

PUBERTY RITES FOR THE SINHALESE FEMALE

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The life changes in the developmental processes of humans require a high degree of social and psychological adjustment. Cultures around the world have evolved ceremonies and rituals associated with these changes. The culture under study, the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka, have cognition of the predictable crises and developmental rhythms that children go through to become an adult and have developed a ritual to mark the physical maturation point of a female.

The ritual is seen as a psycho-social preparation of the female, to help prepare her to deal with what she has to cope with in the future as a biologically mature female. Additionally, the ritual helps the individual to be culturally conditioned to understand and manage the behavioral expectations for a sexually mature female. The recognition of female sexuality is portrayed by significant details in the ritual in that her roles of childbearing and motherhood are connected with the occurrence of menstruation. Throughout the ritual there is a strong underlying theme of welcoming the girl into the adult female domain by her immediate family and friends.

THE ASTROLOGER

A smiling female clerk employed by the High School escorts a thirteen year-old girl to her home in a taxi. She pays the taxi driver and carefully helps the girl out of the vehicle. The girl nervously clutches a portion of her well-starched, pleated-skirt white dress which has a spot of blood on it. She walks to her door and is met by her mother who gives her a gleaming smile as she speaks to the clerk. The girl sits quietly and shyly until the clerk is treated to a hot cup of tea. She is asked by the mother the exact time she discovered that she had menstruated. Leaving the girl in the company of the school clerk, she runs to her neighbor to tell of the good news that her daughter indeed has come of age and that she is the mother of a "big girl," and she asks the neighbor to stay with the girl until a relative comes. The mother then collects her hambiliya, a little purse which is always carried by a woman in the folds of her saree.

She hurries to the family astrologer, tells him the good news, including the time and place of the event, as well as the color of her daughter's dress while giving the girl's horoscope which she has brought along. The astrologer takes his time to refer to his well-thumbed books, ola leaves,¹ charts, and makes some calculations while muttering to himself and reading aloud. He takes a piece of paper, and draws an astrological chart. The lady strains her neck from her chair and eagerly listens. The man asks her the approximate time of menstruation and proceeds to give a lengthy description of the girl's future, the kind of adult she will be, the time of marriage, the influence of her life on the parents, siblings and her health. He gives advice so that care will be taken to shield the child from negative effects due to her time of birth and to help maximize the positive effects of her time of birth. He also writes down the auspicious time for bathing the girl. The mother says that her high school examination is close by and that she cannot afford to miss school for too long. So the date for the ritual bath is re-calculated for another auspicious day. The lady thanks the astrologer,² wraps a few rupees³ into a betel leaf⁴ and gives it to him. He bows his head in acknowledgment and without unwrapping the leaf places it in a drawer. On her way out the lady meets the wife of the astrologer and invites her for the pubertal bathing ritual of her daughter.

THE DHOBY LADY

She then hurries home to attend to the myriad duties that await her. She sends a message to the laundress, or dhoby⁵ through a person working in the house. The worker is asked to inform the dhoby of her daughter's pubescence. The dhoby arrives with clean white sheets for the girl's bed and a white dress, usually similar to the school uniform. Hereafter, until the day of the bath, daily the dhoby will bring a clean sheet and a white dress for the girl. The dhoby is presented with all the garments the girl was wearing when she menstruated including her jewelry. These items are considered to contain kili, a contaminant that is supposed to be around a woman when she menstruates. The donation of the total apparel, including her ornamentation, symbolizes the renunciation of her young girl's role. Thereafter, in seclusion she has a brief preparatory period for her transition. After the ritual bath she will be richly dressed in new clothes with much gold ornamentation as she steps into her new role of a pubescent female with a new identity.

The girl is now secluded in a room away from the normal traffic of the house and will go out only to the bathroom. She will wear a menstrual napkin or a diaper which is a square piece of material folded in a pad-like fashion. These are washed or disposed of carefully as menstrual blood is considered powerful in various practices involving spirits. The concept of hygiene while menstruating could have been instilled into the girls through fear of the spirits as most taboos and fetishes reflect the need for obedience in men and women.

