

The Power of Blood: *The sickness* and Spiritual Vulnerability in Southern Guyana

Dr. Courtney Stafford-Walter¹  0009-0009-0889-0814

¹University of Edinburgh, Moray House of Education and Sport, Edinburgh, UK.
EH8 8AQ - education.school@ed.ac.uk



Abstract: In this article, the author puts the existing literature on gendered personhood and space and the relationships between bodily fluids and the spirit world in dialogue with a specific ethnographic account of the sickness in Southern Guyana. The sickness is a spiritual illness that befalls Amerindian girls living in boarding school dormitories in Guyana that manifests in repeated violent fits. By exploring the reactions of community members and parents to this unusual illness, and how they link it to the power of menstrual blood, the article grapples with gendered personhood and transformation and what it means to come of age for young Amerindian woman in the face of rapid social change.

Keywords: Sickness; Spirits; Menstruation; Gendered Personhood; Schooling.

O poder do sangue: a enfermidade e vulnerabilidade espiritual no Sul da Guiana

Resumo: Neste artigo, a autora coloca a literatura existente sobre pessoa genderizada e espaço, e as relações entre os fluidos corporais e o mundo espiritual, em diálogo com um relato etnográfico específico sobre a enfermidade (*The sickness*) no Sul da Guiana. A enfermidade é uma doença espiritual que atinge meninas ameríndias vivendo em dormitórios de internatos na Guiana e manifesta-se sob ataques violentos repetidos. Ao explorar as reações dos membros da comunidade e dos pais da menina a essa enfermidade incomum, e também como eles vinculam-na ao poder do sangue menstrual, o artigo lida com a pessoa genderizada e a transformação, e o que significa para uma jovem mulher ameríndia atingir a maioridade em face da rápida mudança social.

Palavras-chave: Doença; Espíritos; Menstruação; Pessoa genderizada; Escolaridade.

El poder de la sangre: enfermedad y vulnerabilidad espiritual en el Sur de Guyana

Resumen: En el presente artículo la autora pone en diálogo la literatura sobre la construcción de persona y género, el espacio, los fluidos corporales y el mundo espiritual con una situación etnográfica particular: la enfermedad que ataca a las jóvenes indígenas que viven en los dormitorios de los internados escolares en el Sur de la Guyana. Esta enfermedad es un mal espiritual que se manifiesta en repetidos ataques violentos. La exploración de las reacciones de los padres y miembros de la comunidad frente a esta inusual enfermedad y los vínculos que le atribuyen al poder de la sangre menstrual sobre la enfermedad, le permite a la autora indagar en el proceso de construcción de género y persona, en un contexto de acelerado cambio social, donde se da cita la transformación de las jóvenes indígenas en mujeres adultas.

Palabras clave: enfermedad, espíritus, menstruación, persona/género, escolaridad.

Introduction

During my thirteen months of fieldwork in Southern Guyana, I slowly became familiar with a traumatic spiritual illness befalling Amerindian girls living in state-run boarding school dormitories. This phenomenon presents us with a lot of questions about gender and space, the relationship between bodily fluids and the spirit world, and what it means to come of age as young Amerindian women during a period of rapid social change in this part of Guyana. These young women are removed from their home communities, and no longer have access to key rituals: both everyday

acts of care and rituals that mark menarche. A mobility that brings girls into new, institutional spaces, as well as separating them from their kin and community, marks a rupture from gendered rituals and becomes a context for transforming gendered roles and relationships to space.

The sickness

I heard the first full account of *the sickness* on my second day in Riverside Village¹, in Southern Guyana, where I conducted thirteen months of doctoral fieldwork. My Wapishana host sister, Ella, told me there was a party at one of the two shops in the village that evening, and she said, "Let we go." Upon arrival, Ella and her friends quickly taught me a crucial lesson about how to properly drink cassava beer and I was having a nice time at the party and meeting many people. Ella introduced me to her friend Isabelle. She was a very thin woman around Ella's age of twenty-four, with huge eyes, long dark hair falling past her waist, and a baby stationed on her hips. She also had two other little ones, a son and a daughter, two and three years old, and they were clinging to the bottom of her skirt. They would only let go briefly to come over and claim a biscuit from me.

Isabelle was curious about me and asked what my plans were for my time in the village. I mentioned that I would be volunteering at the school as I was interested in learning about education. Isabelle's expression shifted from a warm smile into a serious gaze within a second. She stated in a grave tone,

Miss, I am trying to get in touch with my father in law. He is a pia'man in Brazil, and he needs to come to rid the school of the bad spirits. One day I saw a school girl get sick, Miss. I invited her over for lunch and she was just eating and drinking, like normal. Then the spirit came in her. She jumped up and she ran straight towards the mountain. I tried to run after her Miss, but she was running faster than any human could run. When we nearly reached the school I started shouting, Help! Help! Help! Two men came out of the school and caught her before she could make it to the mountain. Once they had her I just started crying. I couldn't help it, watching her get taken over like that. After an hour she caught herself, but if you ask her- the spirit is always lurking there, ready to take her again.²

While I had indeed heard others referring to *the sickness* starting in July 2014, when I first arrived in coastal Guyana to begin my fieldwork, it was only with Isabelle's retelling of her experience that I realized exactly how this illness manifested. Based on my own middle class, white American background, I originally foolishly assumed *the sickness* people were mentioning was just physical. However, it quickly became apparent that in this case, and in my fieldsite more broadly, the line between the physical and the spiritual is blurred.

