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**ARE GODDESSES METAFORMIC CONSTRUCTS?
AN APPLICATION OF METAFORMIC THEORY TO MENARCHE
CELEBRATIONS
AND GODDESS RITUALS OF KERALA AND CONTIGUOUS STATES IN
SOUTH INDIA**

By Judith Rae Grahn

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

Doctor of Philosophy

**School
of
Consciousness and Transformation**

**Integral Studies:
Concentration in Women's Spirituality**

**CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF INTEGRAL STUDIES
San Francisco, CA.**

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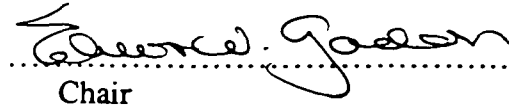
**ARE GODDESSES METAFORMIC CONSTRUCTS?
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A Dissertation by
Judith Rae Grahn


California Institute of Integral Studies
Dissertation Committee

Approval

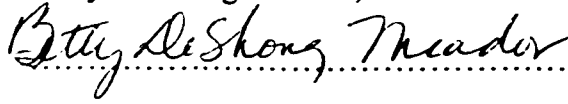
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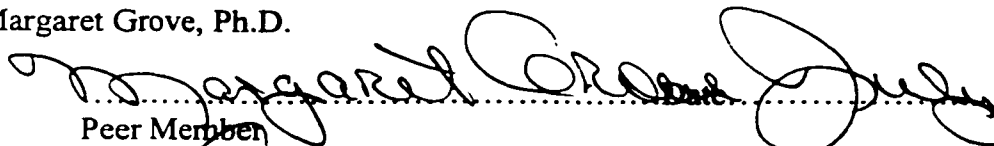
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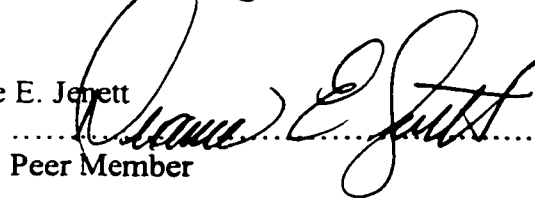
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For “the One whom we adore as the Mother” (Sri Aurobindo)
and

faculty and sisters of my women’s spirituality cohort

Epigraph:

“A substratum of female memories of power and energy has existed from the primordial past. Within this stream, women were the holders and sustainers of heritage. Integral to this was an understanding of the nature of cyclic time, and the rites of passage, of seasons entering creation. All transmission of myth, the contacting of energy sources and the initiating of rites of the auspicious, flowed from mother to daughter, through poesy, art, skill, ritual, the unspoken word, and gesture.”

---Pupul Jayakar, *The Earth Mother*¹

¹ Jayakar, Pupul. *The Earth Mother, Legends, Goddesses and Ritual Arts of India*. Harper and Rowe Publishers, San Francisco: 1990. From the Preface, p. xiii.

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Abstract

ARE GODDESSES METAFORMIC CONSTRUCTS? AN APPLICATION OF METAFORMIC THEORY TO MENARCHE CELEBRATIONS AND GODDESS RITUALS OF KERALA AND CONTIGUOUS STATES IN SOUTH INDIA

Judith Rae Grahn

**A dissertation for California Institute of Integral Studies, 1999
Elinor W. Gadon, Committee Chair**

The study is an application of my own theory, called “metaformic theory” which postulates that human culture evolved from the connection between the lunar cycle and the menstrual cycle. This theory is articulated in my book *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

While worldwide menarche rites among indigenous peoples have largely disappeared in the past decades, a few groups in South India continue to celebrate menstruation. The state of Kerala on the southwest coast has powerful goddess traditions and continuing menstrual customs despite modernization. Living in neighborhoods in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala for four and a half months of fieldwork, I interviewed women and filmed *devi* rituals in several parts of the state. The study compares contemporary menarchal customs, and more especially those from prior to the twentieth century, with rites of goddess Bhagavati, Bhadrakali, Mariamma and others.

The correlations I found affirm that goddess traditions appear to be rooted in the menarche celebrations of Kerala’s diverse communities. Also, certain powerful rites that connect devotees with forces of nature can be interpreted as using metaphors (what I call metaforms) derived from and related to, menstrual rituals. The study deepens my theory, especially with new understanding of *shakti*, and reinforces crediting women’s cultural contributions as well as making connections between women’s and men’s rituals. The study critiques some of Darwin’s ideas, and the work of Marija Gimbutas, and supports earlier work of Indian women, such as Pupul Jayakar. Additionally, the application opens my metaformic theory out to possible explanations of differences among people, and ideas furthering cross-cultural understandings.

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**PREFACE:
Origins of a Theory**

Metaformic Theory is my *poet's* contribution, so appropriately enough strands of its web, such as the idea of culture consisting of braids, and menstruation as creating a deified central organizing principle began appearing in my poetry¹ years before the theory was completed and published as *Blood, Bread and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World* (Beacon Press) in 1993. I began writing poetry centering on women's lives and places in the human story in 1967, reclaiming both "common women" and popular "icons" such as Marilyn Monroe².

The context for this poetic work was a series of social movements, beginning with Civil Rights and early Gay Rights of the 1960's, culminating in an increasingly visible feminist movement, and the specific lesbian feminist movement that I co-founded in November of 1969 with my then-partner of fourteen years, Wendy Cadden. The dynamic setting of all-women's households, businesses and community completely surrounded and supported me for about eight years, as I founded and helped run a women's press, spoke, wrote and taught about women's issues, and studied imagining the world from woman-centered points of view. I cannot think of another such independent woman-centered environment in the U.S.; certainly it is no accident that a theory situated in menstruation would have occurred to me in that unique, highly energized and intelligently interactive setting. Menstruation was one of the topics we brought out of shamed privacy into discussions of meaning, power and women's places in the world. References to blood as a creative force entered my work by 1970. By 1972 my immersion in women's community inspired a series of 32 poems, *She Who*, extensively performed to

¹ In a series called "She Who," and in other writings.

enthusiastic audiences of hundreds of women, who fed and encouraged words and rhythms revolving around the sacred feminine, the active creative principle as She. Critic and poet Alicia Ostriker would write of these poems more than a decade later, "That Everywoman's goddess She Who is both a proper noun and the subject of a potentially infinite series of verbs tells us more about female spirituality than any number of theological works."³

What has motivated me to do this study is a commitment to metaformic theory, and the desire to apply it to the world and continue to develop it as a useful tool. What motivated me to develop the theory, which took from 1973 to 1993, was a seeking for the Sacred Feminine as an active, intelligent and empathic power. Probably this quest was brought about by the fact that I was cut off from my mother through her dissociated withdrawal, and I was disconnected from other women in my family when my father moved us far away from them. Though educated only through the ninth grade, my mother was always interested in science and the nature of knowledge. Yet at the same time she considered herself (and the family considered her) mentally retarded. When in 1973 I chose to investigate menstruation it was because of its mythological connections to the moon and therefore to calendric measurement and science. However, metaformic theory is much broader than this and reflects my own development during the 1980's.

In 1980, ecofeminist social analyst Charlene Spretnak, knowing I was researching menstruation and women's contributions to culture, commissioned me to write an article for her anthology, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*. I filled the article with

² See Grahn, Judy. *The Work of a Common Woman*, Trumansburg, California, The Crossing Press, 1984.

³ Alicia Ostriker, "Alicia Ostriker Praises Judy Grahn's *The Work of A Common Woman*", *Poetry East*, No. 35, 1993, 7.

knowledge the grassroots movement had acquired, and that was far from encompassing a theory of cultural origins. Before doing that I needed a decade of further study, on myself as well as external knowledge. I acquired some understanding of the complexity of the dance between men and women from writing *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds* (Beacon Press, 1984, 1990). This cultural history of Gay peoples posits that societies have constructed “offices” of social usefulness, and sometimes even honor, for the cross-gendered.

I continued writing poetry as a re-framing of women’s positions in old stories, reversing the Iliad’s positioning of Helen as object and creating her as subject.⁴ *The Queen of Wands*, published in 1982, formulates a goddess-hera, “Helen,” configured as flame of life, weaver/worker, tree-goddess and human queen. As “who ever is” she is indestructible and the fact that she was “stolen” only ensures that she remains with us—and in us. With her immanent webbed line she is between us, in the dialogue of our relationship. In one poem I described my mother as the earth, “rocking in her rocking chair,” and “nearly overlooked” by my father and I who were more interested in “fast intellectual pie” than her “real, actual pie.”⁵

This group of poems reached across to my mother, who came out of her deep silence and engaged me in intense discussion about her inner life. She told me of my father’s spirit being—an inherited companion advisor, “whose advice wasn’t always good, either,” and who at times sat upon my father’s chest. She told me also of her own persistent visions and visitations, thus entrusting me with my parent’s secret life in the

⁴ Delia Fisher, “*Never-Ending Story: Re-forming Hero in the Helen Epics of H.D. and Judy Grahn*”, (Ph.D. dissertation., University of Oregon, 1997).

⁵ “The Land That I Grew Up On Is A Rock”, p. 3

psychic realm. From this I gained much confidence to draw ever more deeply from the creative and philosophic well.

Paula Gunn Allen, poet and critic of Native American literature, encouraged me to find my own spiritual traditions and to break with any sort of monotheistic thinking. In the mid-eighties I also became privileged to witness, through translations of Betty De Shong Meador, the emergence of the literature of Inanna, Sumerian goddess from at least 3800 bce through 500 bce. This quintessentially important work demands acceptance of paradox as part of our experience of both the sacred and of the feminine as active principles.

Not incongruently, I had also closely observed plants and animals, concluding that they have complex relationships, intelligence, and “consciousness” but that ours is different because of our cultural habits and practices. In 1988 I published my novel, *Mundane’s World*, detailing connections between human and nonhuman beings and ending with a fictional menarche seclusion. In 1990 when I began reading detailed accounts of menarche practices I realized my decade-old outline was incorrect. *Blood, Bread, and Roses* ceased to be a book about women’s contributions to culture and became instead the vehicle for a theory on the constitution of our humanity itself—women and men, ancestral and contemporary. It asked not only what roles has the sacred feminine played--- but why do humans act the ways we do? How did/does culture come about?

Metaformic theory emerged as a “grand theory” in that it postulates origins of human culture from the connection between menstrual cycle and lunar cycle, and the necessity of men entraining themselves to both cycles. All the elementals of culture may

be “housed” in the cornucopia of worldwide menstrual seclusion rites. Having laid down the theoretical base in *Blood, Bread, and Roses* I sought an opportunity to see if the theory would make sense in the culture of Kerala, South India, which continues—despite the encroachments of the global economy—to celebrate menstruation as a public event.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, deep gratitude to California Institute of Integral Studies, for sponsoring the unique Women's Spirituality Cohort program, founded and guided by Elinor W. Gadon, Ph.D. and existing for one breathtaking period for eighteen of us. Special thanks to esteemed faculty, including Dorothy Ettlting, Ph.D. and Rasjidah Franklin, Ph.D. I thank Rose Wognum Frances for her support of me and of metaformic theory throughout my educational process.

I am deeply grateful for insights and wisdom from members of my committee, besides Elinor, who chaired it: Lucia Birnbaum, Ph.D. and Betty De Shong Meador, Ph.D. I am also indebted to my peer members Margaret Grove, Ph.D. and above all to my research collaborator, Dianne E. Jenett, Ph.D. Without Dianne's generosity of heart and mind, this study could not have happened; I think she knows what she means to me. For helpful comments early in my process I thank Dr. Virginia Fink. Deborah Grenn-Scott helped with the final manuscript; Laura K. Brown gave encouragement; and I thank Eva Levitson, Patti Davis and others who supplied materials.

Edwin C. May, Ph.D. and his Laboratories for Fundamental Research made it possible for me to illustrate this dissertation with videos, edited in collaboration with Dianne Jenett.

My heartfelt thanks to people in Kerala who were helpful, hospitable and sharing of their knowledge. Leela Gulati provided social support and her own research with working women in Kerala. My research and sense of connection to Kerala was deeply enhanced by the contributions of one family toward whom I feel lifelong friendship: V. Subramanian, Professor M.S. Hema Subramanian, and their daughter Kamala. I am both indebted and connected to Professor B. Kamala Bai (retired). I thank for both her research and her personal help, Savithri De Turreil, Ph.D. Many people in Kerala contributed to this effort, including Asha Thombe, Renu Henry, Sathesh Bose and Professor S. Uma Devi. I thank the esteemed poet Suguta Kumari and K.B. Valsala Kumari, Secretary of the Kerala Women's Commission; the esteemed poet Ayyappan Panniker and other members of Kerala's literary community. For helpful discussions I thank temple officials, including M.R. Chandrasekharan Pillai, Chairman of Attukal Bhagavathy Temple Trust.

For companionship in Kerala I thank Elinor Gadon, Jean Weisinger and Patricia Swart.

For her continual encouragement and sending me many kinds of "care packages" on my journey I thank my life partner, Kristine Ruth Brandenburger.

To complete a Ph.D. program is to complete an initiation. To enter a Women's Spirituality program is to engage a spiritual quest. To go to Kerala, India is to fall in love.

Glossary

1. –METAFORMIC VOCABULARY LIST WITH DEFINITIONS

braided (gender) evolutionary schema –discrete groups, most typically the two sexes, develop their own rites and then must find ways of passing their knowledge over to the other

being—generic term for “sentient life force”; the designations human being and nonhuman being replace the more separated and vague phrase “human and nature”

cosmetikos – Metaformic display based in body language, or “embodied literacy”—such as dance, speech, make-up, clothing, cooking and dining rites

crossover – Passage of a gendered ritual to the opposite sex, such as parallel “menstrual” rites

crossover offices – shamanism, berdache, gayness and other roles that enable gendered ritual to pass to the opposite sex

cultural coagulation, coagulation point – tendency of elaborations to reach a point of oppression, necessitating social change to again attain “flow”

cultural obversity – cultural differences or “othering” gain their intensity from the fact that seclusions’ principles are obverse, resulting in a paradox; what one people revere or worship may be viewed as filthy, shameful or deadly by another

dark of the moon-- the moon’s “menstruation,” a three-day period of time.

disconnection from source-- effects of losing menarchal celebration and sacred feminine; a form of collective memory loss

drop-shaped evolutionary schema – cultural evolution in all directions from the beginning seclusion; as differentiated from linear or arrow-shaped models of “progress”

elaboration – development of a particular group of metaforms to increasing and frequently unbalanced complexity

embodied literacy -- body arts that are “read” for meanings, including cosmogonic
As well as social meanings

emergence – the menstruant’s reappearance following seclusion, usually in a celebration

entrainment – ability and tendency of one “beat” or rhythm to synch up with another

glyph – goddess icon (or woman’s shaped body) that embodies a cognitive, cosmic principle of metaformic knowledge

interactive evolutionary theory – humans evolved through interactions with nonhuman being

lunar\menstrual relation – entrainment of the menstrual cycle with the lunar cycle

marriage – metaformic tie between genders and family groups/communities

menarche – a maiden’s first and usually most complexly ritualized menstruation

menstrual celebration – rites of families, communities and religions that hold menstruation sacred

menstrual course – the complete sequence from noticing her blood to seclusion and its rites, emergence, bath, re-dressing, display, return to sexual life and celebration

menstrual logic – expanded metaforms that create major complex rites such as hunting, agriculture, metallurgy; also, a social plot based in menstrual course

menstrual source – the menstrual/lunar relation is a primal source of human mind

merged identification – method by which the menstruant became completely identified with a nonhuman being, originally forms of light, snake, tree, earth, etc.