The reason for secluding the girl is to protect her against evil spirits which can enter her body and cause her mental faculties to be affected. Some object made of iron is kept near the girl so that the evil spirits will not do any harm to her. The girl will carry this object even when she walks to the bathroom and it gives her a sense of security and confidence that the spirits cannot touch her. Female relatives and friends will keep visiting her while she is in exile from the rest of society. The jovial conversations center around the absurd situations in which other females found themselves when they menstruated for the first time. The conversations are dotted with important messages which help her to anticipate a different kind of behavior expected of her as a young adult, her family honor being dependent on her virtuous behavior.

The girl is not expected to speak to any males who visit the house except her father or her immediate brothers who discreetly avoid her so as not to embarrass her. The father now has to come up with extra money to spend for the celebrations connected with the puberty rites which are performed only for the female gender. The emphasis of the menstrual ritual is on the bathing of the girl at an auspicious time. The ritual conceptually includes linking with nature, to create an awareness of the biological events of being female and the cultural norms to which she must adhere. After puberty, she will no longer be able to visit her friends unescorted and will never obtain permission to spend a night away from her family.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE FIRST BATH

New clothes are tailored for the pubescent girl. New gold jewelry is ordered from the jeweler. Fine table cloths, silver utensils, and the best crockery and cutlery are brought out from their storage. The house may be painted anew and new drapes hung. Special sweetmeats are

prepared for the great day. There is a festive air for a week or more with rabana⁶ - playing by the village women and men.

Added to the list of new purchases will be new baked earthenware utensils to pour water to bathe the girl and a trough to collect the water. Saucer-like earthenware lamps with small spouts containing wicks are also purchased. A coconut picker is given an order to bring the inflorescence of the coconut palm in order to decorate the entrance to the house. Until the day of the ritual bathing, the girl's daily diet consists of very bland food. It is believed that her body is undergoing tremendous change at this time and cannot cope with rich food until the mind and body have conditioned themselves to the new physiological change. Her diet will consist of vegetables, lentils, and rice and will be free of fish, meat or fried foods, fried foods being considered to attract spirits. Her food is prepared especially for her, using only the third milk⁷ squeezed from scraped coconut.

Special traditional food is prepared for the day of the ritual bathing. The rice, which is prepared for every festive occasion, is known as "milk-rice." This is reddish-brown rice slow-cooked in rich coconut milk. It is quickly spooned out onto a large china platter and patted down with a clean banana leaf to give it a special subtle flavor. The mixture easily lends itself to being closely packed to any shape and usually is cut into diamond-shaped pieces. The sweetmeats consist of kavurn, a mixture of rice, flour, cardamom, caraway seed and honey. Spoonfuls of the mixture are dropped into a fry pan and a midrib of coconut leaf is inserted into the middle of the cookie-like cake while the oil is splashed onto the cake. Many other sweets will be prepared with mung seed flour, sugar, coconut and honey; kokis, made from rice flour and thick coconut milk is made into various rosette shapes. The sweets keep for about two weeks without refrigeration and therefore are made earlier, in contrast to milk-rice, fish and meats which are prepared the same day of the celebrations. The food is spiced with the addition of exotic spices for which the country has been known for centuries.

THE DAY OF THE BATH

The ritual bathing takes place in the early hours of the morning. The temperature in most parts of the island being eighty degrees on the average ensures a comfortable bath. Before the bath, the girl is taken to look at a

tree that exudes a milky sap when cut. The milk signifies richness of the occasion as well as a symbol of fertility and purity. The girl then walks into the bathroom, accompanied by her mother. She stands on a mat woven out of dry coconut leaves on which has been sprinkled unhusked rice. Unhusked rice, having the potential life for sprouting, is a symbol of fertility for the Sinhalese. The water trough is sprinkled with fresh white jasmine flowers, known for their fragrance and signifying purity. The girl sits on a low wooden stool with a cloth wrapped around her acting as bathing apparel.

