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Author(s): Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern

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# POWER AND PLACEMENT IN BLOOD PRACTICES

Pamela J. Stewart  
Andrew Strathern  
University of Pittsburgh

**Anthropologists writing on the Highlands societies of Papua New Guinea have stressed the variable importance of ideas of menstrual pollution as markers of gender relations. This article suggests an alternative approach to these ideas, emphasizing instead aspects of power, placement, complementarity, collaboration, and the moral agency of both genders. Turning to the ethnographic work of the 1960s, we contrast the writings of Salisbury and Meggitt and discuss the usefulness of the “three bodies” concept of Lock and Scheper-Hughes in the comparative analysis of body substances and their meanings in this region. The use of a collaborative model is helpful in such an overall analysis. (Bodily substances, cosmos, gender, menstruation, power)<sup>1</sup>**

Throughout the world menstrual blood is seen as a powerful bodily fluid in many contexts, especially in its recognized role as a source of fertility, and it is a significant part of a cosmic cycle of life and death. Menstrual blood may be used, like other powerful bodily fluids, in beneficial ways or in lethal ways. In interpreting the use of this fluid the agency of both women and men needs to be considered. Likewise, the cosmological contexts in which bodily substances are regarded must be explored so as to provide a better understanding of how these fluids are seen in all their dimensions (Stewart and Strathern 2001a, 1999a).

Buckley and Gottlieb (1988:7) discuss the diverse practices encompassed by a category such as menstrual taboos. These taboos affect the behavior of others in addition to the menstruating woman, and these actions have “cosmological ramifications” (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:9). They say there is a sort of androcentric bias in the interpretation that anthropologists have frequently made of taboos generally. For example, if women are prohibited from touching male hunting gear, this is interpreted as representing male dominance, but if men are not allowed to touch something in the female domain, this is often interpreted as a sign of female inferiority (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988:14). Rather than demonstrating absolute representations of superiority/inferiority, taboos such as those surrounding menstruation are best understood through observation and interpretation of the specific ways that taboos operate within a local cultural logic.

This article uses examples from the Highlands of Papua New Guinea to explore this topic. We use ethnographic records of other anthropologists and draw on materials from our three field areas in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, the Hagen, Duna, and Pangia (Wiru) areas. The Hagen area belongs to the populous Wahgi Valley in the Western Highlands Province, with a population today of around 100,000 and an administrative center in Mount Hagen township. The Pangia area, inhabited by more than 20,000 speakers of the Wiru language, lies to the south of Hagen and belongs to the Southern Highlands Province, whose headquarters is in the

town of Mendi. The Duna people also number some 20,000 and live in a remote part of the Southern Highlands around Lake Kopyago, northwest of the Huli people. All of these people are primarily horticulturists, growing vegetable crops and raising pigs. All have been extensively influenced by colonial and postcolonial changes in government, business, and missionary personnel, as is the case throughout the Highlands (see for example, Strathern and Stewart 2000a; LiPuma 2000; Knauft 1999). This essay deals largely with these Highlands societies in terms of a comparative analysis of blood practices in the past. We are keenly aware that ideas about gender have been influenced from early colonial times by missionary teachings; and also that anthropologists have imported their own cultural biases, derived at least in part from Judeo-Christian backgrounds, into their accounts.

### THE COLLABORATIVE MODEL

Early anthropologists working in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea tended to emphasize the themes of separation of the lives of women and men and antagonism between them. Often these two themes were connected further with practices of male initiation and the prevalence of warfare conducted by males of hostile intermarrying clans or local groups. These elements were further combined with a model of menstrual pollution that reflected the supposedly hostile and hierarchical character of gender relations. The model also played down the importance of women in supporting successful outcomes in warfare. Theorizing in this vein is portrayed in Allen's (1967) early comparative survey on male cults and initiations. Allen, however, did recognize that there were variations in the Highlands and sought to explain them in terms of warfare, social structure, and exchange practices, and he has more recently reconsidered the same issues from the perspective of indigenous concepts of semen and blood (Allen 1998).