Boarding Schools and sickness

Most Amerindian communities in rural Guyana have a state-run primary school. However, to continue studies beyond this level young people must leave their home communities to attend regional boarding schools, sometimes from as young as ten years old. Region 9, despite being geographically one of the largest regions of Guyana, only has four boarding schools, and many adolescents therefore have to travel great distances to attend one of them. I conducted my fieldwork in a village with a population of approximately 800 that I call Riverside Village. Its secondary school has around 200 students over half of whom are boarders.

Guyana has many groups of Indigenous people, called "the 9 Amerindian tribes" in official discourse, and Riverside Secondary has students from three of these groups: Wapishana, Makushi and Patamona. The Wapishana and Makushi children are from neighboring villages, anywhere from one to multiple hours away by motorbike and they travel to their home communities three times a year at Christmas, Easter and Summer Breaks. The Patamona children, however, who typically travel home on small planes, only visit their families during the two-month-long summer break.

Twenty years ago, the majority of young people in this part of Guyana received their entire education in their home communities. With the shift towards a more formal education structure and the construction of state-run boarding schools over the last two decades, it is now unusual for Amerindian youth to remain in their home communities throughout their childhood and adolescence. In Guyana it is typical to link education directly to concepts like "development" and "modernity", but this is not unique to Guyana. As Laura Rival (1996, p. 156) notes in Ecuador, "[t]he schools found in Huaorani land, like any other school in rural Latin America, or indeed, in any part of the world, are conceived as models of modern culture." Due to this pursuit of "modernity", there is an increasing general expectation in Guyana that Amerindian children, in particular, should leave their kin and community to attend residential schools. This leaves parents in a predicament:

¹ All place names and names of persons have been changed throughout this article.

² In the village, the main language of interaction was Creole English, and all quotes throughout this paper are in Creole English.

they believe that access to education can give their children and their communities a brighter future, but they worry about the risks this separation can bring.

After a review of the *Guyana Chronicle*, the national newspaper, I discovered that *the sickness*³ was not exclusive to Riverside Secondary. Similar episodes of a “mysterious sickness” have affected young women of Amerindian descent living in boarding school dormitories in other parts of Guyana as well. It was first reported in an Arawak village, Santa Rosa, one of the largest Amerindian communities in Guyana, in 2006. The girls who fell sick in Santa Rosa (the village’s real name) displayed the same kinds of symptoms that I witnessed in Riverside—they reported having headaches and pain in their stomachs followed by uncontrollable thrashing of their bodies (GUYANA CHRONICLE, 2009). To my knowledge, it began in Riverside Village in March 2013. Many people in the community were eager to discuss this, and although some of their details varied, they all asserted that a “Granny spirit” was the cause of *the sickness* in the village. As noted in Isabelle’s story, there is a mountain directly behind the school dormitory. When *the sickness* was mentioned in everyday conversation, on the farm, at the shop, and in church, people would explain that someone climbed that mountain, opened a sacred cave, and disturbed the spirit of a granny. In all the conversations I shared with the people of the village, the spirit was never connected to a particular name or a specific ancestor. They were always very clear to state that she was an old, fair-skinned woman who, rather than resting in her cave in peace, had taken to coming down from the mountain and into the dormitory, entering the bodies of young girls.

The sickness is characterized in Riverside by young girls going into what they call “fits” nearly every night. Some girls experience these fits repeatedly, others experienced them once, and others never experienced them at all. Sometimes the fits will affect one girl at a time but oftentimes when one begins to feel the symptoms, many other girls develop them shortly afterwards. During a short stay in the dormitory where I witnessed these fits, I can attest that they can last anywhere from 20 minutes to several hours, and it varies from girl to girl. Sufferers writhe on the floor, arch their backs, and throw their limbs in every direction. Typically, not long after the beginning of their fits, one or more of the girls will attempt to run up the mountain behind the dormitory. The dorm parents and other students try to prevent this by barricading the doors and trying to physically stop the girls from running because the mountain is deep rainforest and can be dangerous, especially in the dark or during the rainy season. However, the girls become incredibly strong, and when they break free from their classmates and find they cannot get out through the door, they run to the windows, break the glass louvers, and jump out. When girls are able to escape the dormitory, they are chased up the mountain by the dorm parents and boys from the dormitory. At least three or four grown boys or men are required to apprehend a single girl, due to the aforementioned strength and their determination to get away. When the girls do eventually come out of the fits, or in their words, “catch themselves”, they have no memory of the events that took place during their fit.

As illustrated in the vignettes above, *the sickness* in these coeducational boarding schools, predominantly affected adolescent girls, rather than boys, with very few exceptions.⁴ In this paper, I will focus on the only form I witnessed during my time in Riverside: the female expression in the form of violent fits. Any approach to analyzing this phenomenon must recognize the centrality of gendered personhood. What is it that sets young women apart from young men in the context of boarding schools in particular? In my experience, the girls were very uncomfortable talking about anything to do with the experience of *the sickness* and would either change the subject or just respond to my questions with silence. Parents and members of the community, on the other hand, were eager to discuss it, so in the following sections I explore the relationship between *the sickness* and spiritual vulnerability based on those discussions.

The scent of blood

From very early on in my fieldwork when people discussed *the sickness* with me and I asked why only girls were sick, they often linked it to the power and danger of menstrual blood. When the people of the Region 9, Guyana would speculate about causes of the possession, they would more often than not draw direct connections between menstruation and *the sickness*. I first heard about the connections between menstruation and spiritual vulnerability long before I moved to Riverside, in the first village I visited in the northern Rupununi. In this Makushi village, some of the women told me about *the sickness* in a different secondary school in the same region. They also

³ The sickness is italicised throughout the article when it is used as the local term for the particular kind of spiritual illness young women suffer in the boarding school of Riverside Secondary.