The dhoby plays an important part in the ritual bathing. She pours seven potfuls of water with the new earthen pot, or kalaya. The girl then takes a bath and the eradication of kili is thought to take place at this time. At the end she is asked to dash the pot on the ground. This practice may be akin to the dashing of the wine glass after toasting a person, in that to no better use than this would the vessel present itself. The mother then helps the girl dry and dress herself.

The girl now dresses in the traditional clothes, the saree, which consists of six yards of flimsy material, a long underskirt, and undergarments. A tight blouse is worn showing the midriff. She is adorned with gold earrings, necklaces, and many gold bangles. She will be given ancestral jewelry by her grandmother. The girl then walks around the back of the house and enters the house through the front door, similar to the entrance to her new role as a menstruating female. The doorway is decorated on either side with flaming oil lamps placed on decorative pots. The pots also contain the cascading yellow flowers of the inflorescence of the coconut palm. As the girl enters the doorway, an older male will hold a husked coconut in front of her and give it a rap with the blunt edge of a knife. If the coconut splits into two equal halves, with a little water remaining in either shell, it is read to be a good omen about her future life of prosperity balanced with good health. Sometimes a coconut will rudely split into a very small part and a larger part that stays up while the smaller will roll off and lie on its face. The half of the coconut with the three indentations is called the female side and the other male. If the female half turns out to be bigger and faces upwards, the girl will have more daughters than sons and vice versa. If both halves are equal size and facing upwards, an equal number of children from both sexes are believed to be the result.

If both halves face downwards, it is an indication of barrenness. The reading of the coconut is not taken too seriously, but it is adhered to as an old custom from an age when there was little control by man over his environment.

The girl then walks demurely into the room and sits on a couch placed in a central place in the living room. This marks the beginning of the all-day festivities. The family begins to serve the prepared elaborate breakfast with warm hospitality. The guests sit and await the trays laden with food. The girl is offered a cup of tea, milk-rice, and some sweets. Her grandparents have arrived from their home and will act as hosts, looking after the entertainment of the visitors who are already present. Hospitality to a visitor is an all-important custom of the Sinhalese culture. Refusal of more food is never taken seriously and more food will be placed on one's plate by the eager hosts. The beverage preferred in the country is hot tea drunk with milk and sugar. There will be many females at work in the kitchen pouring tea, cooking lunch, and washing dishes. A temporary structure which serves as a cooking place has been constructed. This has a wood-burning hearth with facilities for large-scale cooking.

The dhoby's tasks are now over. She is now expected to partake of breakfast and leave, the status of the dhoby not being high enough to mingle with the other guests. She is, however, very satisfied as she can collect all the new utensils that were used and she can anticipate other gifts, such as food for her family and money. She may sometimes bring a small hand cart to transport the gifts to her home. The gifts she receives are an indication of wealth and status of the celebrating family and she will brag to other village women of how much she received in goods and money. The family, therefore, try not to save on this expenditure, mindful of the reputation they earn in return! The weeks of preparation as well as the day's events are managed and executed by women. The mother of the girl makes all the decisions for the ceremony and festivities. The father is only a concerned provider of funds and may only help when requested to do so.

Some of the visitors leave after breakfast, but some remain for lunch. Those that leave present the girl with gifts, such as a piece of fine yardage, money, a piece of gold Jewelry or a gold C.O.M.⁸ The "big girl" at this time is having a great time, with much attention showered on

her for menstruating - a natural consequence in her biological passage. She receives intense social support at this important milestone of her life and joyous welcome into the sisterhood, composed of menstruating females, which sets forth unspoken rules of behavior. They help her gain recognition and awareness of this inevitable reality and encourage her to conform to the cultural norms of staying a virgin until she is married. No one directly conveys these values to the girl. She is expected to learn by observation, inference, deduction, and imitation of the behavior of other females.

After the day of festivities, life returns to normal schedules although not for the "big girl." She is sometimes excluded from the most innocent liberties of visiting a friend or relative unescorted, although this is not strictly adhered to in modern times. She is expected to walk gracefully, not swinging her arms, keeping them close to the body. Her jet black hair is expected to be unshorn and kept in order by using purified coconut oil. She is expected to increase her participation in household work, cooking, preserving food and sewing. If, however, the girl is attending school or has elder sisters, these involvements are minimized and even postponed since the Sinhalese place a premium on education for both boys and girls and support financially and emotionally a promising bright child who does well in school.