Since the 1960s, this overall model has been considerably modified with the realization that separation does not necessarily mean antagonism, and we have emphasized that separation was sometimes a means of actually supporting particular actions. Feil (1987:168-232) built on earlier discussions to pursue intersocietal differences in gender relations in New Guinea. He notes at one point that men's and women's economic activities, for example, "are complementary yet largely independent" in some cases, and that in the Western Highlands there is "an interdependence of male-female roles," which he interprets as a means of achieving high agricultural production for exchange (Feil 1987:168-232). We have extended this point in our writing to the sphere of ritual, especially with regard to Female Spirit cults, arguing that these cults overtly recognized gender complementarity in symbolic terms and that cult performances "were successful only with the full collaboration and co-operation of both males and females in the communities" (Stewart and Strathern 1999b:351; Strathern and Stewart 1999a, 2000b:ch. 6). We have applied this argument further to the reanalysis of the Male Spirit (*Kor Wöp*) cult in Hagen (Stewart and Strathern 2001a:ch. 6; Strathern and Stewart 1999b).

Anthropologists have also noted that where ties of social alliance and exchange between persons and groups were emphasized, the values given to the female domain and to ties established through women were greater than where these ties were weaker or less important. This was the chief argument put forward by Feil (1987) and the case of Hagen illustrates it well. Yet the motif of menstrual pollution has remained in ethnographic accounts at large, detached from the other elements of the original model. It is desirable, therefore, to develop an alternative overall model within which ideas regarding menstruation can be resituated.

We earlier made a start on this re-evaluation by proposing a collaborative model of gender relations in which an emphasis on complementarity and co-operation between the genders counterbalances the earlier emphasis on antagonism and separation. Related arguments have been made, with some differences of emphasis, by Sillitoe (1985) on the Wola of the Southern Highlands, and Knauff (1993, 1999) on south-coast New Guinea cultures, although Knauff (1993:102) does consider these cultures in terms of their ideas about female sexual pollution in relation to women's status.

The significance of the collaborative model is that it considers blood practices in general within the framework of indigenous ideas about the cosmos in which notions about reproduction and fertility (and death) are of overarching importance. Doing this makes it much more difficult to regard ideas about menstrual blood simply in a negative way, since blood itself is a reproductive element of great power in indigenous thinking (Strathern and Stewart 1999c).

The negative connotations of the word "pollution," in terms of an encompassing value for menstrual fluid, accordingly become difficult to support. Semantic difficulties emerge when one realizes that the act of translating indigenous terms may be problematic and that indigenous words that indicate negative and positive powers of substances may have expanding or contracting meanings that are contextually applied. This point can be made also in relation to corpse fluids, since these could be seen as having either lethal or beneficial powers. In Hagen, for example, these fluids were sometimes said to be drawn from the corpse in order to be used as poison in sorcery against those suspected of being responsible for the person's death; whereas among the Duna, corpse fluids were thought to be beneficial to the earth, renewing its "grease" and fertility (Stewart and Strathern 2001b). In Hagen also, the "grease" (*kopong*, a very important bodily fluid) of the dead in general was held to benefit the earth, in contrast to the narrow contexts in which such fluids could be employed for sorcery (Stewart and Strathern 1997a).

Our frame of interpretation is cognate with those of other writers on this topic such as Buckley and Gottlieb (1988), who rejected a simple sociological explanation for menstrual practices and advocated paying attention to ideas of ethnobiology. Meigs (1984) pointed out that the gendered characteristics of the Hua of the Eastern Highlands were seen as varying over time within the life cycle and that balance was sought in gender relations. These Hua ideas operate via the central concept of *nu*,

vital essence in food and people, whose flow has to be managed. The concept of nu is similar to the Hagen idea of kopong.

We employ Douglas's (1984 [1966]) concept of the varying values (negative and positive) associated with objects and substances that are placed outside of their properly prescribed context. "If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place" (Douglas 1984 [1966]:35). This was an enormously productive observation; but a residual problem is left by the use of the term "dirt" itself, which carries precisely those connotations of pathogens and hygiene that Douglas wished to eject from her analysis.