⁴ According to the people of the village, there were three boys who had the sickness since its emergence in 2013. For two of the boys, the sickness manifested as suicide attempts in the dormitory. For one of the boys, however, it manifested in violent fits as well. While I do not have the space to explore this in depth in this paper, I believe this anomalous case corroborates the argument that gendered personhood is about performance, the shaping of bodies through ritual, and gendered agency in lowland South America. The student in question never explicitly mentioned their gender identity to me, but it is worth noting that other students referred to this boy with the derogatory term, “anti-man”, a slur often used for LGBTQ+ community members in Guyana.

explained it by drawing connections between menstruation and spiritual vulnerability. So, when Isabelle gave me the first full account of *the sickness* I heard in Riverside, I asked her right away if she thought these factors might have been related. She replied, *Yes, the girls don't know how to deal with it. They just flush their pads down the toilet or drop them in the long drop instead of burning them, and that makes them vulnerable... These demons are attracted to these things.*

One afternoon during my first month in Riverside, Auntie Dana, my host mother, sat down at the kitchen table with me to talk about *the sickness*. She knew many people had been mentioning it to me and that I was confused about the matter. She explained that these young ladies in the dormitory were getting their monthly "flow", a local term for menstruation, and not disposing of their pads properly, and thus were suffering from *the sickness*. She also took this opportunity to explain to me what places I needed to avoid when I was menstruating. She gently but firmly explained that I could not go to the creek, the river, the farm or even the garden outside our house during that week every month. She made it clear that if I decided to do so, I would be putting myself and whoever was with me in danger. She also instructed me to properly dispose of my sanitary products by burning them, as the scent of the blood is very attractive to the spirits, so all period products must be destroyed. One of the Makushi teachers reiterated the danger of disturbing the spirits with the scent of blood during one of our conversations. She explained to me what *the sickness* was and that it would happen sometimes to the girls in her class. I asked her how many girls became sick and she said, *One time all of them were sick. It could be because Amerindians have very strong beliefs. One is that if a girl bathes in the river when she is menstruating a spirit could take her.*

It's important to clarify that, although people do mention the link between blood and spiritual vulnerability, young girls can also experience *the sickness* when they are not actively menstruating, and even prior to menarche. During an interview with the dorm mother, Auntie Eleanor, who provided pastoral care to all the students living in the dorm, she expanded on this relationship for me. Here is an excerpt from that interview:

Auntie: *...like I don't really know what is wrong with this place but according to our belief, now, the Amerindians, the Wapishanas, it is the mountain. It's what we were told. Evil spirits are there and then come into the children. So they said, the pia'man said.*

CSW: That the mountain has the spirits? And we're right next to the mountain?

Auntie: *Especially the girls, what we believe is that when we get our monthly menstruation, the spirits are there and they smell us.*

CSW: And you are vulnerable during that time? Auntie Dana said I can't go to the farm, I can't go to the Creek, all that when I have my flow.

Auntie: *That is what we believe.*

CSW: So maybe that's why the girls...

Auntie: *Most of the girls are affected.*

CSW: The boys don't have that same problem.

Auntie: *It's when they get their flow it abducted them more, mostly. But still my little girl, the primary girl, that's going to primary school, she's not with her young lady [i.e. first menstruation] as of yet – it attacked her.*

Indeed, Auntie's daughter, who was living in the dormitory with them, had also fallen victim to the sickness, despite still being in primary school. So, although girls may be more susceptible to *the sickness* when they are actively menstruating, the scent of blood can attract the spirits and put the other girls in the dormitory in danger as well.

Many months later, I ran into Auntie Doris, one of the most prominent Riverside women. She was a very wealthy woman by village standards, owning and operating a large cattle ranch with her husband. Auntie Doris told me that while I had been in Brazil, they had a meeting with all the girls in the dorms to talk with them about going to the river with their flow. She said that many of the girls were lying, claiming they were not menstruating when they actually were and then going to swim, wash and bathe in the river. She explained that this was a very dangerous practice because river spirits find menstrual blood to be disgusting – it makes their homes dirty and they wake up very angry and take revenge on anyone in the water – not exclusively girls with their periods. She told me that recently Auntie Theresa reported some whirlwinds in the water, which indicated that the spirits were waking up in the river that surrounded the village. Auntie Doris exclaimed angrily, *So these children are not only endangering themselves but also anyone else who goes to the river!* She claimed the girls were lying on purpose and asserted that the girls from Region 8 and the nearby Makushi were the worst offenders. The girls knew they were doing something wrong and so they now had to honor these traditions. She expressed her fear that one of the girls might die and, as a result, the Patamona would send *kanaima* against Riverside.

Kanaima are one of the most discussed and widely feared spiritual forces in Riverside and throughout Guyana (e.g., Audrey BUTT COLSON, 2001; Neil WHITEHEAD, 2002), one of many members that make up the vibrant spiritual world. They are murderous and shape-shifting persons, and they can literally be anyone or anywhere. People take daily precautions to avoid falling victim to *kanaima*. While indeed neighbors or other members of the village could be *kanaima*, it is important to note that overwhelmingly the allegations against *kanaima* were directed towards outsiders, either Wapishana people from outside the village or people from other Amerindian groups. Butt-Colson, in her work with other Amerindian groups of Guyana offers an explanation for this, highlighting that this designation of outsiders as possible *kaniama* illustrates the fear and suspicions associated with “Others” (BUTT COLSON, 2001, p. 227). Looking at Auntie Doris’ assertion in this context, it is important to note that the girls she accused of lying were Patamona and Makushi, while most of the other girls living in the dormitory are Wapishana like Auntie Doris herself.