metaform – an enacted or embodied idea with menstrual ritual as one part of its equation

metaformic goddess construct – hypothesis that the rituals of most historic goddesses stem directly from menarchal and related women’s and men’s parallel rites

metaformic dialogue – use of a deified construct to engage in dialogue with nonhuman being, spirit, cosmic creation, and so on

metaformic food substances – origins of cultigens in metaform; identification of the raw or cooked material with menstrual blood (or with forms of light)

metaformic theory – human mind and its practices come from menstrual and related blood rites, and that the originating step into humanity is the relation between the menstrual cycle and the lunar cycle

oppositional forms – the particularly polarized social forms that can lead to states of cultural obversity

paradoxical metaform—the solution to one problem creates the next problem. Also, capacity of a culture to successfully contain oppositional and obverse practices

parallel menstruation, parallel menstrual rites – male blood rites that appear to be similar to or connected in some ways to menstrual rituals, as though they were imitative of them in origin

relational theory – origin (of our humanity) is in (our particular) relationships; specifically, the relation between the lunar and menstrual cycles; also, polarities (of gender, of qualities such as hot/cold etc) exist only in relationship

reforming – social change that allows a coagulated elaboration to ease and attain “flow”

seclusion, seclusion rites – menstrual container by which primal ancestors created and “held” human culture

separation – major principle correlated to emergence; creative, initiatory space; “descent”; distinction

shakti – “the power” of oracle and vision, physically manifesting Kundalini force that animates all life; the primal goddess who created Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma, according to the *Devi Mahatmya*—oldest sustained Sanskrit narrative of the Great Goddess; also, the name of a goddess.

shapes of light (sun and moon)-- circle, crescents, horns, tusks, halfmoon, rays

snake-- one of the oldest metaforms, expressing “travelling vagina”, extension of vulva; also phallus; coiled inner energy (kundalini); spiraling earth energy; water, “flow;” crescent fangs and red tongue; venomous danger; ancestral spirits, and so on.

synchrony-- equation of natural substances with menstrual blood; also, equation of lochial and venous blood with menstrual blood

types of metaform:

1. wilderness -- use of living nonhuman being to convey metaformic information
2. cosmetikos – use of human body and food, etc. to convey metaformic information
3. narrative – use of story/menstrual course to convey metaformic story
4. material – use of crafted artifact such as gold, wood, to convey metaformic meaning

simple metaform – equation of red ochre with menstrual blood, for instance

compound metaform – application of one metaform or set of metaforms to another; such as “wagon” (each of its components were once separately ritualized)

2. MALAYALAM TERMS (unless marked)

Amma—Goddess, especially the goddess of *kavu* or village; goddess in her mother aspect

ananku—medium, such as women’s breasts and vulva, but also make-up or tiger skin, for sacred power of possession, attributed especially to menses; goddess oracle in *Cilappatikaram*; dance *annankatu*

aratti—circling motion to remove inauspicious influences; done with a bowl of red liquid or a flame, for instance

arratu—ritual bath, as in river or pond

Bhadrakali—fierce form of the Goddess, with destructive power

Bhagavati—most common form of the Goddess, with aspects from ferocious to comforting

bhuta—spirit or ghost

catanngu—menarche ritual (Thattan community)

Cavadyottum—cheek-piercing rite; also carrying of heavy wood across shoulders as offering

Chandra Bindu—crescent moon, name for the *val* when held by the goddess

chunda—the wire or rod of metal (iron, gold or steel) put in a boy’s side during *Kuttyotum*—“giving the boy to Devi”.

cumcum—red powder, made of red turmeric.

cuttampalam—enclosure for the Devi

Devi—generic title for goddess.

dharmadevatas—family or lineage goddesses, often Bhadrakali

dharmstra—crescent-shaped teeth of Bhagavati

dosha—negative stellar influences, frequently detected during astrological readings done at menarche

garuti—(*garusi*) liquid blood substitute used in temple rites, frequently made of turmeric

and lime

Garuda—sacred mythological bird; also a variety of kite (hawklike bird)

gingelly oil—sesame oil

gramadevatas—village goddesses

illam—extended family home

kalam—colored powder drawing which evokes the deity in ritual setting

Kannaki—goddess as a literary heroine in the *Cilappatikaram, Tale of the Anklet*

kanya—girl, maiden, virgin

kappu—bracelet

kavu—place of open air worship, sacred grove

kolam—women's sacred ground drawing of colored powder, called "writing"

kuruva—high calling sound made by women on auspicious occasions

Kutiyottam, Kuttyotum—boys' or men's piercing rite; offering of blood of pre-puberty boys in Bhagavati temples

mala—garland

Mari—Mother goddess; also rain

Mariyamman, Mariamma—widespread village goddess in Southern Kerala and Tamil Nadu; goddess who is both fierce and tender, and who has a creation myth

marumakkatayam—succession and joint family system among matrilineal castes

mattu clean cloth brought to the maiden at menarche, usually by the ritual washerwoman

Mudiyettu—central Kerala ritual dance drama performed as an offering in Bhagavati temples

nagas—serpent deities; cobras as ancestral gods

nevidiyam—offering of cooked food

nilavilakku—bronze lamp

pongala—sweetened rice porridge cooked as offering to the goddess; also annual nine-day festival at Attukal temple, of rice-cooking by women; rising up, overflowing; also sweet rice cooked at menarche

prasad, prasadam—offering wrapped in a plantain leaf, usually of *cumcum*, flowers; food or offerings “eaten” and thus blessed by deity and given out to devotees at end of *puja*.

prasnam—astrological consultation to determine cause

puja—sacred ritual; literally “flower-offering”

puttu—rice pudding cooked at menarche; also menses

rasa--essence of what is cooked; rising of inner power

ritumati (Sanskrit)—one who is in her season, menstrual period

Shakti—power; life force; the Goddess as intelligent cosmic energy

spondidi—ritual performed on the third day of menses to acquire something desired

talipali—procession of girls and women carrying trays with auspicious objects such as lamp, flowers, mirror, plantains

tantri—tantric priest

Theyyam, teyyam—enactment of (primarily) goddess stories in dramatic community rites of possession by specially trained actors

thulli—to shiver; a woman in such a state may be consulted as an oracle in certain groups

tindari—not to be touched

tiraluka—to arrive at puberty

triputtu arattu—bathing ritual of Parvathi following 3 days menstrual seclusion

tirandukalyanam—celebration of (the auspicious event of) menarche

uccaral—yearly menses of Earth Goddess *Bhumi Devi*

udayad—white petticoat of the Goddess who menstruates, available for sale as sacred object

valkannadi—polished bronze mirror used in some menarche celebrations

val—crescent shaped sword

vari ari—highly sacred *prasadam*; sweet dark red pudding of wild rice and molasses

velichapad, veliccappatu, velichepatti —“shamans” (male and female) of the goddess who dress in red and carry crescent swords

verbuti—ash of cow dung, a sacred substance

yakshi—female tree spirits

INTRODUCTION: Celebration of Menstruation in Modern Kerala

A Modern Menarche Rite: Deva

In 1998, while doing field research in Kerala, India with my collaborator, Dianne Jenett, we were fortunate to be invited to film a menarche ritual. Accompanied by a translator of Malayalam, the regional language, we rode in a black and yellow three-wheeled autorickshaw up a winding road just outside the city of Thiruvananthapuram to an area known locally as “the colony”. We were warmly greeted by the family of the maiden, a fifteen-year-old named Deva, who had been secluded for sixteen days, and this day was her emergence, featuring a ritual bath, gift-giving and a celebration among extended family and neighbors.

The Akkulum colony is a group of unplastered mud brick houses with high peaked thatched roofs, built into the side of a hill. Wide cement steps lead down to sets of terraces. To reach a particular house the visitor steps onto a rough footpath carved into the rocky hill. The houses are close to each other and small, with no indoor plumbing, and the inhabitants are considered poor by Kerala standards. The room used for the *puja* and gift-giving for Deva’s menarche is nine by eleven feet, with a smaller attached room. Cooking is done outside at ground level on traditional concrete or two-brick stoves burning coconut leaf fuel under clay or stainless steel pots. A sitting area outdoors is swept clean and women sit on the ground with their backs against the house wall. A wide galvanized shallow bucket holds washing water, as well as a small plastic dipping cup. The family occupation is goldsmithing, the caste name Thattan. Deva’s brother is learning the family trade. The family’s ancestors immigrated to Kerala from Tamil Nadu generations ago, farther back than anyone can recall.

We explained that we were filming a menarche celebration because in our country menstruation is not celebrated, and is frequently hidden or shamed. The family and neighbor women sympathized, and in the friendly manner we came to consider typical of Kerala, invited us to “stay in India!”

The menarche rite that we were so privileged to witness and film was a fragment from former times, a product of “modernization”.¹ The women in the family had forgotten exactly how to do the ritual bath, and were given oral instructions by the priest, and some older neighbors. “Circle her head with the coconut flowers and then throw them to the east,” the priest instructed. But in the narrow space between buildings crowded with people this seemed a difficulty. While Deva crouched to receive her bath (fully dressed), her aunt circled the top of her head three times with the tall spray of white flowers, hesitated, and then pitched it to the west, down the hillside. Then, “Turmeric, turmeric,” the older women cried as the aunts began to lift the water vessel. They stopped to rub turmeric paste on the girl’s arms and face. As they poured the water over her, only two or three of the oldest women made the auspicious tongue-rolling sound, (*kurava*) the high calling sound that means, “may it go well with her in the future.”

In other parts of the rite that day the women seemed more confident. The plate of fruits for the maiden’s prosperity was beautiful and confidently carried; the orange garland (*mala*) placed around her neck was greeted with a fulsome *kurava* blessing from several women. Her presents were gorgeous: deeply colored cloth *saris*, a gold ring put on by her mother, silver anklets snapped in place by her aunt. Deva received new-looking

¹ Nayar scholar Savithri De Torreil commented on viewing our film, that in the past no male priest would have officiated. “Only women,” she said emphatically.

tall water and cooking vessels carefully wrapped in newspaper and money wrapped in bright green leaves.

In this 1998 version of a menarche celebration, the clock on the wall signals the rule of global, inorganic, nonlunar time. An uncle brings a flashlight as a present and the men discuss video technology with us. The neighbors lament that only three castes in the colony –Thattan, Chetti, and Pandaram—continue to celebrate menarche. Dianne Jenett and I, two overly anxious American women, hold our video cameras, glancing at each other in awed amazement that people anywhere celebrate menstruation. And whatever anyone can say about the meaning of this disappearing rite, the expression of pleasure, joy, and self-confidence on Deva's face as the women in her family dress her as an adult and stand in line to bequeath her all the wealth they can, is unmistakably real.

Chennangoor Temple: the menstruation of goddess Parvathi

Another form of celebration of menstruation takes place in Kerala, for the goddess. At Thrichengannoor Mahadeva Temple, in the town of Chengannoor, Shiva and Parvathi are the installed deities. Like other well-known Kerala temples, this one features a special yearly festival. But the best-known event is the menses of the goddess, an unpredictable occurrence that is determined through close examination of her garment for signs of menstruation. The cloth (*utayata*) wrapping the goddess is examined each morning by the priest. If he finds a stain that may indicate the menses of the goddess, the cloth is immediately brought to the wife of the local Ksatriya chieftain, who examines it. She determines whether or not the stain indicates the menstrual blood of goddess. If she gives a positive answer the cloth is then taken to the oldest female head of the family of the Nambutiri Brahmin who is chief priest (*tantri*) at the temple. Her hereditary office,

like that of the chieftain's wife, is to give final determination of the goddess' menstrual cloth. The cloth itself is considered highly valuable, "the cloth has spirit--a power" to bless household life, and so people—including prominent people from outside the state—bid for the opportunity to buy the powerful cloth, which is "booked" eight or nine years in advance.

Once the women of these two families give an affirmative answer, the goddess' menses ritual begins. The main temple is closed and the icon of the goddess is carried to a small temple; she is in seclusion for three days, and during those days there are no decorations, though people can come to watch. She is dressed by the priest in a white *sari* and is fed a porridge, and on the third day she is given a special dish with coconut and palm sugar (*jaggery*), called *ukali*.

During this three-day period the priest cannot go to the small temple. Devi (a generic pan-Indian term for a goddess) is accompanied by one or two Nayar women whose family has hereditary right to perform this particular office. When interviewed, they affirmed that they consider it a privilege, a "lucky thing" to be there with the Devi, "like a companion, a friend." They sit with her just as female companions sat with them during their own first menses. They cannot touch her during this time. No one touches the goddess in her seclusion because she is considered to be "polluted" by her menses—by which they mean her emanations are too powerful. (See Chapter Two for a discussion of "pollution"). And if the women are menstruating they cannot sit with her. At the end of her seclusion, they bring various soaps and materials with which the goddess is washed: *gingelly* oil, *thali* leaves, turmeric, and mango leaves. People come asking them questions

about what they are doing and they have the authority to answer because they are “personages of the goddess”.

At the *tantri's* house I asked how Devi's power at the time of her menses might affect her devotees? I was told that people come seeking success in finding a spouse, and also “they come to get some good things.” Some might do a special ritual (*spondidi*) twelve times, as an offering. “The women do it every month, they do it twelve times, each on the third day of their menses---a girl did *spondidi* only five times and she got married, and they have many stories like this,” the *tantri's* wife said.

On the fourth day in the morning Parvathi, in the movable form of the installed icon, is carried to the river for her ritual bath (*arratu*). Devotees also immerse themselves at this time. The goddess is carried in a metal vessel or “boat” and immersed in the river Pampa three times. A flaming triangle is waved over her head and floats away on the water. Five people gather to pour some water on her and one of her ritual companions will put flowers on the goddess. When I asked about separating the goddess from the earth, I was told, “They never touch the goddess to the ground. She will be kept on a wooden thing—*albani palan*—which is shaped like a tortoise, a turtle. She will be kept on that; or otherwise on a table.”

During Devi's public procession to the river for her bath, people line the roads and follow along. Groups of women and girls, dressed for the ritual known as *Talipali*, stand along the road holding plates of auspicious objects such as half coconuts, two small plantains, a small glass mirror. In *Talipali* processions I witnessed at other temples, the girls are heavily painted with black kohl around their eyes and dotted lines of sandalwood

paste on their cheeks; they wear gold crowns of paper and cloth, and on their heads like a cap around their shining black hair, coiled streams of white jasmine flowers.

In Tamil Nadu, neighboring state to Kerala, village menarche celebrations continue to be major events, turning out entire villages for processions that may include tens of thousands of people. Celebrations might last for days or even weeks. In Kerala a century ago, Nayar and Brahmin girls rode in style in their own menarche processions mounted on the tops of elephants and with parasols over their heads. In some communities singers and jugglers took part. Old men in Kerala still recall how, as boys, they felt the tingle of privilege to be called on to deliver a meal to the bottom of the garden where a relative was in her seclusion.

One interpreter had a pleased smile as he translated an old Nayar woman's answer to my question, "What was menarche like for you?" "It was just like a festival," he said, repeating for emphasis, "just like a festival." A festival in Kerala is a mass occasion that spares no expense, time or effort, is artful and impassioned, a pageant of color and costume, a parade of splendor and sound. Graceful men balance small trees in red pots on their rhythmically bobbing heads, and groups dressed as horses, peacocks and camels entertain watching children. Firecrackers, drums and horns accompany exquisitely crafted depictions of the deities passing along roads lined with spectators who may join the throng, along with lines of neatly dressed women who carry plates of sacred offerings—coconuts, lamp, incense, plantains, a small mirror. Most especially in village Kerala a festival is in honor of the gods, and most commonly that deity is the goddess.

Menstruation and its attendant rules continue to be among the more important issues in Dravidian and Brahmanic religious and social life. The biggest gathering of

women, pongala festival—where women cook porridge publicly for goddess Bhadrakali-- draws hundreds of thousands to the city of Thiruvananthapuram for the annual gathering. No one may attend if they are menstruating, so women take herbs and hormonal pills to regulate the timing of their cycles. Conversely, during the largest men's gathering, the Ayyappa pilgrimage, men in their preparations as well as on their journey not only may not touch a menstruating women, they may not even see one, lest her menstrual state interfere with the effects of their careful preparations.

When Dianne Jenett, researcher in Kerala and a member of my Ph.D. cohort, brought back some of these reports she also said that she had taken my book, *Blood, Bread, and Roses*, and found metaformic theory illuminated much of what she was experiencing in the tradition of goddess Bhagavati, the primary mother goddess of the state. Kerala seemed a perfect location to apply metaformic theory.