Thus, bodily fluids such as semen and blood, if not kept in their culturally prescribed proper places, can be dirty, polluting, and very dangerous. Powerful substances require managed flows and use within bodies, within time, and within space in order for them to produce desired effects and to avoid undesired consequences (Stewart and Strathern 2002a).

## POWER

In New Guinea societies, concepts of power are paramount when discussing bodily substances. Notions surrounding bodily substances in New Guinea are closely intertwined with ideas about sexual activity, maturation, and gender relations. Health and sickness, fertility and decay, female and male characteristics may all be expressed in terms of particular bodily fluids, such as blood and grease/water (Stewart and Strathern 2001a). In discussing these fluids, "power" signifies the strength to alter a situation, whether positively or negatively. Menstrual fluid is recognized as an extremely powerful substance, signaling the potential of reproductive continuation. Without it the fertility of the group cannot be sustained. The Siane people of the Eastern Highlands acknowledged the importance of menstruation through initiation practices that celebrated menarche, the passage of a girl to a reproductive condition. Strikingly, for the Siane, Salisbury (1965:72) noted that "a girl's first menses are treated as a form of pregnancy . . . but giving birth to blood alone." Salisbury's early ethnography stands out for its insight into female initiation in the Highlands. The Siane were not alone in celebrating the first menses of girls, since these practices belonged also to the Lufa region in the Eastern Highlands, as remarked on by Meigs (1984:131), who notes that "in this religion of the body the female body plays the star role." (For a general reconsideration of female initiation in Melanesia, see Lutkehaus and Roscoe 1995.)

The Siane girl was said to "give birth" in her mother's house, hidden behind a barrier of sweet-smelling branches. Men from other villages came and sang courting songs outside, an action that was said to protect her spirit. The blood she released was seen as a manifestation of paternal spirit in her body and it was important that the "birth" of this blood take place on her parental land; while the presence of men from elsewhere signaled that she could now be courted and married and that her

subsequent children would be born elsewhere. Also notably, when girls visited places to court men, they wore male clothing over their female garb, indicating their dual importance to intergroup alliances. In rituals to the spirits women pulled on strings, seen as the umbilical cords of mythical spirit birds, "stressing the role of women in childbearing and as links to the spirit world" (Salisbury 1965:68) by this act of pulling down fertility.<sup>2</sup>

Salisbury's account stresses the positive significance of menstruation, set also into the context of general ideas about blood and hot and cold conditions of the human body. These general ideas are a practically universal feature of New Guinea Highlands cultures, running across the region from east to west. The initiation of boys involved the purging of their mother's blood, but not because it was polluting. Ties with the mother's people remained important. Rather, it was done to increase the amount of paternal blood and spirit in them. Paradoxically, it seems, girls were thought to retain their own paternal blood and as women to pass it on to their sons. The society was therefore based on a recognition of the power of blood and on practices designed to manage its proportions in the bodies of both men and women. Blood, in general, along with other substances, could cause either health or sickness: an intrusion of alien blood into the body might make a person sick and had to be purged by bloodletting. "Cold blood" indicated that a person had "become a spirit" and might die, requiring treatment with hot foods such as meat mixed with salt and ginger, and by having red ocher clay smeared on the body (Salisbury 1965:56).

Salisbury's account provides evidence that is the more remarkable because it relates to a period relatively close to times of precolonial warfare and to an Eastern Highlands society in which male initiation was practiced. He shows clearly the operation of a humoral system of ideas and also the importance of women as central to reproduction in the cosmos. He does not use the term "pollution" in discussing the initiated girl's menses. Had his ethnography been made the basis for comparative model-making, the history of thinking about the Highlands region might have been different.