Auntie Doris went on, first reiterating what my host mother had told me – that women need to wait two days to a full week after their periods before going out to the river or the farm. She then told me a heartbreaking story about a recent death by drowning in Riverside. She explained, in a very animated way, that a couple years prior, a fifteen-year-old girl waited merely one day after her flow ended and crossed the creek with her friend on a small boat. She said,

All of a sudden, the boat stopped in its tracks; they could neither go backwards nor forwards. A water spirit had caught them and held their boat still. Soon after, whirlwinds surrounded the vessel and the boat tipped over. The spirit pulled the one girl down and carried her towards the rocks while the other girl managed to swim away. They searched for the girl for two whole days, but they couldn’t find her body anywhere. Finally, I lit a candle on a plate and put it in the river. The current carried it directly to where her body was found.

Auntie Doris asserted that the only way to avoid another similar tragedy would be if the dorm mother made a calendar of when the girls were on their flow, and she could regulate when they were allowed to go down to the creek to wash and bathe or go to work on the school farm.

It is worth clarifying that although all these spiritual forces may be attracted by the scent of blood, they are not necessarily similar entities. While feeling through the vibrant spiritual life of my interlocutors, I once asked if the Granny spirit was a *kanaima* and my host sister assured me that they are not the same. In fact, the distinction between these two spiritual entities highlights one of the reasons *the sickness* is so unusual in this area. While spiritual vulnerability caused by the scent of blood is well documented in Amazonia, with rituals aiming to prevent soul loss, possession is much less well documented.

Blood and Spirits in lowland South America

The understanding that menstrual blood can lead to spiritual vulnerability and its link to *the sickness* is not exclusive to the people of the Rupunini. The power of menstrual blood has been noted more broadly time and time again throughout the literature on Lowland South America, although the understanding of the power and potential danger of menstrual blood is of course not uniform across the region or even within communities. Luisa Elvira Belaunde (2006, p. 136) highlights this, arguing, “Cross-culturally, as well as within cultural groups, men and women hold multiple, not necessarily consistent or integrated, understandings of menstruation.”

Menstrual blood can be seen as dangerous in many contexts, including the Airopai communities in Peru where Belaunde conducted her fieldwork. She notes that menstrual blood can be polluting to men, and sexual intercourse during menstruation is avoided as any contact with a menstruating women would impact a man’s ability to perform shamanic rituals (BELAUNDE, 1997, p.135). The Yanomami believe the blood of first menstruation to be the most dangerous, but Albert explains that the threat does not dissipate after menarche, stating, “Menstrual blood is considered to be dangerous, imbued with a harmful odor, and polluting to others, especially men” (Bruce ALBERT, 1985, p. 574, cit Beth CONKLIN, 2001, p. 164). The danger that menstrual blood poses to men and specifically their ability to hunt is noted in several different communities as hunting is often seen as a negotiation between the hunter and the spiritual master of the animal they are hunting. Ken Kensinger (1995, p. 35) echoes these beliefs among the Cashinahua, stating that the smell of menstrual blood attracts spirits who will harm or kidnap menstruating women in the forest, which is why they never enter the forest on their periods, and seldom enter it even when they are not bleeding. These views also emerged during my time in the village as all three of the Wapishana women I quoted in the section above mentioned that the scent of blood would attract spirits.

These beliefs inform where a woman can go and what activities she can perform while menstruating. Janet Siskind notes that amongst the Sharanahua, menstruating women cannot go on the fishing expeditions, particularly the ones that employ poison. If she or anyone she has had sexual relations with in the past three days does join the expedition, the poison will not intoxicate the fish effectively (SISKIND, 1973, p. 115). When I was back in Riverside for a visit in the summer of

2017, my host parents took me fishing with this kind of poison and one of our neighbor's daughters was tagging along. Auntie Dana sent her back to the house, however, after deeming it had not been long enough since her "young lady" (a local euphemism for menarche) for her to assist us with the fishing. She mentioned to the girl's mother that if she had accompanied us we would not have caught any fish.

While we can see the power and the potential danger associated with menstrual blood, it is important to note that blood is understood as a key aspect of growth, strength and vitality in Amazonia for both genders (e.g., BELAUNDE, 1997; 2006; CONKLIN, 2001; Fernando SANTOS-GRANERO, 2012). In some Indigenous groups in lowland South America, the very understanding of conception involves the combination of female blood and male semen, and some communities believe that men contribute to the making of menstrual blood itself through sexual activity, making menstrual blood a social product (CONKLIN, 2001, p. 154). As such, reproductive capacities are built through the interactions of both genders (CONKLIN, 2001, p. 149). Belaunde also highlights that, "...the knowledge of bleeding is not solely confined to women, since men are also born from the blood let by women and may also bleed and cause bleeding to themselves and others" (BELAUNDE, 2006, p. 142).