CHAPTER ONE

Metaformic Theory and Origin Stories

Metaformic Theory and Origins

Metaformic theory is a theory of human origins and origins of culture I first expounded as a book, *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World*. This study is an application of most of the theory's premises to menarche rites and goddess rites of Kerala, South India. By stating that "menstruation created the world," the theory proposes that menstrual rituals literally constructed and contained human consciousness about the nature of reality. Therefore the study, in looking for patterns between menarche rites and goddess rites, has a subtext of looking for such aspects of creation as may have germinated culture itself.

All origin stories are "true" in the sense that they satisfactorily explain and describe cosmology using methods congruent with the cultures who devise and embrace them. While they may be "true", none is whole. None is capable of explaining all cosmology or of embracing the worldviews of all cultures or all possible cultures. Grand theories are usually described as overviews; I claim "underview" as well, meaning inclusion of both my own inner experiential testimony and also the oral mythologies and rites of those usually unseen by the historic gaze—lives and ideas of women and ordinary men, and the so-called "subaltern" and non-elite, those whose worldviews have been unspoken because of gendered, racialized, caste, sexual, menstrual and other classificatory prohibitions on the part of elite writers.

Grand theories overstate to make their cases, and use instantiation as well as substantiation. As a poet I devised "metaform" from metaphor plus form, to mean an

enacted or embodied idea, one part of which derives from menstrual or related rites. The word rite is from *r'tu*, a Sanskrit term with three meanings: menstruation, the first act of sexual union following menstruation, and seasonal rounds.

Metaformic theory begins with the idea that what differentiated ancestral human lineage from all other primates was a unique relationship between female menstrual cycles and lunar cycles. The menstrual-lunar relationship pulled human consciousness outside itself and formed culture. But does such a relationship exist? While studies and my own experience living in all-women environments confirms that women synchronize menstruation with each other, is there evidence that women synchronize cycles with the moon? On the surface, the answer is that in contemporary life, women's cycles are not synchronized with the moon. However, they are the exact length to do so. Three separate studies—in 1937, 1967 and 1981—showed human menses to average 29.5 days, identical to the lunar cycle as seen from the surface of the earth. (Knight 1991, 246-7) In contrast, primate cycles range from 7-25 days for squirrel monkeys to 39 for ring-tailed lemurs. While a few, particularly macaques, range from 28-30, none matches the lunar number of 29.5. (247-9) Only human menses does that. So, even though contemporarily women do not synchronize with the moon, there is nothing biological to stop them from so doing, and I assume that in the past they did.

Metaformic theory posits three “first steps” of origination of primate ancestors that placed them on the human “path” of evolution. Groups (or one single group) of ancestral primates recognized that their menstrual cycles had synchronized or could synchronize with the lunar cycle, that is to say the females acquired a distinct, externally visible timing and identification with light and dark. Secondly the females synchronized

bleeding as a group with the dark of the moon and secluded themselves for safety from predators. Mythologies around the world connect menstruation with predators, especially members of the wild dog family, including coyotes, dingoes, wolves, and also including such creatures as jaguars, leopards and bears.

The lunar-timed and group seclusion of women gave them protection while in a vulnerable (blood-smelling) state, and also a “merged identification” between themselves and a large, distant, consistent nonhuman being, the moon (or protomoon, before the sun and moon were clearly differentiated) associated with qualities of light and dark. If as seems probable two or more members of a group menstruated simultaneously they would have developed female solidarity¹ distinctly unlike other primates. When the adult females piled brush on top of an adolescent at her first bleeding they were constructing the first formal shelters and much more, as seclusion rites became the central container of human consciousness. This container seems to have been retained cross-culturally in particular through menarche rituals, which overall are far more elaborate than monthly seclusions throughout a woman’s ovulatory life. First menstruation, menarche, has in recorded history included long separations—as long as two years—and such protective measures as piling sand over the maiden to cover her waist, having her stand in a hole up to her neck and then covering her with brush, or suspending her above the earth in a hammock or slatted hut. The synchrony between the lunar and menstrual cycles mirrored and “named” both moon and human, and timed seclusion rites kept that naming intact. The females acquired a timed identity, a dance with the lunar beat and blood imagery, that pulled them into a distinct new consciousness, that I call metaformic.

¹ Knight’s term is solidarity.

With the motive of keeping males away from the seclusion place of a daughter or sister, because of the danger of bloodsmell, females acting as a group had the power of signaling yes and no—now come near me, now stay away—with respect to adult male heterosexual behavior and also maternal behavior, for their children would have needed to stay away as well. The lunar-synchronized primate groups would now have had the power to break certain behaviors apart from animal patterns of bonding and mating, allowing more complex social relations and sharing of responsibilities. The females had the power of solidarity with each other; they had the repeated, consistent and highly visible authority of their bond with the moon's phases of light and dark, and they had the substance of blood to use as a volatile linguistic paint of extreme attraction and repulsion.

Following, and in concordance with, these first two female steps of entrainment and timed group seclusion, primate males, the sons, uncles and brothers of the females had to make the third step, a move of deliberate entrainment with the evolving cycles—or they virtually would have belonged to a different species. Males entered metaformic culture through their own blood rites of various sorts. These could have included nose and lip bleeding, tooth removal, hymen breaking, piercing or tearing flesh with thorns and fingernails, all found in rituals, and all capable of preceding the invention of flint blades for cutting and long before the development of formal hunting rites. The males had to entrain themselves to two cycles, both the lunar and the menstrual constructs developing among the females, and they had to use induced, not naturally flowing blood. This must have produced particularly emphatic versions of their own seclusions; for example, because they could be initiated as a group (unlike menarche which is more

likely to happen to one maiden at a time) their seclusion huts would have been larger. I call their blood rites “parallel menstruations” as a way of identifying both their source and the enormity of their meaning as a complex mirroring between the genders.

Highly motivated to bring a leaf cup or a gourd full of water to secluded relatives, the “lunar primates”² evolved into hominids who walked upright and began to carry and keep objects—objects of *r'tu*, of ritual. With connections between blood, vulva, moon, dark/light, danger, attraction, seclusion/no and emergence/yes they had powerful, distinctly new minds—minds built of these connections, these relationships. They enacted the relationships in both gesture and object, producing distinctly different yet related cultures built of applied metaforms. Culture is a language of metaforms. A metaform is a cultural container, a human idea, either in gesture or object, of which one aspect is menstruation—specifically the lunar/menstrual construct. So the theory posits a “beginning,” the first steps which more than one primate group may have taken consisting of an entrainment of female menstrual cycles with lunar cycles, development of females’ seclusion rites with attendant gender solidarity and highly visible signal language, and entrainment of male blood cycles with both of those. Ancestral women especially became a living text laden with meaningful markings and shapes embedded in their flesh or the ways they shaped their hair, to be closely “read” by other women, by men and by their own children. Modern women continue this language of the body.

The particular relationship of hominid ancestral females with such elements as light and dark, the protomoon and other nonhuman beings appears to have been a process of “merged identification”—in that she enacted those elements especially in her puberty rituals. She literally WAS the moon or sun or Venus or a bear or rabbit or whatever

metaformic element she had merged identification with—because of some perceived similarity of shape or color. I think this because in some known rites it is perfectly clear that menstruating or menarchal women have been or are identified during the rites with such beings as sun (Navajo, Tukuna) lunar rabbit (Hazda) bear (ancient Greek, north American Indian). In many male hunting and herding rites women are identified with buffalo, deer and other horned animals. Notions of deity or creation principle seem tied to the merged identification between women, creatures and menstruation. Women, menstruation, and a creation snake are entwined in mythology of Australian aboriginals for example (Knight 1991); Margaret Grove (2000) has photographed aboriginal rock art depictions of red dancing female figures whose vulvas are serpent mouths. Eland antelopes are metaformic of both full moon and menarchal maiden during menarche rites of the !Kung people (Power 1993, 7, 8). I call these creatures, in these relational contexts, metaforms—meaning that many varied peoples have related certain creatures with complex human ideas linking cosmic principles with menstruation (and the Sacred Feminine). Hence certain creatures have had powerful teleological relationship to human culture; stated another way we could say that women “always” have been closely identified with and have had a relationship with nature that is *cognitive* in its character.

The menstrual entrainment with cycles did not stop with the lunar cycle but evidently continued to other cycles, perhaps transferring through merged identification. Menstruating women identified themselves with bodies of water, particular creatures having specific qualities, the sun and moon as distinct beings, the body of the earth itself, red flowers, various plants, seasons and rain, volcanic earth energies and so on. The incorporation of these cycles into ritual practice (human mind) I call a process of

² Term used by author Z. Budapest.

“menstrual logic”—quite literally we have pulled our minds outside our bodies so that we live within a cultural language, and conversely, increasing numbers of natural cycles have been incorporated into ritual, and therefore human culture.

An example of menstrual logic is in the comprehension, by peoples on several continents, of seasonal rains as the “menstruation” of the sky, earth, or sun, and its connection to the growth of plants, to planting and to male as well as female fertility. The application of the menstrual “course” of seclusion and emergence to various elements of nature, which are understood and engaged with metaformically, has given us storied as well as ritualized identities, and has given us time and place orientation that is externally contained in calendars, gestures, maps. Through menstrual logic the elements became understood as entities with storied realities of their own; when the earth became understood as a female body our ancestors gained capacity to comprehend the life cycle of the earth, and so on. Hence knowledge has been constructed, through ritual—which traces back to menstrual ritual or related blood rites—and has been contained through metaformic artifacts. Cultural artifacts and gestures hold knowledge in place so it can be displayed, remembered and taught.

It is my thesis that explicitly human consciousness began with the unique quality of one (or more than one) primate groups, recognizing, experiencing and synchronizing their menstrual cycles with a light in the sky, long before they were able to replicate its shapes, distinguish moon from sun, or name their characteristics in speech—and their efforts to do so gradually developed all forms of speech. To recap, the first three steps are 1. entrainment of female cycles to the lunar cycles, 2. establishment of seclusion rites that excluded males (and probably all nonmenstruating members of the group), and 3. the

entrainment of males to both the lunar cycle and to women's cycles through parallel blood rites. These steps pulled human consciousness out into an externalized language of cultural containers, artifacts and gestural acts—all of which I call metaforms—with which we think, communicate and make meaning of ourselves and our worlds.

Categories of Metaform

I call them *metaforms* rather than symbols because they are embodied and because they are living relationships with nature—that is to say, they have spiritual and emotional dimension not implied in the term “symbol”. Categories of metaform help order the theory, and I began with four. They should not be understood as linear in their development, or even distinct in their boundaries. The first category is “Wilderness,” by which I mean that women had merged identification with beings in nature.

“Wilderness” is a somewhat problematic term, since it is constructed from the urban point of view which projects “simplicity, naturalness, non-culture” as if there is no relationship and complexity between humans and nonhuman beings. Culture in a wilderness setting is just as complex and storied as human culture separated from creatures (who of course have their own cultures—but not metaformically). Probably interactions directly with the life of the earth are more, not less, complex.

Wilderness metaform

Ancestral peoples appear to have projected onto creatures, plants and other nonhuman beings the logic of identifying them, merging their identities with aspects of the human female. Frequently these features have to do with bleeding, the color red, vulva and breast shapes and other metaformic qualities. The same collective merging has happened with predatory animals, those that cause blood flow, especially if they are also

red, and in addition horned animals and others with a marked resemblance to lunar shapes. These nonhuman beings repeatedly appear in both ritual and story as an integral part of creation myths.

A clear example is part of the mythology of the Dogon people of east Africa, which designates a red ant mound as “the vulva of the earth”. These people are believed to have a continuous history of perhaps 30,000 years, and if the rituals surrounding red ant mounds are survivals from those distant times (or even if they are not) the image *creates the earth as a female body* with a highly energized, “bleeding” vulva streaming with red ants. (Griaule, 20, 21) The ingenious poetic imagery is breathtaking, especially in its implications of a metaformic language of gesture and also nonhuman being, that could account for pre-verbal cognition among ancestral groups.

Cosmetikos metaform

The word “*cosmetikos*” is from a Greek term meaning “ordering the cosmos through the body”.³ I assume this began with the women’s use of blood as a body paint, and then blood substitute such as red ochre, clay, red berries and so on, and also all manner of body decorations and signs, which constitute an embodied literacy. Though both men and women have done this intensely, women have the motive to have done it first as a form of instruction to men, who then had motive to reflect it back. Much of women’s worldwide contemporary *cosmetikos* remains directly connected to menarche, such as lip tattooing, piercing and scarification, earrings, body carving and so on. Food substances and gestures also come under this category, as well as sexual behavior.

Narrative metaform

³ Contributed by my friend Cosi Fabian.

The storying of reality by studying or teaching the impact of relationships based in metaform I have called “narrative” though this does not include actual narrative accounts. For example the Dogon people’s scarification of a maiden’s forehead with a V shape and relating this to both the vulva and seasonal rain is narrative metaform. (Grahm 1993, 80; Griaule) Examining a menarchal girl’s first blood drops in relation to the position of the stars (in “lunar constellations”) to identify possible negative influences toward her otherwise positive menarchal energy, is narrative metaform, and a common feature of Kerala menarche rites.

An example I used in *Blood, Bread, and Roses* (Grahm 1993, 195) is of an annual “ball game” played in Mesoamerica at the time of European contact, in which a rubber ball was equated with the moon goddess, Xquic, whose name also meant “rubber” and “blood”. Players could not touch the ball and were thickly muffled in gloves, helmets and other padding suggesting that the no-touch prohibitions of menstrual seclusion rites were transferred to this event. A seasonal ritual connected to sun, moon, rain and corn, the ball game called for a player (the sun) to be sacrificed (made to bleed) before entering the underworld, where the sun was also thought to go. We can see that this world-formation “game” was a narrative constructed of many metaformic relationships forming a cosmogonic paradigm for the Mayan people who devised it.

Material metaform

Material metaforms are the nearly infinite variety of objects crafted of materials such as clay, straw, wood, stone and metal which are themselves connected to menstruation and women’s bodies; theory says that the processes by which they are crafted can be shown (indigenously) to be related to menstruation, and to be imitative of

processes surrounding menarche. If so we would expect that indigenous smelting of iron, gold and other metals would be understood as working with the “menstruation of the earth” and would be ritualized.

Watching a metalsmith at work it is easy enough to see how connections between metal and blood came about. Whatever its shape to begin with, a small chunk of metal curls into a round drop of blood red liquid when heated. If a people have constructed earth as a female deity, molten metals would easily have been mentally constructed as drops of her generative, formative, menstrual blood. Equally importantly, the rituals of women toward their own menstrual blood would have been applied by craftspeople of either gender toward the “blood” of Mother Earth. The Kogi people who live in mountainous Columbia consider gold to be the menstrual blood of the earth. Iron smelting rites in central Africa use the same approach to molten iron (Schmidt 1998,139-61). A myth of India conveys a similar idea: the river goddess Ganga conceived from intercourse with Agni, god of fire, but the burden of his energy was too much for her (one story goes) so she poured out the contents of her womb at the foot of the Himalayas, and each color of fluid flowed from her becoming the substance of all metals. (Induchudan, 132) Again, the metaphor is of the goddess producing unformed matter that the craftspeople then delineate through their ritualized arts. It is from menstrual rites that people have had methods, processes and merged identifications not available to other primates, with which to work the earth.

Three Principles of Metaformic Theory

Following understanding of the four categories, a number of related principles carry the theory forward on its epistemological course.

Parallel menstrual rites

That men do not menstruate and that menstruation includes a volatile, visible substance that can be smeared on other objects in meaningful signaling while at the same time the substance resides in the veins of all mammals put a decisive, contradictory, contentious spin on the metaformic language of human beings. The moment primate ancestral females had timed seclusion rites, males had no choice but to take steps to entrain their own bodies and minds to the cycles. So “parallel menstruation” simply means the (usually blood-based) methods used to entrain men and boys to both the rituals of females and also to the greater cycles being “studied” at the time. Hunting is the most well known of these. In several cultures recorded in the nineteenth century menstruation ruled the hunt. Hunting is deeply ritualized, and is connected to male puberty initiation, male bleeding, and lunar metaforms such as crescent horns and claws.