The general point here is that menstruation was regarded as signifying fertility and was therefore treated as powerful. A girl's transition to the powerful status of a woman required the management of her menses and her protection against danger. Her seclusion or separation marked this and was accompanied by collaborative male activity. We can take the Siane case as paradigmatic for other cases, whether first-menses rituals or not, since in all cases this transition was regarded as significant and was communicatively marked by the first visit to a menstrual hut and a girl's subsequent participation in courting rituals.

Among the Hua people, menstruation was seen as a purification of the female body and was thought to be the cause of the rapid growth of girls relative to boys (Meigs 1984:55-58). Hua men practiced bloodletting since they did not have a physiologically defined cycle of blood loss such as menstruation. Hua male bloodletting drew blood from the stomach, navel, lower back, and buttocks in order to purify the body and cure headache, toothache, and pain in the joints and



elsewhere. Meigs (1984:57) states that blood in general is not lexically differentiated from menstrual blood for the Hua and that "blood let from the limbs of middle-aged men was eaten by other males to enhance growth and strength." These examples demonstrate the powers of substances such as blood and the need to maintain a balance of these substances.

### DANGER

Powerful substances are dangerous if they are not handled correctly, and correct handling requires the management of their flows in bodies, in time, and in space. It is not only that dirt is "matter out of place," but that the power in substances can be diverted into various channels according to the moral agency of the actors involved. Indeed, the idea of dirt here may be misleading. Conventional ethnography has focused on menstrual danger without a counterbalancing recognition of the obvious relationship to fertility, expressed in the image, widespread in the Highlands, of semen and blood binding in the womb to produce a child. Hagen people say that conception occurs when the blood in a woman's womb mixes with semen (Strathern and Stewart 1998a:236-39). In Duna, female blood and male sexual fluid are thought to combine to produce a fetus (Strathern and Stewart 1999c:ch. 11). Wagner (1983) describes this joining of substances for the Daribi of Chimbu Province in Papua New Guinea, for whom the human embryo is said to be formed by semen and uterine blood: "The outer layer of the embryo, and the resulting human being, is thus formed by the father, whereas the blood and internal organs are provided by the mother" (Wagner 1983:76). Likewise, the Paiela people of the Enga Province believe that semen "must wrap around menstrual blood many times to keep it from 'coming outside' if the woman is to conceive" (Biersack 1983:85). The image here is the same as that in Hagen. Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) suggested that ideas about the power of menstrual blood may appear in cultural contexts where such blood is seen as significant for conception. These Highlands cases support this suggestion.

Despite the ethnographic record, anthropological literature has often concentrated on negative aspects of menstrual blood, thus skewing discussion of substances. We give here some counterexamples to this. First, in Hagen, the postpartum taboo on intercourse was supported by the idea that the father's semen could enter into the mother's breast milk and could kill the baby if ingested. The same bodily substance that helped to make the child could kill it, then, if it entered into the bodies of mother and child at a later stage. This shows that semen, important in fertility, could be dangerous in a way that closely parallels the case of menstrual blood. Second, from a different context, Hagen people use the same term for both medicinally beneficial and poisonous substances. *Kopna* or *konga* means both ginger, used as a hot substance in curative magic, and poison, another kind of hot substance but with an ability to kill. This example indicates the duality of power in substances. A ritual curer could use them to strengthen the body, while a sorcerer could use them to

weaken it. Contextual agency therefore determines whether a substance acts positively or negatively.

Persons undergoing life-cycle transitions involving their growth were often in Highlands societies segregated from others. In the Duna area, this held for boys who were kept in seclusion huts in the forest away from settlements, since contact with married and sexually active people of both sexes could impede their maturation. They were being strengthened to meet the challenges of adult life, including “hot” sexual interactions, and for that reason needed to be kept in the “cool” forest for the transition (Strathern and Stewart 2000b; Stewart and Strathern 2000, 2002b).

### POSITIVE STRENGTH

In the Duna area, a ritual of renewal practiced in the past used the menstrual blood of a virgin to appease a ground-dwelling spirit (*tama*) and make him cease his disruption of the ecological balance (Stewart 1998). The girl’s menstrual blood was collected in a bamboo tube and taken along a ritual path punctuated by sacred sites. At the end of the journey the blood was thrown into the hole where the spirit lived. The girl was not allowed to enter into the human cycle of reproduction after her blood had been used in this ritual but remained an honored female in the social system (Strathern and Stewart 1998b).