Bleeding is seen as an important way to transform and change bodies; that applies both to women, in menstruation, and to men in other circumstances. For example, the Wari' practice a ritual seclusion after an act of enemy killing, where men follow similar proscriptions to pregnant women. Both men and women are implicated in bloodletting in different ways. While women are menstruating and have to maintain a seclusion, it is up to their men to protect the well-being of their women and children and to meet their needs. Similarly, during the ritual seclusion after an enemy killing, its success is dependent on woman kin's production of manioc beer (CONKLIN, 2001, p. 162). This highlights one of Belaunde's key points, that "...blood constitutes the main vehicle of both gender equality and gender difference" (BELAUNDE, 2006, p. 132).

Gendered Personhood and Knowledge Production

There has been a plethora of research on gender in lowland South America, highlighting that it is central to the production and reproduction of personhood and the politics of desire; it informs actions in everyday life, as well as dictating how the Amerindian body mediates and engages with the world. By exploring some of this previous research, and how gendered personhood emerges as children become adults, we can identify how *the sickness* fits with or stretches previous interpretations.

While very young children are treated the same regardless of their gender, the distinction between masculine and feminine agency emerges as they grow older (William FISHER, 2001, p. 120). Cecilia McCallum (2001, p. 41) notes that gender differentiation begins between the ages of 7-11 amongst the Cashinahua. These differences are linked closely to the economic process, reflected in not only what the young people learn, but also where and with whom. McCallum notes that girls are taught to cook and to weave by their female elders, in many cases primarily by their grandmothers, and until a young woman is able to grow, cook and serve food well, she is not considered a real woman. Most of these activities take place within the home or the garden (MCCALLUM, 2001).

Young boys on the other hand, do most of their learning outside of the home. Janet Siskind (1973, p. 142) notes that amongst the Sharnahua

[b]oys hunt and fish together, leaving their households most of the day, by the time they are about ten[...] For most boys the companionship of their youth falls away as they search for wives in other villages, hunt by themselves, and live with foreign women surrounded by foreigners.

Yolanda Murphy and Robert Murphy (1972, p. 175) also note this difference amongst the Mundurucú, explaining that boys experience estrangement from their homes and this prepares them for the task of leaving the village for marriage when they become men. In contrast, young women remain at home and reinforce and strengthen the bonds with their female family members. Similarly, McCallum highlights that gendered learning and the space where it takes place is reflective of an underlying dichotomy that gives pattern to daily life, stating:

The opposition is reflected in the way that agency is formally acquired. Women's learning takes place, socially and geographically, on the "inside" while men's learning often involves relationships with beings and spaces linked to the "outside". Women learn in a relation of kinship [...] men learn in relation of affinal kinship [...] Finally men learn by moving away from the village, travelling in the forest and the city whilst both conscious and otherwise, whereas women learn when relatively immobile, staying, for example, in their *chichi's* house (their maternal grandmother and namesake). (MCCALLUM, 2001, p. 48)

Lots of previous research indicates that this inside-outside dichotomy structures village life in many ways, and reflects a deeper ethos of sociality in Amazonia.

Women's activities take place within the home or within the village, while men's activities take place primarily outside of the village. George Mentore (2005, p. 251) articulates the reason why Waiwai women of Southern Guyana may avoid the forest, stating, "Women's bodies [...] being more open—indeed more vulnerable—to the loss of bodily substances, can only be protected from the possibility of vitality loss by reducing their contact with the forest and the acts of killing in the forest." As women are associated with the space inside the village, they exercise their agency by transforming forest products into useful products that can be consumed. This typically includes growing and harvesting food in the garden, cooking food, weaving, and raising children, amongst other things. Men, on the other hand, are aligned with predatory relationships with outsiders, be they animal, human or spirits (e.g., Phillipe DESCOLA, 2001; MCCALLUM, 2001). Descola points out that these distinctions are not always clear-cut, as Achuar women sometimes go hunting with their partners and even occasionally without them (DESCOLA, 2001, p. 96), but this pattern remains broadly applicable throughout lowland South America.

While some of this could be interpreted as gender holding young women back, by relegating them to the domestic spaces inside, which is something feminist scholarship consistently rejects, the ethnographic data does not reflect the same understanding of the domestic sphere as limiting in the way it is perceived in Western contexts. While we see that the proscriptions around women's behavior when they are menstruating could be interpreted in a flat sense as an example of subordination, Belaunde (2006, p. 142) rejects this notion. In fact, "bleeding is a female capacity for knowledge entailing the most socially significant consequences, and hence it can be seen as a female power rather than an index of female subordination." She also highlights the Amazonian idea that the mixing of difference, including across genders, is key to the creation of sociality and self. Amongst the Airopai, Belaunde (1996, p. 142) notes that, "Both men and women have their own practical and ritual realms of action. Yet their differentiation reinforces rather than obstructs their interdependence." And although the domestic sphere may seem limiting when we bring our own cultural notions of it from a Western perspective, this does not translate into Amazonian societies, where the building of kinship and sociality are the very foundation of living the good life.

Feminine agency that takes place in the village is important for a number of reasons, primarily as a way to transform "raw" things into items fit for human consumption, or in the case of humans, proper sociality, both key aspects associated with the production and reproduction of human persons. McCallum (2001, p. 52) explains how the linguistic structure of the Cashinahua language illustrates this transformative power:

The term for "cooked" is *ba*, which in verb form means "to create", "to procreate" and "to be born". Cooking food (*bava-*) is analogous to making babies. Similarly, pots are analogous to wombs. Women are responsible then, for transforming raw substance (meat, fish, vegetables) into cooked and edible substance, just as they are responsible for transforming raw semen into "cooked" babies in their wombs.