Male rites of cutting and bleeding are most overtly understood as “menstruation” in aboriginal Australian cultures, (Knight 1993, Grove 1999). Native Americans also understood and state the relationship, as in Yurok sweat lodge rituals and through other indications such as the necessity for boys to bleed in many of their puberty rituals. Ways of having boys of twelve or so bleed following seclusion rites or other special preparations include: knocking out a tooth; cutting thighs, sides, arms and head; cutting or even re-shaping the penis to resemble a vulva; and bleeding from various orifices. (See Knight 1991, Grahn 1993, Grove 1998)

Menstrual logic

My premise is that “menstrual logic” explains the how and why of the multiplicitous ways humans think and act. Ancestrally, the actions that grew up within

menstrual seclusion rites spilled out slowly and ritually into public life as gestures, artifacts, behaviors and processes constituting arts, religions and sciences. Specifically, the course of the secluded maiden, her cycle, became the plot of numberless storied comprehensions of other cycles of nature. One example of such a “plot” is the maiden’s initial seclusion at menarche in a covered structure, her emergence among female relatives who carried her to the river for her bath, the procession with the whole village involved, her being dressed in adult finery. This plot is enacted in the course of a ritual of the oldest known goddess of Greece, Hera. On one island Hera, identified with the moon, was embodied as a forty-inch high slab of oak wood. She was secluded in a long stone chamber, completely in the dark and bound by the lygos vine. Lygos is an emmenagogue, a plant substance capable of bringing on menstruation, allowing women who use it to synchronize timing of their periods for seasonal ritual purposes. Hera in her form of a slab of oak was periodically carried by her priestesses to the river Imbrasos. There she was unbound, washed and dressed as the Full Moon. With the village following in procession she was carried back and set up on a pedestal in front of her temple. Much later, the wood was carved into a female image.(Kerenyi 1975, Grahn 1993, 190-191)

From this story, called *hieros logos*, “sacred story”, I took the idea of menstrual logic—a storying of reality that has given humans a method for identifying and understanding many kinds of life cycles, including seasonal, weather, and timings of the sun and moon in confluences such as the solstices.

Metaformic theory says that menstrual logic and related rituals account for development of complex systems such as hunting with spears, bows and axes; fishing with poison, nets and hooks; horticulture and agriculture; bringing home of fire and its

use in cooking; carpentry and other crafts and finally stone masonry and metallurgy; knot-tying and weaving; healing arts—and so on. That these arts began as rituals means they were thoroughly regulated and constructed, probably always in contexts of cosmogony and what we now call “religion”. I assume that ancestral peoples always had to be very aware, conscious to the extreme, of the consequences of failing to follow the rules of ritual exactly. With the tools of seclusion rites, humankind, in contrast to other animals, brought home the most dangerous powers on earth: fierce creatures, poisonous plants, fire. They did this using merged identification and by entering into a ritualized dialogue with these powers, a dialogue that is a mixture of science and religion, and more.

An expectation follows that indigenous societies would show evidence of being or having been heavily regulated by menstrual prohibitions and mandates. The premise, in part from such words as “regula” meaning menstruation and being the root of “regulation”, is that societies were ruled by menstruation’s prohibitions and contributions, that society spilled into development as it elaborated menstrual customs and the consciousness, thinking, sciences created through these customs.

In looking at menstrual regulations, I find that a negative relationship carries as much weight as a positive. The strong prohibition of particular behaviors or substances “creates” them and focuses attention on them as much as a positive mandate does. The powerful approach/avoid, yes/no, do this/don’t do that of systems of menstrual rule is cross-continental in scope and deeply embedded in women’s behaviors even long after menarche rites themselves have ceased being practiced. These systems can be mutually exclusive between groups, each of which has elaborated a different set of metaforms and

prohibitions. While many of the regulations of seclusion are repeated cross-continently, they represent only a small number of menstruation's rules; even seemingly small differences powerfully affect behavior.

Beliefs about marriage, sexual and food practices, religious ritual, speech habits are all socially constructed, as has been solidly affirmed in many fields of social science. In addition, an array of approaches to such everyday essentials as beauty, work, money, cleanliness, blood, and other creatures are socially ordered and morally configured. They make groups "different" from each other, and supply dynamic interactions and diversity. They are also mandated by one group but strictly prohibited by another; they are oppositional and frequently mutually exclusive. The term I use for this is "obversity". Specifically, "cultural obversity" refers to practices and beliefs that are orderly, moral and even sacred for one group and prohibited, immoral and even demonic for another.

Crossing, Crossover and Substitution

The tension created by the two genders having totally different relationships to the substance of blood and the metaforms created from it (and consequently also the acquisition of some kinds of knowledge) at times separates them for lengths of time, decades perhaps. During this time one gender may forge into being new knowledge or processes or social structures, and the other be prohibited from them for some reason. As I said it in *Blood, Bread, and Roses*, "Crossing marks the great shifts of power between women's r'tu and men's parallel rites. Crossing takes advantage of the fact that the genders have different relationships to the central menstrual entrainment and therefore can trade leadership back and forth—like a shuttle on a loom" (275) The gap created must be closed with what I call "crossover" movements. These are frequently led by

members of society who don't fit conventional definitions of gender (or whatever other categories have been constructed). These subgroups may be shamans, artists or others who can "cross" social and other boundaries, or they may be religious or other reformers like historic Buddha, Jesus or Shankaracharya.

Substitution is another principle of metaformic change outlined in *Blood, Bread and Roses* as the "tricking" of the metaform, the tradition that demands blood or some other kind of sacrifice. The "trick" comes about through substituting something equally acceptable to the ritual whose values have changed over time. For example, religious human sacrifice to "feed" deities of grain or other natural forces must have seemed a small price to pay, indeed a high and heroic honor, ten thousand years ago and through most of the centuries since agriculture first began to be the major economic underpinning of our ancestors. In today's economy, it reads as senseless murder, and though continuing in remote areas even into the twentieth century (of India for example) for the most part has been replaced by animal sacrifice, which in turn has been mostly replaced by the use of red plant products that can carry the requisite blood imagery. Likewise, European and American hunting rites to socialize boys into men have to a large though by no means total extent been successfully replaced with strenuous, challenging games less dangerous to wildlife.

Finally, any thought about change in human affairs should include an understanding of metaformic paradox, that blood is a volatile and divisive as well as binding and life-giving substance. Any change in older rituals is a stepping into a new set of problems that will need to be solved sooner or later.

An example of crossover that can happen from elaboration is a description of a woman's life in a Manchurian household just prior to the Chinese Communist revolution. At that time, women in the extended family as an example (Chang 1991, 108), arose from their beds at three a.m. to begin preparing breakfast, a procedure made impossibly complex because eight completely different breakfasts were mandatory, and the same criteria held for the other meals as well. This is a very simple example of food *cosmetikos* elaborated to the point of oppression. Whatever else the communist revolution may have meant for such a family, the fact that it had a military (masculine) *cosmetikos* mandating that everyone eat the same meal in the same building, immediately accomplished the freeing up of a huge number of woman-labor-hours. Mao Tse Tung's edict to melt woks for village iron smelting plants would have accomplished a similar sudden and sweeping change in longstanding household habits.

A second example of a not yet completed crossover from one gendered "braid" to another is the Industrial Revolution's concentrated use of male ingenuity and inventiveness—in both the US and Europe; women served as labor either at home or in mills, but were not, with few exceptions, owners or inventors. Throughout the twentieth century, however, women—formerly illiterate and unable to vote—gained both advantages and began moving up the labor scale. Increasingly they have moved into positions of authority and inventive contribution—especially by attending schools and learning subjects that formerly were defined as "male occupations": engineering, medicine, science, theology, philosophy, political science and social studies. In a less successful part of the crossover, men have moved into some amount of childcare and nurturing occupations, but the tension of this supportive aspect not happening at a

sufficient pace has caused some sociologists to call this a “stalled revolution”⁴.

Nevertheless, and despite backlash, we appear to continue to be in the middle of this crossover, with women “catching up” to men’s accomplishments of the Industrial Revolution and now in some areas beginning to lead society as a whole.

The concept of periodic metaformic crossover, between genders and other major groups, is my attempt to locate within metaformic theory a dialectic for social change. I consider this a work in process.

Darwin and Metaformic Theory

Darwinism, that is to say the theory of evolution, has enabled science to establish an origin story that has moved far beyond the mythology of Genesis. The elemental idea of evolution and of human descent from primate ancestors remains a viable and continually unfolding promise that we can find a place to stand from which to see ourselves. As contemporary cultural anthropologist Chris Knight pays tribute: “The attractions of Darwinism are understandable, because unless we grasp the real uniqueness of humanity’s social and symbolically constructed essence, we are obliged to treat the problem of origins in a biological way.”(Knight 1991, 53) Following Marx in holding that the totality of social relations constitute the “real nature of man” Knight has succinctly described the limitations of treating “the problem of origins in a biological way”:

“As we seek our essence in biology, the importance of language, labour, ideology and consciousness in producing and defining our humanity is simply overlooked. Instead of seeing humans as symbolically constituted persons, our minds formed through childhood socialisation and through collective cultural products such as language, we see only the activities of bodies and brains. Instead of standing back and bringing into focus the evolving collective dimensions of all human life – dimensions such as economic systems,

⁴ Arlie Hochschild, talk at University of Kerala, February, 1998.

grammatical systems, religions—we view the world as if through a microscope. Increasing the magnification, we shorten our depth of focus, until the only visible realities become physical individuals eating, breathing, copulating and other wise surviving in their immediate physical environments, their localised interactions filling almost our entire field of vision. Within this myopic perspective, the global, higher-order plane of existence of these physical individuals becomes invisible to us. We are left unaware of the existence of any transpatial plane of collective structure embracing and shaping the biological localised life processes in which we are all involved. The subject matter of social anthropology—the study of economics, cultural kinship, ritual, language and myth—is not only left unexplained. It is not even seen as a higher order level or reality in need of being explained. “(53)

The question of women’s place in evolution was evidently answered for Darwin by the social conventions of his era and class. Women stayed home to tend the bourgeois household while men sailed forth on world adventures. So the tired remark that there are no great women composers and therefore it is men who have produced human culture is a direct quote from Darwin, for whom greatness was the measure of intelligence:

The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than woman can attain—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. If two lists were made of the most eminent men and women in poetry, painting, sculpture, music—comprising composition and performance, history, science, and philosophy, with half-a-dozen names under each subject, the two lists would not bear comparison. We may also infer, . . . that if men are capable of decided eminence over women in many subjects, the average standard of mental power in man must be above that of woman. (Darwin 1871, 1981, 327)

Given the limitations of his era, and he as representative of it, we can leave that quote behind as a quibble that continues to need correction, the solution probably being in women doing more research about our foremothers and both sexes redefining what constitutes contribution and “greatness”. Considerable literature now exists on the recovery of great women artists, poets, composers and scientists—but that is not the point. “Greatness” and “origin” may be two different accomplishments; as I said earlier, the men’s lodge is usually larger in any given culture, because it houses all the men

together. But the menstrual hut is probably the original prototype for the structure, and it has taken every imaginable variety of form and material.

Sherry Ortner is the feminist theorist who pointed out that men see women's accomplishments as "nature".⁵ The cultural matrix of women's and lower class male's contributions is the instrument upon which a select few European males played concertos of "greatness". Metaformic theory posits the addition that because culture is itself a language, frequently between the genders, men have to first comprehend women's contribution (entrainment) and then reflect it back larger, more elaborately. Consequently we should expect that male expression would be more elaborate in the sense of "greatness" as longer pieces, more notes, more specialization. But in the absence of recognizing the female matrix of culture, these elaborated reflections have been mistaken for the essence of culture itself.

Darwin expressed the culture of everyday life as "common sense"—yet this is precisely the matrix of culture that so markedly differentiates our species and for which "common sense" is not a sensible or plausible source of the invention. For example, while it may seem "common sense" to cook oat porridge for breakfast and serve it in bowls with spoons and bowls of sugar, these are exactly the objects that primates do not invent. They sensibly flee from our most cherished ancient "gods"—fire, lightning, molten metal, and hard indigestible grains. My hope is that my idea of *cosmetikos* can help solve this puzzle, which a number of women have brought to the forefront, by

⁵ Ortner, Sherry, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture and Society*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974.

locating the ritual various people retain that might explain the otherwise inexplicable matrices of human culture.

Related to this point is the “shape” of evolution. A forward or upward moving linear shaped evolution in which intelligent apes “discover” or use “common sense” and “develop” or “invent” to fill “needs” has the limitation of being a line. Line is a perfectly fine shape for tracing a family or small group lineage, but a single line cannot explain our differences. We are better served with the schemata of a bundle of lines, or even of evolution as a drop splashing out equally in all directions.⁶

Darwin acknowledged repeatedly that his theory could not explain cultural differences among human groups. “We have thus far been baffled in our attempts to account for the differences between the races of man....” (248) And again: “We have now seen that the characteristic differences between the races of man....are not explained...”(248) And especially, “I do not intend to assert that sexual selection will account for all the differences between the races....” (249). This is a crucial philosophical gap. One that Darwin himself filled by using the term “common sense” to explain mundane activities of humans. This term means “anyone with sense would do this,” and that sets up two lines of judgment—one is that apes are lacking in common sense, since they did not follow us along our strange path of cooking, putting food on plates, squaring corners of our nests, painting on surfaces and plucking our eyebrows and all the rest of the cultural behaviors that—taken overall—distinguish us markedly from every other being.

Yet even in the midst of developing humanism Darwin and fellow 19th century thinkers noticed that apes do occasionally use stone tools, cover themselves in leaves

against the heat, curl a leaf into a cup to drink water. If they have capacity to do what we do, “common sense” does not explain our habits, something more is needed, as Darwin, and as Knight have noted. A second line of judgment opens up in a viewpoint of hierarchical differences among various cultures. If “common sense” created the cart, then people who never attached the wheel to an axle are going to be judged as “less sensical” and from this it is an easy and I think inevitable step to judgments of not only stupidity but more lethally, “less human”. For this reason alone Darwin, selected here solely because he remains so influential, needs not to be dismissed—as the ideas of evolutionary theory remain dynamic—but needs urgently to be corrected, and especially by those he thought incapable of deep thought.

I now realize metaformic theory addresses this gap directly with the concept of *cosmetikos*—ordering the cosmos through body arts. These include markings, paint, dance and gesture, and also habits around ingestion, including foodstuffs and cooking. For some readers the most challenging idea in metaformic theory is *cosmetikos*. Briefly the term says that activities having to do with the body and its expressions, with food, clothing, body arts, movement, gestures and so on do not derive from “common sense” but rather from ritual and its relationships, and are or were expressions of embodied ideas, the earliest forms of literacy.

From the strictly materialist, Darwinian point of view, cooking came about from the practicality of preservation of food, softening of grains. From the metaformic (or any ritual-inclusive) point of view, cooking began as ritual—the mixture of items for metaformic purpose—and only gradually became “cooking” as the everyday processing of foodstuffs. For example the carrot does not exist in the wild as an edible root and

⁶ A description contributed by Laura K. Brown, Ph.D. candidate in Philosophy and Religion, CIIS.

appears to have been attractive to women for the emmenogogic effects of its seeds and the woad dyes extracted from its woody fibers. From using it for ritual purpose women probably culturally selected for soft—and red—roots. The Celtic meaning of “carrot” is “red”. (Grieve 1971, 161-66; Grahn 1993, 110).

For Darwin body “decoration” arose as a factor of “sexual selection”—like the bright colors of birds—and because (he believed) humans have an innate “aesthetic sense”. From the standpoint of metaformic theory the body arts were developed by women and reflected by men as a signal language which held a great deal of ontological knowledge, such as time-space and other relations, group and individual statuses, and the shapes of the lights in the sky in relation to metals, creatures, and stories. Women’s bodies in particular have served as knowledgeable texts to be “read”. This complex body language ancestrally carried cognitive, “science” content, and also evoked the erotico-physio-religious awe we inadequately condense into the one word “beauty,” and that Darwin described as a uniquely human “aesthetic sense” which he related unconvincingly to the plumage of birds, and to the purpose of sexual selection. Without denying that sexual attraction plays a part in “decoration,” (but sexual attraction itself is socially constructed) I have called the use of body arts as a complex language *cosmetikos*, and included even cooking in its elaborated functions of signification. Earliest round fire pits seem likely as depictions of the sun, for example, and therefore as “science” in addition to whatever else they were for ancestral peoples. Fire, the round shape of light and the sun are all elements that are woven into menstrual regulations, cross-culturally.