In the boys’ growth rituals among the Duna, the Female Spirit (*Payame Ima*) protected and guided the boys via her spirit marriage with the ritual expert who was leading the boys through this phase of development (Strathern and Stewart 2000b:chs. 5 and 6). Among the neighboring Enga, the Female Spirit who functioned in this way was represented by two objects: the bog iris and the *penge*, a bamboo section “filled with sacred fluid said to originate from the blood of the spirit woman” (Wiessner and Tumu 1998:218). In the Hagen area, it was said that the Female Spirit (*Amb Kor*) might announce her presence and the need for a ritual performance in her honor by leaving menstrual blood near the house of the male leader who was to organize the celebration. This ritual had as its central focus the enhancement of fertility for women, pigs, and the land, and thus had the welfare of the community at heart (Strathern and Stewart 1997, 1999d).

### PLACEMENT

The examples given above indicate clearly the significance of placement. Placement is not just a structural concept but an aspect of how moral agency is at work. It is proper for women to visit the menstrual hut, just as it is proper for men to stay in the men’s house. A man who visited a menstrual hut secretly was thought to do so only to have illicit intercourse with a woman there who was not his wife. In Hagen, it was thought that this could result in his sickness and death unless he confessed and the blood he contacted in this way was removed from his body. The



bad quality of the blood marks the immorality of his actions and consequently of his body.

This Hagen example can be compared to one from Pangia showing menstrual huts in a different aspect. Seclusion huts were themselves thought to be arenas of particular power. In Pangia, it was thought that a man could become pregnant if he got menstrual blood inside his body by inadvertently consuming it or through transmission via his penis (Strathern and Stewart 2000b; Stewart and Strathern 1999b). The symptoms included an enlarged abdomen. A ritual expert cured the stricken man inside a menstrual hut unoccupied by women. Here is an indication that one of the fears regarding male contact with menstrual blood was male pregnancy and the loss of male identity through the transformative power of menstrual fluid. The Pangia cure can be seen as a ritual abortifacient to rid a man of a female condition that is dangerous to him, since he has no uterus or vaginal opening for expulsion. Thus, menstrual blood out of place can produce sexual identity confusion. This underlying fear of confusion can be argued to be at the heart of menstrual taboos and practices in Hagen as well as Pangia. Just as men should not sleep in menstrual huts, women should not sleep in men's houses, since to do so would make them "cold." The aim here, however, was not simply to effect a separation, but to ensure that powerful actions occurred in the right places according to local ideas.

Among the Hua people the condition of male pregnancy is called *kupa* (Meigs 1984:52-62). The affected man's stomach is said to become progressively bigger as a mass of blood grows and develops fetal characteristics. "Some informants even claim to have seen fetuses after their removal [of the mass] from men's bodies, an operation performed by non-Hua specialists" (Meigs 1984:47-48). Unless this procedure is undertaken it is said that the abdomen will burst open, causing death. Treatment for the condition included "bloodletting and the consumption of the eldest brother's wife's feces" (Meigs 1984:52). These male pregnancies are said to be the outcome of improper practice such as ingesting menstrual blood or eating possum meat, which Hua males say is permitted only to uninitiated males or very old men (i.e., sexually nonfunctional males) (Meigs 1984:52). The Hua believe that a fetus is formed primarily from "a large amount of menstrual blood and a small amount of semen. All the blood in the newborn, as in the adult, is the mother's" (Meigs 1984:61).

In the first example, from the Hagen area, socially wrong agency produces sickness; in the second example, from the Pangia area, socially beneficial agency produces curing. Menstrual huts are the locus of both instances.

