situation occurs in their lives. However, in everyday communication there are certain codes by which sexual themes may be referred to albeit extremely indirectly. Women usually say: ‘Have you already taken your bath?’ or ‘Have you washed your dress yet?’, which they will understand among themselves as: ‘I’ve got menstruation’, or ‘Is your menstruation over?’ or ‘Have you started menstruation yet?’. In the past women wore a strip of folded and sewn-together cloth whose ends were held by her skirt belt—one on her stomach and one on her back. She had two such pieces of cloth; she washed them daily. During menstruation the woman was not allowed to take a bath and was only allowed to wash herself after menstruation. What is really peculiar is that she always took this bath together with her spouse.

There are many taboos on menstruation and they range from highly complicated ones dealing with rituals in the houses of gods to various constraints in women’s everyday activities. These taboos always concern women aged approximately between 10 and 50, so they are not exactly female taboos but rather fertility age female taboos. Because it is difficult to know when and if menstruation is coming in the case of each woman of fertility age, the restriction is general. No examinations or questions raised concerning menstruation are discussed. All women with exception of very young girls and very old women are held under these restrictions. First of all, they are prohibited from participating in rituals of the gods and from approaching the sacred places. However, the most important taboo concerns entering the caves that are considered to be the seats of the gods. This applies generally to all women of fertility age. But there also exists a special household taboo directly concerning menstruating woman in a particular family. For example, a menstruating woman is not allowed to leave anything belonging to her on the floor in a Lacandon house. Among Lacandons, there are a lot of taboos associated with menstruating women. The principal question revolves around the meaning and conceptualization of these taboos in the Lacandon symbolical universe. The easiest way to explain this taboo is in the frame of a universal concept designed by Mary Douglas as ritual ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’ (Douglas 1966). However, we have real doubts about the universal dimensions of various concepts based on the mental and cultural catego-

ries of the Old World. It may well be more appropriate to examine this concept in the frame of the Mesoamerican and Maya perception of the blood. Many anthropologists recognize that in the Maya cultural context, the blood contains special spiritual energy, souls or a universal substance which is operable only in ritual conditions. In this case we have to suppose that menstruation is a kind of uncontrolled 'bloodletting' which can cause ritual disharmony among the community. The blood flows out without any incantation or assignation to the supernatural entities. It can be potentially dangerous because this 'free' sacral energy can attract negative spiritual power or make the positive ones angry. We can also justify this by our observations of the treatment of animal-killing within the same Lacandon community. It seems that any spilling of blood outside of ritual purposes is prohibited or culturally unacceptable. From fishing, in which case the Lacandons kill the fish by suffocating them outside of water to home-farms where chickens are only killed by hanging, we can recognize the cultural aversion to blood spilt outside of rituals even if the original blood rituals had been substituted by symbolical versions.

It is also possible that a periodical process such as menstruation were clearly associated with lunar cycles that had to be reflected inside the Lacandon cosmological order (Marion 1999b). Perhaps some aspects of the Moon or beings such as the ancient Ixtab or contemporary Xtabai might represent dangerous lunar aspects related to menstruation. Anyway the Lacandon social order that excluded females of fertility age from all ritual activities in the frame of general restrictions on the uncontrolled flow of blood is a part of the same cosmological order.

PREGNANCY

Nevertheless, the majority of female taboos among the Lacandons concern pregnant rather than menstruating women. The pregnant woman is reflected as a primary source of potential 'danger'.

In Lacandon society, pregnancy is considered to be a most peculiar period in a woman's life. During pregnancy the woman seems to be isolated from Lacandon society or rather, her situation may be denoted as ambivalent. On the one hand, a pregnant woman is ascribed healing powers and is considered to be 'warm'. For instance, when someone cuts his/her finger, it is sufficient for a pregnant woman to take any leaf of a plant into her hand and cover the wound with it. As a result, the wound will immediately stop bleeding and will also soon heal.

Another example of her special abilities in this period is a thin cotton fibre called *k'uuch* which is believed to have an enormous healing power when rolled up by a pregnant woman. In the past, such fibres were used by the Lacandons for making their typical cotton tunics—*xikul*. For the healing procedure, a short fibre is tied around the sick person's neck. The *k'uuch* itself possesses a strong healing power irrespective of who rolled it, whether it be a woman who is not pregnant or even a man. Nevertheless, the most effective *k'uuch* is always made by a pregnant woman exclusively. For this reason, if there is one in the village, messengers are sent to her with a request to roll up a *k'uuch* for a sick person. This request is never declined.

On the other hand, according to the Lacandons, the period of pregnancy multiplies the 'disturbing' elements in the woman. A pregnant woman or, more exactly, the child in her womb is believed to be able to bewitch a newborn baby or other little children who cannot talk yet. Lacandon women say that the unborn baby can talk to these little ones. For this reason, when a pregnant woman meets another woman carrying a little child in her arms, this child will burst into tears for no reason and will not want to stop. Another consequence of such an incident is that the child's head will also heat up. Nevertheless, Lacandon women know a special treatment against these negative magic influences on the child: it is necessary to wash his/her head in a concoction made of chilli leaves and crushed garlic. But although they know how to suppress all these symptoms, they are still frightened when meeting a pregnant woman and, if possible, attempt to avoid her.