And, by performing this very important transformative work in daily lives, women "stand at the center of the production of what constitutes Cashinahua cultural and social identity" (MCCALLUM, 2001, p. 52).

This division of labour has been explored in greater depth in the Guyanese context by Laura Mentore, in her work with the Waiwai. She describes an intersubjective relationship between Waiwai womanhood and the cultivation of cassava (MENTORE, 2012, p. 149). She goes so far as to argue,

Woman and the sociophysical capacities most intimately associated with womanhood are largely enacted through their embodied perspectival alignment with cassava in its various forms. To embody the capacities of motherhood is at one and the same time to embody the capacities for cultivating and producing cassava.

This further illustrates the vibrancy and complexity of social and gendered relationships between human and nonhuman others in the Guyanese context.

Similarly, Wapishana women are associated with the space inside the village, also processing raw cassava from the farm into something safe to eat, and cooking and preparing the meat the men in their lives bring home from the forest. While planting and tending to their cassava farms, the women of Riverside teach their young women to sing to the plants. Once, while working on the cassava farm one morning, my Wapishana aunt earnestly directed me to sing to the roots as I planted them in the earth. As I softly sang the lyrics of pop songs to these tiny tubers, I was helping to forge and strengthen ties of consanguinity – my aunt was teaching me to create kinship with the plants.

The two aspects of gendered production are reliant on one another. For instance, a man cannot cook and consume the meat he hunts, but woman rarely hunt, so both men and women depend on one another's agency to consume food. It follows that these complementary relationships also work to form the basis of sociality through marriage. Steve Rubenstein (2004, p. 1047) also notes the material exchanges associated with marriages amongst the Ecuadorian

Shuar, stating, "Husbands and wives are joined to one another by economic need: the sexual division of labor requires a man to find at least one woman to cultivate and prepare food, and a woman to find a man who will clear gardens and hunt or manage cattle". However, his discussion is more nuanced, and he highlights that these exchanges are also related to the notion of desire, and that the lines between desiring another person and desiring their objects can be easily blurred (RUBENSTEIN, 2004, p. 1061-2). By providing or processing food and sharing it, a person is actively showing and embodying mutual care and building community. McCallum (2001, p. 63) notes that it is only through these relationships that members of the community can become "complete persons", and that marriage allows for the creation of life: "as parents, as grandparents and as members of a community of kinspeople".

Life in the boarding school dormitory marks a disruption in many of the important aspects of life in community reviewed above. It marks a break from the constant sharing of space and substance, and a break from those rarer ritual moments that mark key transitions from childhood to adulthood.

Menarche

When drawing connections between *the sickness* and menstruation, it is important to note how practices surrounding menstruation and particularly the "young lady", as they call menarche in Riverside, have changed due to the boarding school system. My host mother explained that when she was young, whenever a girl got her first "young lady", she would undergo a period of semi-seclusion by being removed from the home area for a few days, to spend the time away from men. She would be surrounded by the women of her family, her grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and older sisters for the short experience of her first period. It was there where their older female relatives would explain the taboos associated with menstruation that Auntie Dana explained to me above; particularly that they were to avoid the creek, river and farm while experiencing their "flow". Throughout the Amazonian region, menarche marks the move from girlhood into womanhood (CONKLIN, 2001; MCCALLUM, 2001) and, as such, is an important aspect of what it means to be a woman in Amazonia. Now, when young women have their first experience of menstruation, however, they are typically already living in the dormitories, as secondary schooling usually begins around age 13 in Guyana. The sharp difference between the seclusion ritual in the not so distant past, and the dormitory experience today, opens a space for both a disruption and transformation of gendered personhood in Southern Guyana.

Menarche highlights the capacities and abilities of the young woman's body in a productive sense (CONKLIN, 2001). While the spectrum of marking this event is broad in Amazonian indigenous groups, the kind of semi-seclusion ritual that Auntie Dana described has been noted by ethnographers in other communities as well, although the severity of the restrictions vary from community to community. Albert (1985, p. 361) describes a similar practice amongst the Yanomami of Brazil and Venezuela. When girls first menstruate, they also observe a semi-seclusion as well as dietary restrictions, and if she fails at observing these practices, she runs the risk of aging rapidly into an old woman. Yolanda and Robert Murphy (1974, p. 176), in their work about gender amongst the Mundurucú, explain that girls are restricted from bathing during their first period lest a particular bird find and consume their blood, which would not only cause their skin to turn yellow but also suggest impending death. Cecilia McCallum describes the practices around this occasion amongst the Cashinahua, which seem to be the most similar ritual to what my host mother experienced in her youth that I have come across in the literature. McCallum (2001, p. 53) states,

First menses occasions a small ritual, involving a period of semi-seclusion and dieting. At this time, a girl must stay close to home and work on her newly acquired skills, under the tutelage of her maternal grandmother, for menstrual blood is offensive to the forest and river spirits. The smell draws the attention of the spirits to the presence of human beings, alerting them to possible danger and causing them to interfere in their activities. One reason, then, that a girl must stay at home is to protect her from these spirits, who would be angry at their intrusion into their domain. Menstrual blood, like other bodily substances, links humans to spirits, because it makes the separation between human domain and spirit domain begin to break down. Its smell "makes a path" from one domain to the other and makes normally invisible humans visible to the spirits.

In this short passage, McCallum highlights the importance and centrality of female relationships during this ritual. She also illustrates how menstruation foregrounds not only the relationships between men and women but also between spirits and humans, all which are relevant to understanding the phenomenon of *the sickness*.