### MYTHOLOGICAL IDEAS

The use of the menstrual hut for the seclusion of women during the time of their menstrual flows is a practice that is no longer sustained among the Hagen, Pangia, or Duna peoples, having been abolished along with other forms of ritual practices under various influences, including missionary teachings. We do not know when

exactly the practice of menstrual seclusion began in the Hagen or Duna areas, but for Pangia it seems to have entered at the same time that the Female Spirit (*Aroa Ipono*) cult performances were imported. Also for Pangia, the ritualization of menstruation and the introduction of menstrual huts, stressing the importance of female reproductive powers, were introduced as a part of the cult package of rituals. The work of Wiessner and Tumu (1998) as well as our own demonstrates the significance of the historical movements of cult complexes and their associated meanings throughout the Highlands region. The category of notions regarding the Female Spirit is historically very strong in all three of these areas and aspects of rituals directed to these spirits are retained. Menstrual observations by women marked out this Spirit's importance to both genders in the places where the cult was held.

In the Hagen area, the origin of menstruation is linked through myth to the agency of human men who interact with the siblings of the Female Spirit. Vicedom and Tischner (1943-48[3]:25-31), Strauss and Tischner (1962:436-37), and Strathern and Stewart (1999d) recount and discuss this myth. In one version of the myth, the younger of a pair of unmarried brothers living in the forest saw some large red parrots which often came to eat at fruit trees, and asked his brother to shoot one of these birds. The brother did so but the bird flew off. He followed the bird but found instead a girl whose upper arm was bandaged. She accepted his offer of a piece of meat. He observed that she would leave her house and rub herself against a banana tree stem. After seeing this, he took a fragment of shell and an axe blade and inserted them into the tree where she rubbed herself. The next time the girl rubbed herself in this way, the objects slit her open, making a vagina. Later her sisters returned from where they had been staying, and all except the youngest entered the house, became hot, and after a time went outside and rubbed against the tree. The human man had thus tricked these Sky-Sisters (*Tei-Amb*) into cutting their genitals open so that the man and his brothers could have sexual intercourse with them. These opened women who had shed their own blood thus became the ancestresses of human groups. The one Sky-Woman who did not cut herself became the Female Spirit (*Amb Kor*). She became the spirit wife to many human men, since all the male performers in the cult were said to be her husbands.

The older brother made aprons for all the girls, gave them cooked meat, and took them to his home. He gave three of the girls to his younger brother and kept four for himself as his wives. One day he quarreled with one wife (the girl whom he had first shot in parrot form) because she was infertile. She ran into her garden and cried. Then a fierce storm arose and the *Amb Kor* appeared in front of her. She gave her human sister a bundle of dance decorations and red cordyline plants, and told her to give these items to her husband, telling him to open the bundle in the secret enclosure at the back of his men's house. Thus, human men learned from the Female Spirit how to enact the rituals to ensure fertility. In a sense, this first human man tricked the Sky Women into becoming menstruating human wives, while the remaining Sky Woman endowed them with fertility.

A similar myth exists among the Anganen of the lower Lai-Nembi Valley of the Southern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea (Nihill 1999). In this version, a group of women with closed vaginas lived by themselves without men.

There were many of them, all dark except for one "red" woman. . . . One day they were attacked by a group of men and fled. They climbed trees but the men noticed this and rubbed tree oil onto the trunk, causing the women to slip. At the base of the trees, men had placed their axes. When the women slipped they were cut and began to bleed. After this the women menstruated and had children. . . . [S]he [the red-skinned female] ran far away, later giving birth to a group of red people, the Australians. (Nihill 1999:67)

This last element in the narrative links with a widely dispersed set of narratives in which the colonial outsiders were partially equated with indigenous spirit beings. The motif of slitting the mythical women's vaginas open also appears strikingly in a version of the Adam and Eve narrative recorded by Whitehouse (1995:56) in his study of the Pomio Kivung movement in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea.