According to some Lacandons, every pregnant woman contains poison in her body and, therefore, her mere presence strengthens the effects of a snake bite in the body of the victim. It is reported that a snake bite is a very frequent cause of unnatural death among this population. Although the Lacandons know of medicinal plants for snake bites, they are convinced that if a pregnant woman enters a house in which the bitten person is lying, then he is bound to die despite the application of healing herbs. Nevertheless, the pregnant woman can eliminate her negative influence by offering the sick a spoon of *ma'iz'* (*pozol*), brewed from maize and used daily in every Lacandon household. Only then will the victim of a snake bite survive.

Pregnancy is not the exclusive concern of the woman but, in an explicitly stated way, it concerns her spouse or the father of the child as well. When the woman is pregnant, her spouse is not allowed to climb a tree because it will turn dry or stop bearing fruit. No pregnant woman is allowed to enter a cave, nor her spouse. As Lacandon men really feel horrified at the thought of violating this taboo, they only dare to enter a cave, for example, when they are hunting a large rodent called a *ha'alel* (*Agouti paca*) in situations where they are absolutely sure that their spouse is not pregnant. During our visits to secret caves in which particular ceremonies are performed, we observed that our guides really trembled for fear that the cave would close 'its mouth' and swallow us. Such would be the punishment sent by the gods for having violated the taboo regarding the spouses of pregnant women.

Another notable ritual requests that the process of making a new canoe should be kept secret from a pregnant woman. The canoe is usually dug out of one piece of a mahogany tree trunk. As it is an arduous and exacting task, it is usually performed by five men. It is vital that a pregnant woman should not have the slightest idea that the men are just making a new canoe: if she learnt about it, the canoe would crack and all those hard days of toil would be in vain. For this reason, none of the Lacandon men would even allude to the fact that they were making a canoe. They argue that they can never be sure that some women may be pregnant although she knows nothing of it yet.

CONCLUSIONS

Even if ritual taboos are explicitly directed against pregnant and menstruating women, as mentioned above, the impossibility of instantaneously assessing whether a particular woman is pregnant or menstruating at any given moment has led to some general female taboos, whereby every woman is considered to be potentially dangerous. For instance, men strongly feel that they are at risk when they renovate god pots. At that time, they seek seclusion in the forest where they usually spend from six to eight weeks. Not only is this a period of sexual abstinence but it is a time when they are not allowed to look at a woman, either. Paradoxically, every woman knows her husband's hiding place as she brings him his daily meal. She first calls from a distance that she is bringing the meal; then she approaches with her back to the place, puts the food down and leaves quickly. Any exchange of looks with her husband will be disastrous for his several weeks of effort in making new clay god pots to host some of their gods. Interestingly, the punishment for violating any taboo is not ordained by the community: it is believed that the culprit will be severely punished directly by the gods themselves.

For instance, women are prohibited from participating in the pilgrimage to Yaxchilán, an extraordinarily sacred place for the Lacandons. According to our informants, once a spouse of a very important religious leader violated this taboo and although it was only for one day, the punishment was very cruel—she lost her baby.

The Lacandons are also persuaded that when the last day of the Earth comes, a giant animal called *Nukux Bäk* will devour all sinners. This animal probably represents an image borrowed from the Christian apocalypse mixed with the local story about giant jaguars coming at the end of times.

However, the Lacandons claim that the devoured sinners will be liars, those who have committed incest or sodomy as well as pregnant and menstruating women. One may only ask what is the source of such an extremely negative attitude toward pregnant and menstruating women?

We might conclude that in spite of the fact that menstruation and pregnancy are frequently mentioned together, both are articulated differently in many cases and the sources of these cultural and ritual taboos could be different. We already indicated that in the case of menstruation, it might be a question of the danger posed by a ritually uncontrolled flow of blood in the context of the Maya symbolical significance of blood and ritual practices. But what can we do with pregnancy where there is no blood and ritual taboo is much more powerful?

While a menstruating woman is dangerous because for her the ritual manipulation of blood is not possible and this in turn can induce negative supernatural powers, the position of pregnant woman is completely different. She is powerful; she is a healer as well as a sorceress. In the quest for some universal Mesoamerican or Maya patterns for this combination of abilities, one might consider nagualism. The basic principal of this belief is the supernatural status of two beings in one body or two hearts in one being. The unborn child can communicate and cause harm; the pregnant woman contains poison and causes death but at the same time she can heal wounds and cure seriously ill people. It seems to be a specific part of a nagual cosmivision where the existence of an alter ego brings extraordinary magic abilities. In this case, the alter ego is represented by an unborn child during the period of pregnancy.

The Maya female taboos can be studied by means of various social theories and major intercultural comparisons and it could be appealing to examine the problem through western theoretical models. The main goal of this brief report is to announce that in many cases these models do not correspond with the odd reality of the New World and our objective should be to find a way to study it in its own particular context.

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