Conklin (2001, p. 151) explains that the practice of Amazonian seclusion rituals, including those for menstruation but also for childbirth (or, in the case of the Wari', enemy killing), is to "achieve the formation or re-formation of the individual's body and of spiritual or psychological capacities linked to bodily states". This statement is important to contextualize through the context of "consubstantiality", the notion that human bodies are not inherently given, but rather

shaped and reshaped consistently by partners, families, neighbors and communities in lowland South America through the sharing of substance and acts of mutual care (Peter GOW, 1989; Elsje LAGROU, 2000; MCCALLUM, 2001; MENTORE, 2005; RIVAL, 2005; SANTOS-GRANERO, 2009; Aparecida VILAÇA, 1999).

With this understanding of the transformative body, it follows that these rituals are vital to the construction of gendered personhood in everyday life and in those key liminal moments, such as the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Currently, in the Rupununi, where most young Amerindian girls are living in a boarding school dormitory when they have their first “young lady”, this practice of ritual semi-seclusion is no longer observed. As the dormitory is filled with boys, the girls are unable to avoid interacting with them. They no longer experience this crucial moment of solidarity with their female relatives, nor do they have the opportunity to review the taboos associated with this time of the month to avoid danger throughout the course of their lives. Girls are aware of the taboos associated with menstruation through interacting with their mothers, aunts, grandmothers, older sisters, and female friends throughout their youth. However, this very specific experience that entails the separation from men, a connection with the important women in their lives and their explicit instruction, is no longer available to them. In these boarding school dormitories, these young women are separated from their kin and community. They are without both the everyday rituals of community living and the building of sociality, as well as the coming-of-age seclusion of menarche. This marks a disruption with the past and with the ways gendered relationships are spatialized. In this liminal context, girls struggle to renegotiate the meaning of gendered personhood.

Movement

Taking a closer look at the experience of young Amerindian women in boarding school dormitories, it is important to note that many aspects can come together to create circumstances that lead to spiritual vulnerability. First of all, young women no longer have access to key rituals that shape both self and community. They no longer experience the everyday rituals of sharing space and substance with kin, and they are also menstruating for the first time in these boarding school spaces, and unable to experience the rituals associated with menarche that their mothers and grandmothers experienced. And to add to it all, they have been removed from the key relationships with the other women in their family, as they leave their home villages and travel to boarding school dormitories, moving from the inside, typically associated with feminine agency, and moving to the outside that tends to be associated with masculine agency.

It is important to note that movement is not something new in the Rupunni more broadly. It has been central to indigenous Guyanese peoples' way of life throughout history (Peter RIVIÈRE, 1984; Joanna OVERING-KAPLAN, 1975; Peter WHITEHEAD, 1988). But we cannot disregard the understanding of gendered agency that informed this mobility in the not-so-distant past, mirroring some of the previous research noted above. Reflecting Amerindian ideas about relationships with the outside and production of knowledge and kinship, even before the widespread attendance of boarding schools in Guyana, young Amerindian men would still be expected to travel (at around the same age that they now attend school instead), in order to forge relationships with outsiders and to return to the village with new knowledge. Young women, on the other hand, would leave their home community on rarer occasions, focusing on the work of maintaining kinship ties and sociality within their villages through spending time with their grandmothers, aunts, mothers and siblings, and thereby producing sociality.

With the relatively recent shift in the amount of young people attending boarding school, however, a record number of young women leave their home communities. In other words, young women are moving from what would typically be understood as the inside, the home community, farm, garden, to the outside, an institutional space, in unprecedented ways. These historical gendered expectations of mobility shed light on the sharp difference between the ways young women and men experience boarding schools. While young men are still leaving the village to acquire new forms of knowledge, young women are disconnected from the vital relationships with their women relatives, and left without the constant production and reproduction of the intergenerational relationships that promote embodied knowledge of kin and community. Young men are still able to build relationships with outsiders, but young women are no longer able to produce sociality as they would in their home community.

Young women living in the dormitories have been removed from the inside of their social networks and disconnected from their female relatives, marking a disruption from traditional ways of producing and reproducing feminine personhood. McCallum (2001, p. 49) notes that, “Grandparents assume greater responsibility for the corporeal production of adulthood in adolescents” amongst the Cashinahua. The spirit that invokes *the sickness* does not coincidentally take the form of a Granny. It is exactly that absence of these vital intergenerational relationships with female kin that leaves the girls spiritually vulnerable.

It is undeniable that this rupture in access to rituals and removal from the “inside” where feminine agency thrives is having a serious impact on young women in boarding schools in Southern Guyana, with *the sickness* as a key example of how this disruption manifests. However, while these young women struggle to create sociality in the way they are used to in their home communities, they are clearly building relationships with other young people in the dormitories and creating sociality in that way. So not only does this liminal space mark a divergence of traditional ways of shaping personhood; it also introduces new experiences of gendered personhood which have the potentiality to deconstruct and reconstruct gender roles. Coming of age for young Amerindian women in the face of these changes can be traumatic, as we see through the experience of *the sickness*, but it also invites transformations of gendered roles and spaces, the blurring of notions of inside and outside, and the opportunity for the reimagining of relationality in lowland South America.