The Female Spirits in these myths are Sky Beings who are an important category in mythologies that can be traced all over Eastern Indonesia and the broader areas of Melanesia, including Papua New Guinea (Strathern and Stewart 2000b). Likewise, among the Telefolmin, the female creator figure Afek, similar to the Amb Kor, is said in one myth to have generated all of the important cultural objects, including the net bag, from her vaginal secretions and menstrual blood. One of the uses to which Afek put her net bag was to hold the bones of her husband/younger brother Umoin prior to his funeral. The net bag, which has been equated with Afek's (externalized) womb (MacKenzie 1991; Stewart and Strathern 1997b), thus serves as a container of the human body at all stages of the life cycle, in which death at least partly recapitulates birth.

The physical use of seclusion huts by menstruating females served many purposes, including that of a nonverbal means of communication. It indicated to the immediate community that those inside were still potentially able to reproduce for the group, while at the same time the cessation of seclusion could announce to the group that one of their women was pregnant and soon their number would be increased. The final removal of a woman (at menopause) from the monthly ritual of menstruation could also mark the transformation of a female into another phase of social action, such as happened among the Hua. "The postmenopausal woman with three or more children was formally initiated, [and] took up residence in the men's house, where she was shown the secrets of male society, previously hidden from her on pain of death" (Meigs 1984:67).

## RETROSPECTIVE

Earlier in this article we suggested that had Salisbury's account of first-menstruation rites for girls been given more prominence, a different paradigm of the meaning of menstrual blood might have been developed. Here we take brief note of

one influential essay that was contemporaneous with Salisbury's work, and which did contribute to the paradigm of pollution that was developed. This was Mervyn Meggitt's (1964) article on male-female relationships in the Highlands of Australian New Guinea. Meggitt sought to establish different patterns of ideas about gender relations in different parts of the Highlands on the basis of information then available. The bulk of the essay concerned bachelors' rituals among the Mae Enga, whom he studied. He set his account of these Mae rituals into a comparative scheme in which he compared the Mae with the Kuma of the Western Highlands (Reay 1959). Meggitt suggested "that in Highlands ethnography we must discriminate between at least two kinds of inter-sexual conflict or opposition—the Mae type and the Kuma type. The one reflects the anxiety of prudes to protect themselves from contamination by women, the other the aggressive determination of lechers to assert their control over recalcitrant women" (Meggitt 1964:221). After comparing various other cases, such as the Huli, with the Mae, and others such as the Medlpa (Hagen) and the Siane with the Kuma, Meggitt went on to identify some societies of the Eastern Highlands in which, somehow, both syndromes coexist. He suggested that in these cases men fear menstrual pollution but aggressively seek sexual activities.

Such generalizations are subject to the test of time. Wiessner and Tumu's (1998) ethnography of the Enga region as a whole shows a much more complex model of gender relations than Meggitt described in 1964, marked by senses of complementarity and cosmic collaboration as well as by notions of menstrual dangers. O'Hanlon's (1989) study of the north Wahgi Wall Komblo considerably modified the picture of Wahgi society that Meggitt had drawn from Reay's work. In addition, generalizations of this sort also reflect the orientation of the author. Here the author's focus was on negative aspects of relationships, on male agency, and on patterns of political relations as determinative of cultural ideas. On the basis of the early ethnography of Vicedom and Tischner, Meggitt suggests for the Medlpa that "there is evidence that to some extent men in this society fear women's supernaturally derived sexuality and prevent them from participating in the most important rituals" (Meggitt 1964:205). Here he refers to precisely those Female Spirit cults that we argue strongly represent the notion of complementarity between gendered powers in the cosmos. Exactly what Meggitt meant by "supernaturally derived sexuality" is not clear. The myth actually attributes the cutting open of the Sky Women's vaginas to male human agency. This was something that men brought into being. The myth does, however, attribute the greatest fertility-giving power to the female who was not cut open in this way. It is she who gives fertility through ritual to the human men and her sisters now married to them. This is a cosmological picture far removed from what Meggitt calls "the anxiety of prudes."

Meggitt's own ethnography further reveals that the major purpose of the Mae bachelors' rites was to make the youths who participated in them attractive to young women when they finally "came out" and danced before them. However, Meggitt does not stress this aim in its positive aspects, but rather argues that the bachelors

must return to “everyday life where, strengthened by the rituals, they face once more the insidious influence of unclean women” (Meggitt 1964:217).