Chris Knight and Metaformic Theory

In his 1991 book *Blood Relations: Menstruation and Origins of Culture*, British anthropologist Chris Knight argues that ancestral females contributed massively to the underpinnings of culture through the vehicle of menstruation. I respect in Knight how much care he has taken to prepare his argument and claim his own perspective as a modern myth resting on the work of Marx and Engels. He carefully lays the groundwork with critiques of anthropology's contributions during nearly two centuries of effort, ever since Lewis Henry Morgan first became enthralled with Iroquois matrilineal social structures enabling Engels' analysis of pre-history as a peaceful matrilineal period centered on women and children. Yet anthropology's first attempts at "grand theory" were spurned in a 20th century that had interest in information alone such as that provided by Franz Boas, or in the timeless fixed essential structures such as those imagined by Claude Levi-Strauss. According to Knight:

Not all anthropologists accept that humanity is 'just another species', that culture is no more than 'an adaptation' or that Darwinism is the best and only necessary framework within which to study the nature or origin of human social life. In fact, most of twentieth-century social anthropology has defined itself as a discipline precisely in opposition to such ideas. In the process of doing so, however, it has accentuated rather than transcended intellectual schism and confusion. Instead of addressing from its own standpoint the problems raised by the evolutionary sciences in relation to human life—cultural anthropology has simply turned its face away. Extraordinarily...the very idea of research by cultural specialists into the origins of human culture has in effect been tabooed. (57)

Knight's own argument in *Blood Relations* is proactive, centering on a "revolution" by human females in exerting control of sexuality through the establishment of menstrual taboos prohibiting sex and granting sexual favors in exchange for meat from

a successful hunt. Knight times his revolution late, at 90,000–45,000 years ago, when material artifacts began to proliferate and skulls show capacity for fully articulated speech. Simply stated, Knight argues that ancestral women used the analogy, which he calls “synchrony”, to powerfully equate menstrual blood with all other blood in order to get men to treat the blood of the hunt as if it were menstrual blood—and turn its processing over to the women. Then, using processes already devised in their own phase-locked rituals, the women interceded with the men’s control of meat from kills. This laid the groundwork for women to gain control of meat hunted by their mates through application of fire. In this, the initial ritual of cooking, women roasted meat until all traces of the tabooed substance were gone, rewarding the men with sex in exchange. While this is a plausible thesis, a problem with it is that many of the systems of taboo in menstruation not only called for a prohibition against sex during bleeding, but also a prohibition against hunting. This contradicts Knight’s scenario of male hunters feeling confident to go hunting while the women were in seclusion, since they were not available for sex in any case. A second problem I think is with the dating; it seems more reasonable to see 90,000 BP as an explosion of hard material skilled crafts than as a benchmark of human culture itself. Soft material crafts and use of distinctly human body language seem possible for millions of years, not tens of thousands of years, of our developmental capacity.

In hypothesizing a “sex-strike” by ancestral women, Knight is addressing his own question of why primal human males would have conquered their sexual possessiveness enough to leave the females and go hunting; and secondly why they would have brought the meat back to the females rather than devouring it themselves. In this, the theory

seems to rest its case on a model of patriarchal families and to overlook the power of mothers and sisters to affect sons and brothers in the matrilineal family systems that appear to have preceded patriarchal structures. From these revolutionary steps, Knight argues, all complexly human culture followed—signals, other taboos, language and separation of the genders—inducing social cooperation far beyond anything primates do.

Points of agreement between Knight's theory and metaformic theory are at the heart of the subject of menstruation's creation of culture. The immense differences between human and animal ways of expressing being demands an explanation of some extraordinary step our lineage took ancestrally, that other apes did not. I have used the simple menstrual/lunar connection to account for this step. Knight has more complexly described the elemental menstrual origin powers—gender solidarity between women and “phase-locking” by which he means both the (initially) biological and unconscious timing and later the deliberate entrainment of women's cycles to the moon and/or the sea. The possibility that ancestral females undertook to do this, perhaps over millions of years of evolution, is supported by herbal histories and such accounts as Thesmophoria, an ancient Greek Fall menstrual ritual for the purpose of which women timed their periods by ingesting the lygos plant. (Meador 1992)

As I said earlier, Knight has also pointed out that women's cycles are capable of “phase-locking” with the moon—though in modern times they do not show this—and also with each other, and even with the tides. Women's relation to menstruation is so delicately tuned that women not only will menstruate with each other in certain situations, but also according to oral testimony I have heard from American women, and according to written testimony that Knight reports, women menstruate when they attend

rituals or hear stories or even words *about* menstruation. I have used his term “synchrony” to describe the analogy women drew between various kinds of blood and analogous “blood” such as honey, sap and red ochre. I also used his notion that initial use of fire was for the purpose of removing blood; much cooking seems to be connected to ideas about blood.

The difference in emphasis between our two perspectives seems significant, and is perhaps gendered. The emphasis on material advantage (gained through a sex strike by females to acquire meat) in Knight’s argument, while congruent with Marx, does not explain religion (but I am not saying he is anti-religion) or the complexity of symbol systems and use of body language. Metaformic theory emphasizes a dialogue between human and nonhuman being, and among humans. The dialogue inherent in the relationship between lunar and menstrual cycle or tidal and menstrual cycle, is embedded in my explanation, and the term “metaform” includes “spirit”. I offer the term “merged identification” to begin an exploration of why human females have been mixed with specific imagery of nature. Ancestrally icons dated at up to 40,000 years ago show women merged with snake, bird, sheep, tree and other motifs combining her with nonhuman beings. In at least two contemporary menarche rites maidens dress up to enact the sun, (Tukuna and Navajo); among South African hunter-gatherers at menarche rites women dress as eland animals, understood as lunar forms; in aboriginal Australia the merging is of snake, woman, menstruation and a consciousness of the landscape. From these and other examples (Grahn 1992; Knight, 1991; Lincoln, 1991; Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988) such as that the earth has been so consistently imaged as a female body and that in some cultures this is overtly connected to women’s menses, I have built up an

argument that we are metaformic creatures. We have constructed our knowledge and behavior through elaborated ritual that is metaformic. It is as though our minds and our sensing of the world around us *consists of metaforms*. We have not only menstrual history but metaformic minds, contained by the metaformic culture within which we live and act. In these respects metaformic theory is more ideational and spiritual than Marx would find acceptable, and yet also more materialist and body-based than Plato's idealism would be comfortable with. I define my theory as relational, and integral—of body, mind and spirit. Tellingly, Knight's critics in Britain have lambasted him for connecting women with the moon, as this is associated with the populist "goddess movement" that is discredited in Leftist circles.⁷

Marija Gimbutas and Metaformic Theory

The Lithuanian-born archeologist who presented a new origin story to the English-speaking world, among others, through the 1970's and 1980's gripped the popular imagination, and that of some other scientists and scholars in many different fields. (Marler 1997) She described her method: "An interdisciplinary approach has been lacking in standard archeological consideration, whereas a cross-pollination of disciplines has the potential to further illuminate and expand our understanding of the past. This integrated approach, which is the way I choose to work, is a new discipline of knowledge which I call Archeomythology." (Gimbutas 1991, 342)

Marija Gimbutas defined a distinct area from Malta to Ireland, from Turkey to the North Sea, and a broad sweep of prehistoric time from paleolithic (40,000 BP) through the neolithic ca. 500 bce. She called this distinct geographic era "Old Europe". Analyzing

⁷ Knight. personal correspondence.

and categorizing from some 30,000 icons that have been found, hundreds of them by her, she concluded they represented female deities and were part of a single “Goddess religion”. She connected this with a mother-kinship system of social order.

“The emergence of the Goddess religion in the Paleolithic must have coincided with the model provided by preexisting human social structure. The worship of female deities is connected to a mother-kinship system and ancestor worship in which sexual identity of the head of the family and kin formulated the sexual identity of the supreme deity. In the mother-kinship system, woman as mother is the social center. She is duly venerated and petitioned, with prayer and thank-offerings, as the progenitor of the family and stem.” (1991, 342)

Gimbutas used myths and folklore, including oral lore from modern times to substantiate findings from the past, a risky endeavor, yet I find her analysis of the meanings to be remarkably similar to connections that I found—quite independent of her research—in menarche literature. The question of whether we can now make a connection between menarche rites and current goddess rites (in South India) will, I believe, have bearing on Gimbutas’ work. Her stunning contribution is her connection of the imagery—from bird faces to vulva triangles and so on, into a description of a complex cosmology and cosmogony. She shows in her categories of symbols that the icons are symbolically configured, with a “language “ of repeated shapes including spirals, lunar shapes, vulvular triangles, breasts, snakes, meanders, zig-zags, labyrinths and so on (and I will add, the color red) which she thought show linguistic and cosmogonical intent.

Gimbutas’ critics and deity

While Gimbutas may have overstated her case, something original thinkers—including Darwin—perhaps always do in order to as fully as possible substantiate the story and explain their own vision, she has seen an important pattern that clearly deserves

serious attention. Since publication of her first three books (and a fourth, published posthumously in 1999) on the culture of Old Europe as unified by virtue of being goddess-centered, a number of critical articles have questioned her methodology, her responsibility to science, and even her psychology. Among these, it seems to me the most glaringly obvious issue of the controversy is about the existence or nonexistence of qualities of *deity* in the female icons she describes at such length in her work. For purposes of discussion I have selected one, Lynn Meskell (“Archeology, the Goddess and the New Age”, 1995) because she very thoughtfully covers much of the critical territory, and because she draws from the opinions of several of her colleagues: David Anthony, Ruth Tringle, M.W. Conkey, and others.

Gimbutas’ critics refuse to consider widespread feminine deity, or to discuss any of the icons as even being local deity; Meskell (1995) seems unwilling to consider the implications of any of them being deities—yet I cannot imagine the same skepticism if all the icons were male, males connected to birds, snakes, bulls, bees, butterflies—and with portions of their bodies emphasized—I can rather imagine that the word “gods” would fall easily from the lips of archeologists—as well it should. For what is a deity if not a combination of human with creature and cosmos in some kind of emblematic form? What else tells us this is “supernatural” and a power—not a caricature, mistake or a doll? Zeus in the form of a snake, bull or swan is extremely well-known—and of course substantiated by the literature of Greek mythology.

Female deification also is substantiated by Greek mythology, and others, particularly at Sumer in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, whose written literature has been translated throughout the twentieth century. The icons of Inanna are quite similar, with

exaggerated eyes, pubic triangle, and so on, to some of those found at older sites within the geographical area Gimbutas defined as Old Europe. The name of Inanna on cuneiform tablets and her icons and temple ruins date to as far back as 3600 and even 3800 (Meador 2000) This overlaps with Gimbutas' time frame.

The consistent refusal so far on the part of archeologists to address the probability that at least some (substantial) percentage of the icons Gimbutas describes were goddesses indicates that she has hit a nerve in the contemporary scientific belief system—specifically the nerve of its Darwinian materialism, the idea that “common sense” accounts for the everyday elements of culture. The question of what constitutes deity is pertinent here, as well as how activities may be comprehended as sacred, in an all-encompassingly sacred context: “she (Gimbutas) concluded human activities like grinding grain, baking bread, weaving and spinning were inseparable from divine participation.” (81) Meskell lists some alternative uses of figurines suggested by other archeologists: territorial markers, ancestral ties, in ancestor “cults”; dolls, toys, tokens of identification, “primitive contracts,” communication, birthing rituals, teaching devices, tools of sorcery, magic, healing, initiation, and for social and economic bonds.(82). It is tempting to ask here what part of “Goddess” is it that these archeologists are not understanding? since the list represents all kinds of functions fulfilled by village goddesses in India, currently, and there is nothing in Gimbutas' analysis of the symbols as “the” language—despite her self-confidence—that excludes any other functions of the icons. However, very little has been published about village India and its village goddesses, *gramma devata*. In all fairness, before my experience of field work in Kerala

I also might not have recognized as goddess characteristics the list of “alternative uses” of figurines.

Nevertheless the same symbols, and identical theriomorphic motifs of snake, frog, bird, horned animals, occur world-wide on icons that are readily and thoroughly accepted as deities, from such far-flung sites as Mayan, Egyptian, Sumerian, Babylonian, Harappan, Syrian, and sub-Saharan civilizations. Literary texts of Rome, Greece, Egypt, Babylon and more recently Sumer confirm the deification of goddesses whose icons also exist and in some cases resemble those of Old Europe. Ishtar’s tall crown, Lilith’s bird feet and Inanna’s eight-petalled flower appear in icons, some of them very small, as votive images are (a repeated criticism of Old Europe’s icons is their small size). The deity of Inanna is complexly mythologized in an extensive formal literature dated beginning at 2300 bce. Cuneiform tablets bearing Inanna’s name are dated as far back as 3800 in the Tigris Euphrates Valley—the date of 3800 is well within the era of Gimbutas’ research. If scholars accept this documentation of the authenticity of goddess imagery, it seems unnecessarily contentious to assume that Gimbutas’ similar reading of Neolithic icons found hundreds of miles to the east is mistaken, or to quote directly from Meskell, “irresponsible”.

Overall, though probably overstated in the certainty of her specific interpretations, Gimbutas has made her case that the female icons are female *deities*, in a context of goddess religion, and that the emblems associated with them constitute meaningful, cosmogonic “language”—in a general sense. That her interpretations can be amplified by other interpretations goes without saying—goddesses of Old Europe may have had a number of languages and doubtless a variety of place and era-specific cultural meanings

and uses. Whether this also means that they constitute a seamless whole, a single religion, is more problematic, and brings up the question of what deity *is*. I agree with Meskell (84) that Gimbutas constructed a “Mother Goddess metanarrative” and interpreted icons as female-only to the point of exclusion of the male principle. I add to this that in South India I repeatedly needed to be told the gender of various deities; my eyes alone could not say.

Gimbutas states her premise of a single religion as fact: “The multiple categories, functions and symbols used by prehistoric peoples to express the Great Mystery are all aspects of the unbroken unity of one deity, a Goddess who is ultimately nature herself.” (1991, 223)

A Myth of Paradise Lost

A more meaningful critique has been made of Gimbutas’ claim that the peaceful agrarian civilization she identified with goddess religion was decimated by raiders from the east mounted on horseback, bearing a simplistic religion of sky gods and a far less artistic material culture than those of the peaceful matristic farmers of Old Europe. This myth, a version of Paradise Lost, deserves to be criticized because it seriously weakens the power of her new origin story.

Meskell makes the point that “There is a striking congruence between Gimbutas’ own life and her perception of Old Europe, influenced emotionally by the invasion of her birthplace, Lithuania by German and Soviet armies with a subsequent Soviet occupation. Gimbutas called the removal by Stalin’s Europe of “the cream of the society...the greatest shame of human history.” (78) This, Meskell believes, mirrors Gimbutas’ view

of “Old Europe, a creative, matriarchal and *good* society which was invaded by men with weapons from the East.” (79).

Meskell rightly says that while Gimbutas did not claim to be doing feminist archeology, she has been adopted as an icon within a movement of —primarily— grassroots activists and scholars, outside the field of archeology. She has caught the imaginations of a generation of women hungry to restore the Sacred Feminine. However, as Meskell attests, “some feminists do not accept her methodology, since she was so steeped within the ‘establishment’ epistemological framework of polar opposites, rigid gender roles, barbarian invaders and cultural stages (Fagan 1992; Brown 1993) which are now regarded as outmoded.”