References

- BUTT COLSON, Audrey. “Itoto (Kanaima) as Death and Anti-Structure”. In: RIVAL, Laura M.; WHITEHEAD, Neil L.. *Beyond the Visible and the Material: The Amerindianization of Society in the Work of Peter Rivière*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 221-234.
- BELAUNDE, Luisa E.; BUENO, I. R. “A força dos pensamentos, o fedor do sangue. Hematologia e gênero na Amazônia”. *Revista de antropologia*, São Paulo, v. 49, n. 1, p. 205-243, 2006.
- BELAUNDE, Luisa E.. “‘Looking after your woman’: Contraception amongst the Airopai (Secoya) of western Amazonia”. *Anthropology & medicine*, v. 4, n. 2, p. 131-144, 1997.
- CONKLIN, Beth A. “Women’s Blood, Warriors’ Blood, and the Conquest of Vitality in Amazonia”. In: GREGOR, Thomas A.; TUZIN, Donald. *Gender in Amazonia and Melanesia*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001. p. 141-174.
- DESCOLA, Philippe. “The Genres of Gender: Local Models and Global Paradigms in the Comparison of Amazonia and Melanesia”. In: GREGOR, Thomas A.; TUZIN, Donald. *Gender in Amazonia and Melanesia*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001. p. 91-114.
- FISHER, William H. “Age-Based Genders among the Kayapo”. In: GREGOR, Thomas A.; TUZIN, Donald. *Gender in Amazonia and Melanesia*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2001. p. 115-140.
- GOW, Peter. “The Perverse Child: Desire in a Native Amazonian Subsistence Economy”. *Man*, N.S., v. 24, n. 4, p. 567-82, 1989.
- KENSINGER, Ken. *How Real People Ought to Live*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press Inc., 1995.
- LAGROU, Elsje Maria. “Homesickness and the Cashinahua Self: A Reflection on the Embodied Condition of Relatedness”. In: OVERING Joanna; PASSES, Alan. *Anthropology of Love and Anger. The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*. London, New York: Routledge, 2000. p. 152-69.
- MCCALLUM, Cecilia. *Gender and Sociality in Amazonia: How Real People Are Made*. New York: Berg, 2001.
- MENTORE, George. *Of Passionate Curves and Desirable Cadences*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005.
- MENTORE, Laura. “The Intersubjective Life of Cassava among the Waiwai”. *Anthropology and Humanism*, v. 37, n. 2, p. 146-155, 2012.
- GUYANA CHRONICLE. *Moruka mystery illness seems to have gone away*. 2009, July 15. Retrieved from <http://guyanachronicle.com/2009/07/15/moruka-mystery-illness-seems-to-have-gone-away>.
- MURPHY, Yolanda; MURPHY, Robert F. *Women of the Forest*. New York and London: Colombia University Press, 1974.
- OVERING-KAPLAN, Joanna. *The Piaroa, a People of the Orinoco Basin: A Study in Kinship and Marriage*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.
- RIVAL, Laura. “Introduction: What Constitutes a Human Body in Native Amazonia?”. *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, v. 3, n. 2, p. 105-110, 2005.

RIVAL, Laura. "Formal Schooling and the Production of Modern Citizens in the Ecuadorian Amazon". In: LEVINSON, Bradley; FOLEY, Douglas E.; HOLLAND, Doris. *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996. p. 153-169.

RIVIÈRE, Peter. *Individual and Society in Guiana*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

RUBENSTEIN, Steven L.. "Fieldwork and the Erotic Economy on the Colonial Frontier". *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, v. 29, n. 4, p. 1041-1071, 2004.

SANTOS-GRANERO, Fernando. "Beinghood and people-making in native Amazonia: A constructional approach with a perspectival coda". *HAU journal of ethnographic theory*, v. 2, n. 1, p. 181-211. 2012.

SANTOS-GRANERO, Fernando. "Hybrid Bodyscapes: A Visual History of Yanésya Patterns of Cultural Change". *Current Anthropology*, v. 50, n. 4, p. 477-512, 2009.

SISKIND, Janet. *To Hunt in the Morning*. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

VILAÇA, Aparecida. "Cultural Change as a Body Metamorphoses". In: FAUSTO, Carlos; HECKENBERGER, Michael. *Time and Memory in Indigenous Amazonia: Anthropological Perspectives*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999. p. 169-193.

WHITEHEAD, Neil L.. *Dark Shamans: Kanaima and the Poetics of Violent Death*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002.

WHITEHEAD, Peter J. P. "A Disciplina do Desenho: Quadros Etnográficos Holandeses do Brasil Setecentista". *Revista do Museu Paulista, Nova Série*, v. XXXIII, 1988, p. 267-89.

Dr. Courtney Stafford-Walter (courtney.stafford-walter@ed.ac.uk; Courtney.rose.stafford.walter@gmail.com) received her PhD from the University of St Andrews and teaches at the University of Edinburgh. Her fieldwork, conducted in a Wapishana community in Southern Guyana, focused primarily on boarding schools and the impact on Amerindian youth and their communities. Her work also explores Indigenous knowledge, its influence on sustainable lifeways, and the impact of climate change.



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE ACCORDING TO THE JOURNAL'S NORMS

STAFFORD-WALTER, Courtney. "The Power of Blood". Revista Estudos Feministas, Florianópolis, v. 31, n. 3, e95248, 2023.

AUTORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

Not applicable.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Not applicable.

CONSENT TO USE IMAGE

Not applicable.

APPROVAL BY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

Not applicable.

USE LICENSE

This article is licensed under the Creative Commons License CC-BY 4.0 International. With this license you can share, adapt, create for any purpose, as long as you assign the authorship of the work.

BACKGROUND

Received on 01/07/2023
Approved on 13/07/2023