The girl returns to school the very next day after her bathing ceremony. A teacher always can single out a girl who has come of age by observing the new gold chain around her neck, new earrings, gold bangles, and the cluster of whispering girls around her. She is now one of the "big girls" who have somewhat higher status than those who have not yet had the privilege of menstruating: She has had a pleasant social experience, with much support from her family; she has contributed to a happy occasion, for in fact, she has been the cause of the festivities; and she has been launched into a different social status in the cultural domain. She is now a young adult female with a new and strong identity.

CONCLUSION

It is seen that the puberty rite of the Sinhalese, which marks the first menstruation of a female, ensures that she attains a stable feminine identity of herself.

The informal communication with friends and relatives makes it clear that from here on her movements are restricted¹ due to her vulnerability. She is expected to remain a virgin until she marries. Her rewards for remaining such are family and personal honor and a sense of importance that she is expected to adhere to the cultural ethics. Although the ceremony brings awareness of her future roles as wife and mother, it does not assume that the goals of success and achievement are not for women. The decision-making, planning, and execution of the puberty rites are by women. The mother plays the role of the primary decision-maker.

The girl is introduced to the adult female domain through a series of pleasant and meaningful rituals. The entire family is present to show its total approval and recognition of her importance as well as her future role. The rites show the open attitude of the Sinhalese towards the sexuality of the female. There is no attempt to disregard or hide the realities of menstruation. The rite is conducive to an easy access to the psychological preparation for the biological realities of femaleness. The female is left with a clear understanding of her basic sexual identity and that the culture does not devalue her role. She is thus given a foundation from which to work towards the expectations of the culture, to her next passage in life.

NOTES

] Polished palm leaf on which astrological data is written.

2Sinhalese Astrologers attempt to forecast events and make personality assessments for an individual by noting the time of birth. Appropriate predictive formation is taken from elaborate manuals and almanacs.

3Rupee is the currency in the country. One rupee equals 100 cents.

4Betel leaf is from a climbing pepper whose fresh leaves are chewed together with the astringent hot of the betel palm.

5Laundry is done by a male or female dhoby who visits homes weekly to take away the soiled clothes and to bring back laundered ones.

The dhoby comes from the Rada caste, the principal washer caste in the island. In marriage and in other ceremonies such as puberty and post-nuptial rites as well as funerals of high caste people, the people of the washer caste have a special function specifically connected with washing clothes.

The caste system in Sri Lanka is not similar to that found in India. In the early days with the selection of the King and in order to exalt his position, there came a division of labor and power. It no longer operates in seriousness, especially in urban areas. Buddhism looks down on a caste system. Religion, education and economic forces have resulted in many people changing their jobs resulting in a disregard of the orthodox view of castes. All Sinhalese follow this menstrual ritual, irrespective of caste.

See o.Wickremanayake, "The Caste System of Sri Lanka," Case Studies of Human and Fundamental Freedoms - a World Survey. Vol. II (The Hague: Marinue/ Nijhoff, 1975), p. 184.

6Thisrabana is a drum approximately three feet in diameter, with a treated cow hide stretched over an 8 inch-deep wooden rim. This is placed over a three-legged wooden stand, and hot coals are placed underneath to give it the correct tone. six to eight villagers sit around the rabana and perhaps

sing a tune while playing the drum. The reverberations can be heard for miles around and the passerby knows that this is either a wedding or a ceremony connected with a girl's coming of age.

7The cloth is of two yards in length and 45 inches in width. Women wrap it around the upper part of the body by taking it under the armpits, and men wear it around the waist when bathing.

8Gold coins are mostly those from British sovereigns and come in a quarter, half or full sovereigns, and would be given by very close relatives.

9The Sinhalese women's images in Sinhalese literature emphasize their walk of ease and dignity to that of a female elephant which has an unhurried gait of gracefulness.

10Sinhalese women from ancient times have not been secluded in the manner of many Orientals. There is no veiling or confining women into separate rooms during times of menstruation.

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