But Meskell also counters Gimbutas’ belief that the existence of goddess icons indicate women’s economic and social stature in the eras she delineates. Meskell states that “numerous ethnographic accounts suggest that cultures with strong female deities—if indeed they *are* deities—may still regard women in the profane world as a low-status group.” She goes on to say that the romanticizing of the past by “many feminists and pseudo-feminists ... furnishes the seed for a return to Edenic conditions, ecological balance, healing the planet and matriculture itself, in opposition to the forecasts of Armageddon and the second coming.” (79)

Gimbutas and menstruation

Gimbutas went out of her way to avoid reference to menstruation⁸ even when the connections should have been obvious, for example: “In Magdalenian times and later in Old Europe, zig-zags and M’s are found engraved or painted within uterine and lens

⁸ In her major works in English. Her fourth book, published posthumously, contained a single paragraph linking menstruating with Gorgons.

(vulva) shapes, suggesting the symbolic affinity between the zig-zag, M, female moisture, and amniotic fluid.”(1974, 19) Yet surely another obvious “female moisture” found in the womb is blood—menstrual, hymenal and lochial. Significantly, I think, Gimbutas avoids the subjects of both menstruation and blood—the indexes of her three major books in English do not have a single entry for either one—despite that red is the most frequently used color in the icons of for instance, plates in *The Civilization of the Goddess*, and even some of the white sculptures show signs of having been rubbed with a red substance. Besides the prominence of breasts and vulva, it could be said that the single most common characteristic of the icons is that a showing of the color red, either in painted lines or zones such as red circles or stripes. Or the figurine is made of a red stone or of red clay. Sometimes a red icon is painted with black figures; sometimes a white icon has been rubbed with a red powder.

I bring this up because the most prominent colors of the icons—red, white and black—are not easily found in “nature”—which is mostly green, brown, blue and gold. If the icons are collectively a “goddess who is ultimately nature itself,” as Gimbutas stated, we could expect them to reflect the colors of the natural world. Red, black and white are found as prominent colors in indigenous religions all over the planet. They are, metaformically speaking, the colors of the menstrual/lunar construct—white full moon, black dark moon, and red (women’s) blood.

Did Gimbutas have a social prohibition against mentioning menstruation, as is common in Christian cultures? Yet blood is also an accompaniment of childbirth. Avoiding the word blood, Gimbutas repeatedly says that the red color is the color of “life”. Yet she must have meant blood—for what else is red? Was she perhaps avoiding

any association of goddess religion with blood because she associated it so thoroughly with violence? Another place of avoidance is in her treatment of bulls' horns—acknowledging them as depictions of “crescents” which relates them to the moon, yet avoiding the obvious connection to menstruation when they are depicted as red. Was she avoiding the fact that the bulls' heads had to have been cut off? That this was a religion in any way connected to blood rites? But assuming as correct her agreement with Dorothy Cameron's speculation that the shape of bucrania at Catal Huyuk site is a replication of the uterus (1989 and 1991, Dorothy Cameron) the question of some kind of blood rites is unavoidable. How would a people know the shape of the uterus and ovaries, organs tangled into internal cavity tissues, especially in the process of excarnation (the process by which Cameron explains the knowledge of these people, ca. 8000 bce), unless they were excising human flesh for one reason or another. No matter what the reason, this is practice of “blood rites,” whether sacred or secular. Why avoid this with insistence on excarnation as the sole method of examining innards? This particular criticism is also brought up by Meskell.

Why metaformic theory doesn't concentrate on birth imagery

Metaformic theory rests its argument specifically on menstruation, and much less so on rituals of birth for two reasons. The first is that all animals give birth, and all respect their mothers. But they don't ritualize it or make a religion explaining all of nature, or wear skirts or mark themselves or anything else with the symbol system that so clearly emphasizes the lunar shapes that humans everywhere have used. Nor do they dress themselves in others' skins or teeth or branches in the “merged identification” characteristic of human religious dramas. And as Chris Knight states so succinctly, we

need to be looking for something unique to humans, something that differentiated us definitively from our primate cousins.

Menstruation and its relation to the moon, recognized in cultures all over the globe, is a relationship that is unique to humans, that explains ancestral comprehension of “cycles” and that—through the notion of parallel blood rites and other ideas—includes men every step of the way. Indeed, my theory argues that the fact that half our species does not menstruate is what created necessity for visible, embodied language, and continues to create a constant dialectical tension that keeps our evolution spinning in an acceleration of massively unprimateline habits that characterize our history and our future alike.

Not to overstate this, birth analogies obviously are part of the iconography of Old Europe, and birth analogies have played a part, especially in certain farming communities. Fertility stories are definitely a part of menarche and many related blood rites. Gimbutas recognizes a distinct category of “pregnant goddess” and their pregnant state is obviously depicted. But most of the icons found in Old Europe and other areas are not pregnant or displaying the act of giving birth. Moreover, in ethnographic accounts, the seclusion rites of birth rituals appear to be constructed around the subject of the potency of the accompanying *blood*, and not with the act of birthing itself. And finally, the “energies” that Gimbutas recognized from folk myths as connected to snake, water and so on are thoroughly connected to women’s breasts, vulva, eyes, and blood, and these areas of “energies”—far more frequently than the pregnant abdomen—are precisely the areas exaggerated in the iconography. This suggests an energy or potential of the female rather than a depiction of “giving birth to forms”.

A second reason I stress menstruation rather than birth is because metaformic theory is epistemological, positing metaforms of culture as linguistic, the embodying of cosmogonic ideas. The relationships implied in the icons, for instance of red circles or red bull's heads, is a cognitive relationship. Gimbutas consistently described the icons as linguistic in the repeated motifs such as spirals, M's, circles that she read as "eggs" and so forth. But though her brilliant analysis brought us the concept of "the language of the goddess" and though many of her headings are cosmogonic, she does not explicitly theorize, as I do, that the characteristic human views of reality (though utterly diverse around the world) have in common that they have all had to be embodied, contained and instructed through ritual. That is, the icons precisely describe developments of human *minds* and cosmogonies. I do not believe that ancestral primates could draw the shapes of light and say the difference between the sun's effects and the moon's effects, let alone make connections between fire, lightning, sun and the abstract sense we call in English "heat". To come into human usage, it seems obvious that these all had to be constructed, held in place and taught. The capacity to do this, I say, is metaformic, as this knowledge had to be constructed through ritual and its embodied language, most germinally in menarche and related (parallel blood) rites. And—to continue differentiating from Darwinian thinking—not firstly or solely in the alleged and abstract "intelligence" of big and then bigger brains, and not in the associations of "birthing" and nurturing of a nature goddess, either...a sentimental and reductive characterization that Gimbutas' critics have given her.

Differences and similarities between metaformic theory and Gimbutas' theory

Major differences between Gimbutas and metaformic theory include that she constructed evil vs good as both gendered and cultural, which led some of her followers (in my experience of them) to conduct themselves as victims of a patriarchal conspiracy, and even to mistrust culture itself, understood as the product of evil patriarchal men. Moreover, the expectation of the utopian vision of absolute good existing in the lost past cannot lead to realistic appraisal of current times, nor of women taking full responsibility for development of culture with all its possibilities and its implications.

Finally, the goddess religion of Old Europe, presented by Gimbutas as hegemonic and seamless, a “natural” cycle of birth, death and rebirth—central to the philosophy she espouses—contains no inner tension that explains progress, development or change. In her myth of origin, the dialectic for change must be oppositional, in the figure of the “outsider”—invading, war-bringing and evil patriarchs whose only roles are annihilation, villainy and oppression. In metaformic theory there is innate inner tension in the different relations that each gendered “strand” of culture has to the subject of blood, moon or whatever metaformic construction the entrainment of cycles has for a particular generation. This tension creates the necessity for an externalized language, not only the containment of distinctly human ideas within a gendered (or otherwise specified) group, but also the instruction of those ideas to the gender that is not entrained to the cycles. In other words, one powerful motive for creating the icons as complexly contained ideas related to the female body, could be that males needed to learn those ideas through their own ritual participation. That is to say, male ritual could have elaborated into the making

of the complex iconography as a method of their own “merged identification” with the elements depicted.

To state this philosophic difference with the Gimbutas-based myth yet another way, the so-called Kurgans were just as metaformic as were the agrarian peoples they allegedly overthrew and replaced; even if they were raging barbarian patriarchs they were, nevertheless, *still* metaformic in their origins.

Painful though this process of understanding has been because of my own (earlier) stake in overprotecting women’s nurturing qualities, metaformic theory would expect both agriculture and animal domestication to necessitate, as part of their development, rituals of blood sacrifice, including human sacrifice, and also increasingly demanding menarche rules and prohibitions. The more dependent upon and conscious about, that people became of the repercussions to them of seasonal weather patterns, the more demands would be made on the human institutions (rituals) containing and controlling that consciousness and its capacity for prediction, supplication and dialogue with nonhuman being. The central role of menarche and the maiden’s believed and/or real capacity to influence weather—along with many other capacities—would have led at times to severe proscriptions on the behavior of women—imposed by the women themselves. Thus, the idea that women in societies of the past also had “freedom” and endless choice is one of the more distorted views of utopianists.

The importance of Gimbutas’ contribution cannot be exaggerated, if only that she has surfaced with a European tradition of the Sacred Feminine as a discernibly complex philosophy, by sorting the iconographic symbols into categories and connecting major motifs to cosmological themes in mythology. More importantly she has breathed hope

into many contemporary people seeking an alternative to the strictly materialist and masculinist societies including mainstream U.S. culture. She has brought new life to “prehistoric” ideology, and a new origin story for the modern imagination at a time when we need as many of them as we can find or devise.

We will see in this study whether her connections are confirmed in the current practices of goddess worship in South India.

Liberatory Aspects of Theories of Origin

I must address liberatory aspects of theories of origin. By “liberatory” I do not mean attainment of more freedom. The sense I mean is can we human liberate ourselves from our own agonies and oppressions. Can we step outside our own illusions to change destructive behaviors in the Hindu sense of *maya* or culture trance. These can include extremes of both freedom and security, but in particular I am concerned with our aggressions, systems of exclusions and misuse of the earth. Does a theory bind us to narrow, chauvinist judgments or does it enable us to engage with our evolution, with history and science, with nature and economies?

To me, an origin story with an inherent dialect for social as well as personal change is more desirable, and it needs to be inclusive of both genders—indeed, to imagine a number of genders if necessary. The story also needs to be able to account for the destructive or cruel we (I) do as well as the constructive and kindly, and to account for the paradox that sometimes we do the most harm while attempting most to do good. One problem I see with Gimbutas’ hyper-idealization of birth and nurturing as the primary characterization of “the” goddess is that she leaves women with the task of persuading men that since they allegedly once honored the feminine for its powers of fertility they should now do so again to restore equity. This is a weak argument. An

additional problem is the dualistic storyline casting one people—horseback raiders with “sky gods”—as villains whose only role in the story is annihilation of the “good” peaceful world of women. The dualism leads to projection of so-called “dark” and violent powers onto so-called “others”. By definition the myth places these situations beyond the control of women, leaving men to take action—meaning military and police action. On the other hand, Gimbutas posits a strong alliance between women’s power and “nature” with its earth energies. This is definitely challenging to the Darwinian hypothesis of natural selection—or sexual selection, for that matter—as natural processes intersected solely with tools of “intelligence” of positivist western science, wielded primarily by elite, highly specialized men.

Steeped in Marx, Knight offers a more muscled social approach with the notion that paleolithic women affected a “strike” in the past that enabled them to take evolution into their own hands, gaining meat from men by tricking them into believing that contact with menstrual blood would make them drop dead or ruin their hunting. Because of this history of a group seizing control of its evolutionary destiny, people can do so again to correct for exploitative conditions, such as workers trapped in exploitative capitalist conditions. However, Darwinian linear evolutionary theory and Marxist practice polarize the issues of material well-being and spirituality, especially with their ever-present subtext, the viewing of nature as raw material to be exploited for human consumption, creating a dualistic antagonism between spiritual and materialist teachings.

Behind most European philosophy stands the imposing, entrenched figure of Darwin and the deep, general western mainstream belief that “common sense” inventiveness—individual and aspiring to “survival” against hostile nature—accounts for

human culture. This philosophy, idealizing aggression and male blood rites, has led not only to the cynical and lonely alienation of people trapped in materialist ideology but also to a linear story about evolution being a path toward becoming “the *most* human” enabling the subhumanizing of various groups to continue as a practice and as a philosophical position. Nevertheless, the theory of evolution pulled attention away from the storied passivity and woman-blaming of Genesis mythology and engaged the probability of material science not only interacting with evolution, but even engineering it. Knight, in my mind, represents an important step toward correction, and I intend metaformic theory as a bridge to more inclusive origin stories.

Resolution of the tension between materialist and spiritualist perspectives has begun to happen in the work of a few people. Combining a solid Marxian base with her attraction to Black Madonna installations throughout North Africa and Europe, Lucia Birnbaum has addressed the split directly. By including as sources of material the graffiti and proletarian carnivals expressing critiques of institutional power and enduring desire for both peace and social justice, Birnbaum advocates for leadership from women and the groups the Left now calls “subalterns”—the lowest economic and political strata of societies.

She also knits into one cloth two disparate waves of feminism—materialist, socialist, political feminism and cultural/goddess-movement feminism—as Charlene Spretnak also attempted in her 1981 anthology *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality*. Birnbaum argues for understanding of “Black madonnas” as deep-seated memories of African origins of humanity, with periodic migrations of peoples who carried the “dark mother” as prototypical creation goddess from 100,000 years ago. (Cavalli-Sforza 1993).

In a somewhat similar vein, Pupul Jayakar wrote of her native India that its culture was fed by two streams, one the male crafts tradition with its teachings passed along through the guru system. The other, she said, is a deep river under India, a river of women's wisdom and all the arts, taught from mother to daughter, and held "in our wombs". She draws from the practice of village goddess tradition, held in family customs by the non-Sanskritic peoples, the workers whose rituals interweave with their lives, and whose practices constitute origin stories of enactment—an underview rather than an overview.

Haridas Chaudhuri, an Indian teacher, founded in 1973 California Institute of Integral Studies as an East-West school. He wrote in his *Modern Man's Religion* the requirements of religion to participate in the modern age, by divesting itself of pessimism, other-worldliness, dogmatism and reconstructing with higher values of love, social justice, international peace, devotion to truth.(21) He recommends ten imperatives of "cosmic religion" including tolerance and understanding for enemies and atheists, respect for founders of all religions equally, love of Nature as "the visible language of the Supreme" and "participation in the evolutionary being of the world in conscious union with the eternal."(40) In *Sri Aurobundo, Prophet of Life Divine*, Chaudhuri introduces the teachings of his own teacher, a revolutionary who advocated armed, if necessary, overthrow of British rule in India in his early years and later became a poet-philosopher. He established his teachings in writings and also in the settlement of a multinational utopian community, Auroville, in collaboration with his partner Mirra Alfassa (Mira Richard), also known as "The Mother". Aurobindo taught the method of integral yoga and philosophy of integral nondualism toward the goal of combining high spiritual union

with the divine, and total involvement in earthly life. To seize evolution means to synthesize “the Eastern devotion to the Spirit and the Western devotion to Life...to the total spiritualisation of life and its material basis...” (247) Love, Aurobindo thought, is not enough; we must also include Knowledge and Power.

With developing metaformic theory out of the buried female tradition in the West, I too seek an integral dialectic of social change, one that can balance material life with the life of spirit in the dialogue with “nature” (which I call “nonhuman beings”) and future. Toward that end I seek with this study to further our understanding of the contribution that women in particular have made to the development of human culture and evolution, a contribution that has not had voice or been credited in the west. With metaformic theory I ask what it is that has made us the peculiar, amazing beasts that we are and knowing more, can we more effectively control ourselves and our fantastic powers? Can we deepen our dialogue with both spirit and nonhuman earth-beings, as we enter our next evolutionary phase? And finally, I want to know the goddess in all her forms. What is her relation to women, to men, to knowledge and power and blood and evolution?

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology: An Application of Metaformic Theory

Construction of the Study

This study is the application of major portions of metaformic theory to data on both menarche rites and goddess rituals of Kerala, India.

As a mythographer using an associative mind, I am looking for patterns that correlate with metaformic constructs. I am looking for patterns rather than current meanings. Patterns of repeated behavior appear to be much older than meanings “explaining” them, since traditions are dynamic and changing, though specific practices and especially rituals may continue quite exactly. (Thapar, 40-42) Drawing attention to patterns rather than meanings has particular value to an application of a theory that postulates extremely ancient behavior.