Apart from the overall tone of these descriptions, there is a further conceptual problem with Meggitt’s approach. He argues that political relations explain the intensity of “fears of menstrual pollution.” Since he finds these fears emphasized with the Mae but not with the Kuma, he correlates this difference with “marrying enemies” among the Mae and “marrying friends” among the Kuma. There are other examples for which this does not hold. In Pangia, enemy groups often intermarried, yet prior to the introduction of the Aroa Ipono cult, menstrual restrictions appear not to have been much in evidence. And Meggitt places the Medlpa with the Kuma, yet the Medlpa apparently had more concerns regarding the power of menstrual fluids than the Kuma. This kind of analysis requires bringing more variables into play and seeking ever finer discriminations to explain nuances of differences.

The fundamental problem with the form of analysis that Meggitt used lies with lumping together ideas about separation, opposition, sexuality, and pollution in a single complex of factors. A stress on ideas of pollution (and focusing solely on female pollution instead of considering male pollution) or their absence omits the cosmic elements of complementarity and collaboration which are present in the ethnographic materials and which our collaborative model tries to bring to the fore, pointing out that elements of the model can be discerned throughout the Highlands. Thus we can indeed begin to note sociological differences in patterns without imposing pollution as the point of reference. Long ago, Salisbury did something of this kind by looking closely at his ethnographic materials.

Another way to restructure the basis of enquiry here is by reference to the distinctions made by Lock and Scheper-Hughes (1987) on the “three bodies”: the individual body, the social body, and the body politic. The individual body belongs to the person who feels and acts, and therefore can have benevolent or malevolent intentions toward others. The social body refers to “the representational uses of the body as a natural symbol” (Lock and Scheper-Hughes 1987:7), and the body politic refers to the regulation and control of bodies in reproduction and sexuality. The details of these definitions aside, it is their reference to different domains of actions and ideas that is relevant here. Our concern has been to contextualize the social body in the Highlands, pointing out the powers, positive and negative, attributed to blood. How individuals or persons experience or deal with such powers is another matter, and how relationships are politically regulated is still another. In building his complexes of features, Meggitt merged these different aspects, producing difficulties for his own comparative analysis. While not undertaking a wholesale review of the comparative field, we have tried to suggest here ways in which such a review can productively be undertaken, and to cite some ethnography to support our interpretations of the social body (that is to say, the gendered body) in the Highlands.



## CONCLUSION

It is imperative to look at blood ideologies and practices within the overall framework of indigenous ideas about the cosmos, in which notions about reproduction and fertility (and also death) are of overarching importance. If this is done then it becomes much harder to look on ideas about menstrual blood in solely negative terms, since blood is a reproductive element of great power in indigenous thinking (see Stewart and Strathern 2001a for a general discussion of this concept in New Guinea).

The examples given here are intended to advance a model of certain historical aspects of the Highlands societies that frames the topic of menstrual blood in terms of ideas of power, placement, and mythological significance. We stress the potential duality of substances, the importance of moral agency, and the cosmological ideas that in the past formed the encompassing backdrop to social practices. Our examples also fit into the idea of the collaborative model because both female and male substances, and correspondingly female and male actions and symbolic values, were constantly seen as combined together in these societies in the pursuit of their overall reproduction.

## NOTES

1. Some materials in this article are adapted from *Gender, Song, and Sensibility: Folktales and Folksongs in the Highlands of New Guinea*, copyright 2002, by Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern. They are reproduced with the permission of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., Westport, CT.
2. This resembles the cosmic umbilical cord connecting Sky and Earth in eastern Indonesian traditions, sometimes symbolized as a liana or as a python (Strathern and Stewart 2000b:60-65, 72-73), and resembles, in the Wahgi Valley, the actions that take place in Komblo dances in which two girls pull on an effigy described as the *kund gale* in a context of fertility ritual (O'Hanlon 1989:106).

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