While *Blood, Bread and Roses* is a global study, this application is to a single geographic place: Kerala and contiguous areas. I set out to apply metaformic theory, constructed (in *Blood, Bread and Roses*) with categories drawn from worldwide indigenous and village sources, to a specific location in South India. I went to Kerala to see if the patterns of metaformic theory fit in this context. There, I lived in the city of Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) in the south, and in that vicinity did most of my research. I also went to the north Malabar coast and to Kodungallor which is near the city of Cochin in the central part of the coast. While Kerala is the central area of focus, for a number of reasons I have drawn some material from contiguous regions, especially Tamil Nadu. Tamil is widely spoken in Kerala, in addition to native Malayalam. The south

coast, including Nagarcoil, was made part of Tamil Nadu only recently, in 1956. Many of the major caste groups as defined until the twentieth century, are in both states. For example, the large agricultural groups Ilavar and Cheruman; the washer groups Velan and Mannan, the crafts groups Kammalan, and the Tamil Brahmins. The family whose menarche I filmed with Dianne Jenett, is Kammalan, specifically Thattan, with the occupation of goldsmith, and though the family has been in Kerala for generations their roots are in Tamil Nadu.

To complete this study, I selected major portions of metaformic theory and then studied ethnographic and anthropologic material, mythology and poetry both oral and written, and my own collection of filmed and taped interviews. Using as a guide an outline of the original theory laid out in *Blood, Bread and Roses*, I have closely examined ethnographic accounts, especially those of L.K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, and also Reverend Henry Whitehead from early in the twentieth century. Kathleen Gough's 1955 "Female Initiation Rites of the Malabar Coast" and her studies of Nayar customs undergird the later work of Melinda A. Moore and others. Deborah Neff did a detailed study of Pulluva community rites: "Fertility and Power in Kerala Serpent Ritual" (1995). More recent ethnographic studies of women in Kerala and Tamil Nadu have been done by Savithri De Turreil and Karin Kapadia. I have also examined transcripts and film footage of interviews, rituals and images relating to both menarche rites and goddess rites in Kerala, that I gathered (in collaboration with Dianne Jenett) during 1997 and 1998. By sorting the data into paragraph descriptions and lists and entering it, in Chapters Four and Five, into six categories of metaformic theory, I have constructed twelve correlational tables.

Application of the Theory

I am applying six major parts of metaformic theory as originally described in *Blood, Bread and Roses*. The first four parts are categories of metaform: *wilderness*, *cosmetikos*, *narrative* and *material*, comprising Chapter Four. The fifth category is *parallel menstruation*, the incorporation of males into a lunar/menstrual relationship. The sixth and most complex category is *menstrual logic*, which attempts to describe metaformic foundations underlying social structures and major myths, motifs and concepts. Finally, in the idea of *crossover*, I will be looking for points of social transition that seem metaformically structured. The metaforms of the theory lend themselves to tables and lists, since they are discrete categories, such as “food substances” or “gestures”. Chapter Five, the application of metaformic theory’s more complex ideas, uses some extended descriptions with examples and longer narratives, including oral mythologies. Tables have been a useful tool for presentation of some of this information as well.

I have included anecdotal and journal material to convey, experientially, my own comprehension of and direct encounters with Shakti, with the immanence also called “the power” of the goddess.

Hypothesis and Questions

The hypothesis of this study is that goddesses are metaformic constructs. Most simply, the research asks to what extent, if any, the maiden at menarche has characteristics of the goddess, and secondly, in what ways does the goddess seem similar to a maiden at menarche. Similar inquiry is addressed to the rituals of both menarche and the goddess—do they appear to be alike?

On a deeper level, metaformic theory seeks patterns suggesting ways culture itself has been impacted by or constructed through menarche rites, even though this impact or construction may have been *consciously* understood only long ago. In a sense, I am treating ritual as a kind of literacy, containing knowledge; and in Kerala indigenous forms of in Kerala are both extremely old and intertwined with ritual. Six questions from the original theory (in *Blood, Bread and Roses*) seem appropriate ways of addressing both levels of inquiry.

Question One:

Part one, does the maiden at menarche embody the goddess? Part two, is the goddess configured like the maiden at menarche? In general “the maiden” and “the goddess” means any example from any community. I have frequently credited information from menarche rites to specific communities and sometimes with respect to a specific form of the goddess as well.

Question Two:

Part one: Do elements of menarche rites also occur in goddess rites? Part two: do elements of goddess rites, icons and imagery also occur in the menarche rites of various communities?

The next four questions attempt to reach the deeper levels of origins of culture itself, and the possible accuracy and usefulness of the story metaformic theory is telling about human consciousness.

Question Three:

Do men or boys appear to have parallel blood rites? These can include male bleeding rites that are related to goddess rites, or related to women’s rites of menarche.

Question Four:

Is the “cosmos,” in the sense of forces of or knowledge of nature, discernible as metaformic either in goddess or menarchal rituals?

Question Five:

Do major cultural institutional and behavioral structures have metaformic correlations in such categories as: 1. occupations, 2. gendered behavior; 3. sacred substances; 4. caste behavior; 5. cultural myths and origin stories, and arts; 6. monotheism or polytheism.

Question Six:

Is anything new surfacing here that either furthers or contradicts the theory and connects it to changing modern times, and which furthers my emerging ideas of metaformic *crossover* and *cultural obversity*?

Why This Location

Kerala seemed particularly promising because south India continues to have a thriving tradition of village goddess worship, many public temples accessible to non-Hindus, and a goddess tradition which in many communities is held in *kavus*—small open air shrines in groves of trees, or a single tree along a roadside, and accessible to everyone. Though densely populated and richly complex in its culture, Kerala is a small state, geographically contiguous and culturally more or less homogenous, and which had not been subject to invasion. Immigrant groups, as I said in Chapter Two, have arrived from diverse places including Africa, the Mediterranean, the Indus Valley and so on. Migrations continue from Sri Lanka and the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu, contributing to the diversity of this culture. The chances of ancient practices continuing is

a good one. Historians emphasize integrative and common traditions which are found in Kerala in spite of the diversity of her religions and people. (Achyutha Menon 1961, 17; Iyer 1970, 32; Chaitanya 1994, 24). A fair number of good ethnographic studies have been done, revealing that until recently menarche was a major, celebrated event among many different communities.

I had seen footage from Kerala (filmed by my colleague, Dianne Jenett) showing *kuttyottam*, a boys' piercing ritual and procession, which she identified as a possible parallel menstruation ritual. Soon I was told about (spelling) Chennganor, a temple where the goddess menstruates a few times a year. Menstruation, I soon learned, governed most religious and social affairs. This seemed an ideal place to ask questions about the possible continuance of menarche celebrations and to look for patterns linking to goddess rites. Once there I began asking questions, looking for patterns based on metaformic theory's categories.

Collaboration

My field research was made possible in collaboration with a sister scholar, Dianne Jenett, from my Women's Spirituality Ph.D. program at California Institute of Integral Studies, with Elinor Gadon as director. We were excellently matched for this joint effort, as her research is on *pongala* festival, a mass rice-cooking offering done by hundreds of thousands of women to goddess Bhagavathi on the Full Moon day in February at the city of Thiruvananthapuram. In January of 1997 we both went there and lived in a rented house; I filmed a *pongala* rite for her and she assisted me in gathering background material. The following year we returned, and again videoed for each other during interviews and long rituals.

The advantage of collaboration in research, a model our cohort doctoral program encouraged, was especially evident in enabling us to make connections with Kerala women. Through our program's director, Professor Elinor Gadon, Dianne had met Professor Leela Gulathi on a prior trip, and through her own research had been introduced to Professor M.S. Hema Subramanian. Both of these professional women are active feminists who gave us intensive assistance, connections, encouragement and friendship.

Through Leela Gulathi's contacts we were able to live in a house in a historic Tamil Brahmin *gramman* (religious neighborhood). Here we interacted with neighborhood people, shopped, cooked and struggled with our language deficit. Thoroughly embedded in the neighborhood of Attukal Bhagavati temple, we had ample opportunity to get to know people and to attend rituals.

In February of 1998 we again went to Kerala and continued collaborating in the filming of interviews and rituals, pertinent to both of our projects. Dianne and I had with us one still and two video cameras. We frequently took all three cameras to a ritual, festival or interview situation. Generally, when she interviewed I filmed and vice versa. In general we found the people of Kerala welcomed our filming. Photography has been in India since 1840 (*Christian Science Monitor*, June 4, 1998.) and some consider Indians the best filmmakers in the world. As people for whom story, image and ritual are completely interrelated, film is a favored medium. Perhaps this is why so often crowds of men especially—women were more reticent—parted to make visual space for us and we were frequently positioned literally in the middle of the ritual, next to the band or at the altar in order to have the best possible view.

As we had expected, women were sometimes more camera-shy than men, especially among those groups (former untouchables) that are usually shown in such “poor” light in the Western gaze. To counter shyness and commonsense suspicion, we used the built-in playback screen on Dianne’s Sony camera to excellent effect. Once people saw what we saw, and *how* we saw them—with their dignity and beauty—they relaxed. We constantly remained aware of the power of the camera to judge, to pry and to distract. We tried to remain sensitive to what was happening on the other side of our viewing lens and our desire to do “research”. On one occasion when our cameras attracted too much attention from village children at a *pongala*, and we saw this was distracting the participants, we left the temple grounds. When people in street crowds or vending stands indicated they did not want to be filmed, we turned off the cameras and apologized.

Every ritual we filmed was by invitation of the people sponsoring it. In the case of our Theyyam footage, the family whose tradition this had been for generations were turning control of it to a committee representing the community at large; they wanted a record for family use. Older people are concerned because young people are rapidly losing interest, their attention lured by television and amplified rock bands, away from traditional artists reciting age-old poems invoking the goddess or other deities. The Tiyya people at Pompadiyal near the north Malabar coast wanted to preserve their family legacy and asked Dianne to record as much of the rite as possible. We filmed ritual events during a twenty four-hour period in order to make this record for them, staying at the family country home for meal breaks and short rests during the all-night dramas.

In our filming collaboration the two of us operated as a tight protective unit, especially in the intensity of crowds, heat, dust, and the “possessed” dancing of devotees. The filming of *Thiruvathira*, a graceful women’s dance performed at the Village Fair in Kerala in January was accomplished while I stood unbalanced on a steep sand hill with Dianne propping me upright from behind. Whenever we were to go out filming to a village, I packed boiled water, energy snacks of cashews and apricots, and towels to wipe dust and the sweat that ran into the lens. Dianne made arrangements, phone calls, bought bus and train tickets, and endlessly filled me with her knowledge of Kerala. We kept alert, guiding each other through the hyperintensity of sound, image, emotion and shakti that is characteristic of a Hindu rite or festival. Considering our visual photographic tools to be extensions of eyes and arms, we entered in, riding the waves of excitement and calm, release and control. We wore Indian clothing and ran barefoot over blistering roads and temple sand; and felt the power and love of the Goddess and other deities everywhere we went. We got used to being stared at by ten thousand curious people at a time, or being the only women in a crowd of five thousand men.

We found that individuals always stepped forward to engage with us, whether to explain, point out what to do next, ask a question in English, or unexpectedly help out. I recall my shoulder sagging under the weight of a suitcase coming from the train at midnight in the middle of the state and a woman wordlessly taking the burden for me, up the long staircase. We entered in at the rituals, following the cardinal rule as a stranger in India to just act, just do what you feel is right until someone stops you. We broke into tears when we made a mistake in ritual, such as when I took something from the Snake Maiden with my *left* hand, and got my wrist slapped, or when Dianne was corrected for

tasting her *pongala* to see if it was cooked. (The goddess always “eats first” so you must never taste her food before she does.)

Sources

Material gathered for examination has been a combination of written and oral, the latter thanks to video and tape recorder to supplement my memory and experiential impressions.

Literature Research

This includes recent dissertations, historic and ethnographic accounts, local family stories, mythology, folklore, poetry, anthropology, and anecdotal accounts.

Ethnographic

Primary ethnographic material both recent and from the nineteenth and early twentieth century contains details of menarche rites among Kerala’s diverse communities. Most detailed and inclusive is the work of L.K. Anantha Krishna Iyer, whose three volume study, *The Tribes and Castes of Cochin* began appearing in print in 1909. As Superintendent of a “Cochin Ethnographical Study” the brahmin scholar surveyed tribal people in the hills as well as castes in the agricultural lands, and included many details about the menarche rites, and religious rites, of various communities. A secondary source supplementary to Iyer, Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari’s ethnography *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, (1909) contains many details of the menarche rites of various communities across South India, and also has much additional information about a wide range of customs from the nineteenth century.

The Reverend Henry Whitehead wrote his observations, *The Village Gods of South India* (1921, 1980) with some emotional prejudices characteristic of his nationality,

class and religious calling, and was quite explicit in his horror of certain customs, especially blood rites of lower caste people worshipping goddess Bhagavati, whom he describes as “queen of the demons”. His understanding of indigenous practices was in general that devotees were poor suffering zealots in the clutch of all manner of dark forces, a stance reinforced by occasional examples of human sacrifice in rural agricultural practices. The care with which he includes details of all kinds of rites despite his horror, makes his work valuable, especially in his confirmation of the former existence of male piercing rites, *pongala*, and related matters. *Tribes of Kerala*, edited by Padmashri S.S. Shashi (1995), contains rich ethnographic lore and pertinent information of practices. V.T Induchudan’s *The Secret Chamber* (1969) is a crucial study of Kodungallor Temple. In addition to his own insights, he draws from Achuta Menon’s *Kali Worship in Kerala*, which has not been translated from the original Malayalam.

Excellent contemporary ethnographic studies have been done by two South Indian women. Savithri De Turreil, a Nayar scholar who after living some years in Canada returned to her native Kerala to do an in-depth study of women’s rituals in the Nayar community, and comparing them to rituals of a number of other communities in Kerala and neighboring state of Tamil Nadu. Her study, called *Nayars in a South Indian Matrix: a study based on female-centered ritual* (1995) is based in interviews she did with over a hundred women. By concentrating on the range of rituals that defined the lives of various other South Indian communities as well as Nayar women, she counters a certain exotification that had surrounded the matrilineal customs of the Nayars. By questioning women of other traditions such as Kshatriya, Ilava and Namputiri in Kerala and Tamil Brahmins, Konku Kavuntar and others in neighboring states of Tamil Nadu and

Karnataka, in addition to Nayar women, De Turreil shows both that experiences previously thought of as distinctly Nayar were actually widespread in South India, and that the lives of women were sustained by numerous complex life-cycle rites involving participation by their whole communities.

Though De Turreil concentrates on kinship relations—"one has to look for connections between the kinship structure of a group and its religious symbolism" (59)—most pertinent to my research are her details of the complexity of menarche, and its connection to deity. She believes that the Nayar maiden at menarche experienced herself as the goddess at a specific moment when she was to look into the special bronze mirror (*valkannadi*) that was an essential feature of traditional Nayar menarche. DeTurreil's conclusion is supported by Tamil ritual which also treats the female as divinity (76) and Gough (1955.71) who noted that just before puberty and at menarche the Nayar female is associated with Goddess Bhagavati.

De Turreil is responding to earlier non-native ethnographers who studied Nayars as though they were a unique group whose matrilineal customs made them different from other communities. She corrects for this by setting Nayar customs in a context of customs that are more generally South Indian, including matrilineal descent and widespread celebration of menarche. For example, she identifies as common practice among most communities the use of a particular form, the *pondi*, a triangle made of banana leaves. This triangle is set aflame and waved over the menarchal maiden's head during her bath and then floated away on the water.

A second woman scholar familiar with, and native of, South India is Karin Kapadia whose research is published in her book, *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste,*

and Class in Rural South India (1995). In her study of customs of Pallars, Muthurajas, Chettiars and Christian Paraiyars, among others, Kapadia suggests that puberty rites are “essential because of the Dravidian system of very close kin”—who must be protected from the astrological danger (*doshan*) that comes through the maiden at menarche. Natal kin are symbolically one blood, and “it is literally, this blood that is being protected now, while it flows out of the girl” (100). She distinguishes between the Brahminic view of women under the “sin of menstruation” and Dravidian approaches: “when menarchal practice and the discourse are defined by non-Brahmins, it is the auspiciousness and mystical generative powers of the young woman that are stressed.” In Brahmin representations the maiden’s impurity and dangerousness are stressed; however Kapadia cautions that this should be thought of as a continuum, not a dichotomy, of difference. (73) Kapadia did her fieldwork in rural Tamil Nadu, closely documenting the menstrual practices which are still prevalent and vitally important, especially among the non-Brahmins. She notes that in the non-Brahmin castes in South India the puberty rites “symbolically recreate women in the image of the divine”(Kapadia, 70).

Recent American researchers of Indian women’s customs are also trying to correct conceptions of the past. Dianne Jenett’s research concentrates on the relationship Kerala women have to goddess Bhagavati, as expressed in interviews and also in their participation in women-centered rituals for the goddess. Using “organic inquiry” (methodology she helped develop) she includes her own story, incorporates interaction with Devi, and lets women’s own words tell their beliefs. In addition to our collaboration, her research has been of value to my work, including her research into the roots of

pongala's connections to blood offerings, in the past, as well as its continuing relation to shakti. (Jenett 1999)

Sarah Caldwell, an American, also included her own story as standpoint in her 1995 study of the ritual drama *Mudiyettu* ("Oh terrifying Mother: The Mudiyettu ritual drama of Kerala, South India"). She includes observations and ritual details connecting goddess Bhagavati to menstruation, and suggests that "just as Bhagavati is modeled on the virgin female, the female puberty rite is the prototype of all Bhagavati rituals seen in the Kerala temple today." (Chapter 4, 298) which while overly generalized, is confirmed by my study. *Mudiyettu* is a (Brahminic) male ritual drama of the killing of the demon Darika by goddess Bhadrakali, who was created by Shiva specifically for that purpose. Despite the specificity of *Mudiyettu* as a subject Caldwell makes sweeping claims about the relation of women to the goddess in general. I found her negative assumptions about Kerala women's relation to the goddess and their own practices not confirmed by my own research or that of Dianne Jenett in her study of a mass porridge offering done by women in Kerala. Perhaps a reason for this important discrepancy in our findings is that *Mudiyettu* is a male rite, and women and men tend to leave each other's rituals alone.

Pertinent recent research of Indian women's rituals from outside Kerala includes work by Frederique Apffel-Marglin who has done field research and has written about both menses practices and their relation to the earth goddess, whose "menses" are part of the seasonal round ritualized by agricultural people in Orissa. I found her accounts in *Wives of the God-King* invaluable in formulating my own idea of "menstrual logic" as the application of menstrual rites to earth processes. Additionally, Apffel-Marglin has made

important contribution in differentiating Hindu concepts of auspicious and inauspicious from purity and impurity.

Mythology and Literature

The most important work that I have found on goddesses of India is Pupul Jayakar's *The Earth Mother: Legends, Goddesses and Ritual Arts of India* (1990) which contains a rich history of crafts associated with village goddess worship, details of Dravidian rites and origin stories, including some from South India.

Primary literary sources must begin with a gripping English translation of *The Mahabharata*, by J.A.B. van Buitenen (1973). This work is amplified in usefulness by William Buck's prose interpretation of the story for Westerners in particular, K.S. Singh's edited collection of articles, *The Mahabharata in the Tribal and Folk Traditions of India* and Richard Armando Frasca's ethnographic research on *The Theatre of the Mahabharata* on rituals enacted to goddess Thirupadi (Draupadi in the Mahabharata). Though the ritual theatre dramas (*Tukku*) take place in contemporary Tamil Nadu, Frasca makes clear that the participants, Pulayans and washermen, and the rituals have close connection to *Theyyam* dramas and embodiment of the goddess by *Theyyam* actors in north Malabar, which I witnessed in 1997.

Other useful written mythology sources include Jan Knappert's popular lexicon of Hindu mythology, and the beautifully illustrated collection *Devi: The Great Goddess*. Edited by Lynne Shaner and published by the Smithsonian Museum, this volume mysteriously omits Kerala traditions, though containing essential essays such as "The Threefold Vision of the *Devi Mahatmya* by Thomas B. Coburn and thoughts on

contemporary representation and meaning of the goddess to modern “hyphenated” Indian people by Tapati Guha-Takurta and Gayatri Spivak, respectively.

As secondary sources I found useful the devotional literature of devotees of Kali including the mystic poetry of Ramprasad—though particular to Bengal’s Kali--and various *bajans* (sacred songs) and accounts of the founding of temples, many of which contain some metaformic connections. Satheesh Bose, who invited us to film his village *cavadyottum*, and whose family we interviewed about the ritual of *pongala*, carefully wrote down and sent me the origin story of a Maryamman temple near his village home. The epic poem of love, betrayal and outraged innocence, *The Tale of an Anklet: An Epic of South India, (The Cilappatikaram of Ilanko Atikal)* translated by P. Parthasarathy, contains rich imagery and connections. Though first published in 1892, the epic in its oral version is far older and has many variants. For example, descriptions of the Goddess in her form as Kannaki, written down from older oral sources, confirms a connection between the vulva and the cobra, and also connection of the parasol to the moon, and of the moon to the goddess.

Sources from popular culture include novels such as *The Outcaste* by Matampu Kunjukuttan or *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy) which provide details of contemporary or historic life and issues of Keralites. Creative essays of Gita Mehta, *Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India*, provides just what the subtitle says. Various popular handbooks, such as *Festivals of Kerala*, sponsored by Casino Group of Hotels in Cochin, or K.R. Vaidyanathan’s *Temples and Legends of Kerala*, and the publishings of Mata Amritananadamayi (known in the US as Ammachi) from her *ashram*

are directed to tourists and non-Hindus who wish to engage in worship of the goddesses and gods, and are also useful to me for certain details about *pujas*.

Filming of Field Research

In collaboration with Dianne Jenett, I conducted field research consisting of videotaped interviews with temple officials, and women describing their family menarche celebrations, and a number of goddess rituals. Jenett and I did all our own filming, using hand-held 8 millimeter cameras.

Filming of My Interviews

We interviewed, on video, twenty-one women on the subject of their own family menarche rites. I wanted information on the contemporary approach to menstruation, and also to gain some details missing in the ethnographies.

The range of our informants, whose backgrounds are from eleven communities, proved valuable because of the paucity of information available about peoples who belong to other than the two best known and most studied groups, the Brahmin and Nayar. In addition to those groups, women from formerly lower-caste, untouchable (*dalit*) communities, such as Ilavar, Cheruman and Pullovan, gave us interviews on the subject of their experience of menarche or menstruation. We spoke also to Christian women and one woman who is a French ex-patriot trained in Hindu customs. Though most of our sources were from the city of Thiruvananthapuram in the south, we also traveled several times to Arunmula and Kodungallor at mid-state, and filmed on the north Malabar coast. We interviewed women whose occupations were brick carrier, construction worker, agricultural worker, servant, professor, government worker, student, retired teacher, matron of arts school, and hereditary office of temple attendant. The sister

and niece of the Maharaja at Kodungallor recalled details of their menarche rites and showed us the bronze mirror (*valkannadi*) they had used in seclusion.

We interviewed members of the Tantri's family connected to Trichengannoor Mahadeva Temple at Chennganor, including one of the two women whose office includes deciding from examination of the garment of the Goddess that she is, indeed, menstruating. We interviewed two Nayar women who sit with the installation of the goddess as her companions during her menses, and a woman, V.K. Saraswathiamma of the Atikal family who through hereditary office attends the outdoor Goddess Maryamma installation on the west side of Kodungallor Kurumbu Bhagavathi Temple.

We did a number of related interviews with temple officials including the chairman at the time, M.R. Chandrasekharan Pillai, as well as the president, secretary and other officials of Attukal Temple. The Chief Tantri there and also the Head Priest at Kodungallor Kurumba Bhagavathi Temple spoke to us; and Sri R. Thulaseedharan who is the present administrator of the temple in charge of Thozuvancode Sree Chamundi Bhagavathi Temple gave us more than an hour of his time.

In research related to Attukal Temple *Pongala* Festival (Dianne's research, but also pertinent to mine) we interviewed twenty-five to thirty women with a range of occupations and from a range of communities. We filmed portions of six *pongala*s, as well as participating in some. We also interviewed a number of health officials on the status of women in Kerala. We interviewed poet, activist and head of the Women's Commission Sugata Kumari for two hours, on the subject of women's shelters and mental health. In her skillful capacity as a poet, she sang her poetry as is the tradition of the Malayali art and told us of the goddess as paradoxical, as both loving mother and

destroyer, bringer of flood, fire and famine, and producer of bounty and harmony of life. Another of Kerala's fine poets, the venerable and revered Professor Ayyappan Panniker, shared his invaluable stories and witty insights.

Filming of Rituals

In conjunction with our interest in rituals of the Goddess Bhagavathi, we filmed or otherwise attained footage of the following rites done by women only, besides *pongala*: a "possession" or Shakti ritual of a Palaya community; Full Moon ritual at Attukal Temple; women drawing daily *kolams* on Valiachalai Street; a session of painting henna designs on the hand (*mylanji*); a women's national dance (*Thiruvathiri*) of Kerala; *thalapali* processions at Devi temples in Vilanod and Velloorkonam villages. In addition, women told us stories of the Goddess at Malabar, Travancore and Kodungallor—that is north, south and mid-state. We recorded informal discussions between and among women about both menstruation and the Goddess.

Of men's rites associated with the Goddess, we were invited to a village forty-five minutes from Thiruvananthapuram to film seven hours of Cavady (*Cavadyottum*), a healing and piercing rite done by village men. We traveled overnight by train to reach a village, Pampadiyal ("place of the dancing snake") on the Malabar Coast to film for two days a Theyyam Festival in which men embody the Goddess in stylized stories. We have footage of the boys' piercing initiation *Kuttyotum* in processions, and boys bathing at the temple, and a men's dance related to the rite filmed at Mavilarika. In conjunction with Attukal *pongala* and *Kuttyotum*, we took footage of men and a few women embodying the Goddess in the annual night procession from Attukal Temple to Ayyappan temple.

Of mixed gender rituals related to goddesses, we have footage by a Kerala film company from inside Attukal Temple of a fiery *naga* ritual, which Dianne attended. We traveled overnight by train to Kodungallur to film two days of the deeply intense Bharani Festival, the “ritual polluting” of the Bhagavati temple in which both men and women oracles in states of spirit possession dance, sing, cut their heads and make oracular pronouncements.

Without filming, at Chottanikkara Temple precinct we witnessed (in awe) the banyan trees full of large iron nails pounded in to them as treatment for and by the mentally afflicted, and inside the temple devotees drinking *garuti* (blood colored liquid) as *prasad* (holy offering).

Oral Literature

Oral accounts provided by various people include a version of the killing of the demon Darika by goddess Bhadrakali (*Darikavadham*) in which Bhadrakali and goddess Vasurimala (Maryamma) become compassionate toward each other. (Appendix C) . In an account of a Nambutiri family story of being outcasted, a menstrual theme is combined with that of caste in the story of a Pulayan woman and burning *illams*. (Appendix B) People told stories from the Mahabharata and the *Cilappatikaram*, both of which written literatures are widely known and adapted orally; we also heard other goddess stories, such as of two sisters who gave birth to a snake and a bird. A commonly told story is of an agricultural woman (a Pulayan, for instance—formerly untouchable) who accidentally strikes a stone with her sickle. The stone bleeds and is later determined to be the Goddess, who conveys that she wants a temple built on the spot.

Translation and Re-translation Using Film

We were fortunate to work with fourteen translators at different locations. These relationships included people who “just showed up” to help us, or relatives of the ritual participants—such as the niece of the family who had asked us to film Theyyam festival at Cannanore, or friends who accompanied us to various interviews—like Leela, Asha, Hema and Subramanian. Half (seven) of the people who translated for us were women—a very valuable contribution and an extraordinary gift to us, as families do not usually like a young unmarried woman to travel about with Westerners, while married women have their hands full running households and frequently holding outside jobs. The range of communities was another valuable asset: People from “scheduled castes”—poor or formerly lower caste—were quite forthcoming as well as people from Nayar, and Brahmin communities.

Re-translation (Jenett’s innovation) was made possible by the fact that she equipped us with a playback camera. This made it possible for a re-translator to watch the screen while talking into a tape recorder. Or, one or two re-translators sat watching the three-inch screen while I video-taped their comments. (South Indians with their excellent oral memories may find it amazing that we need so many supplements for our minds—but we have lost much of the skill of mental recall, and listening to a variety of unaccustomed accents is a strain.)

In addition to on-site re-translation, Nayar scholar Savithri De Turreil traveled from Canada to Palo Alto, California in 1998 to work with us. During her visit she re-translated some important interviews and commented on the material. Re-translation helped us understand the varied and at times contradictory community viewpoints that

were brought to bear on our research questions, and some of the creativity that Kerala's story-telling traditions may elicit rather than word for word translation. In all at least fifteen people contributed time and effort translating conversations, filmed and written material for us.

Limitations

I don't speak Malayalam, the language of Kerala. In my two visits, in 1997 and 1998, I lived there a total of four and a half months.

The number of interviews of women describing their own family's menarches that I attained is small, as this study is not a survey. We talked for at least half an hour to twenty-one women about their own experiences and their family menarche practices, and heard accounts from a few more.

I come from a culture that hides the subject of menstruation and does not have a goddess. Therefore—to paraphrase an Indian friend--I come to Kerala with an emptiness, a need that will draw data in an imbalanced way that might not be true for a citizen of the culture. And, conversely, sometimes my own inhibitions on the subject of menstruation, and fear of offending my hostesses in Kerala interfered with my ability to "just ask".

Because I didn't speak the language, I had to rely on translators whose own attitudes toward the subject were influenced by their community backgrounds, age and gender. Though we corrected for this problem by doing double or even triple translations, the study should not be considered as anything like an exhaustive ethnographic study, nor was it intended to be that.

Delimitations

The study uses only part of metaformic theory. I have concentrated on six sections although the theory could explore several others, for example royalty or blood rituals of defloration and childbirth, or of hunting and fishing, or the relation of goddesses to gods, especially Lord Shiva. However, I think the chosen six sections cover the intent of the study to move beyond the initial research question, “Are goddesses metaformic constructs?” in order to explore the deeper premise of metaformic theory that menarche and related rites contain root sources or centers of culture itself. This study also explores, however briefly, what deity is to the construction of reality, if indeed it is metaformic in origin.

Terminology

Two glossaries are in the front of this text, one of metaformic terms and the second of Malayalam words.

Here in this section, I have included a more extensive examination of two terms that are particularly problematic cross-culturally. These are, first, “pollution,” an English term used throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to attempt to describe the prohibitions placed on menstrual women in indigenous cultures. Secondly I have discussed the Sanskrit pan-Indian term “Shakti,” which pertains to both the Goddess and women, who are all understood as inherently having *shakti*. In addition perhaps the force is in some sense similar to the archaic Dravidian term *ananku*—a characteristic quality of allure and power held by women at or following menarche. (Hart 1973; Ram 1992; Jenett 1999)

The Problem with Pollution

As Mary Douglas has told us in her book *Purity and Danger*, ideas of “dirt” can mean “matter out of place” in one culture and something else entirely in another. The English-language concept of “pollution” in European and American mainstream cultures is an absolute and applies to ‘matter out of place’ as in air pollution caused by carbon emissions that are particles in an inappropriate place. In these cultures pollution can never be a positive power, it is simply poison and simply evil and undesirable. In common English usage, a little pollution differs from a lot only in the amount of harm it can produce. Purity is also absolute, one can never have too much of it. As a synonym for no-touch or menstrual regulations of indigenous peoples, pollution is a misleading term.

Recently women scholars associated with India have attempted to correct the absolute judgment the term “pollution” with respect to menstruation lays upon its subjects. In particular researchers working with Dravidian, non-brahmin practice and philosophy have seen it necessary to correct the definition of menstruation’s affects as understood by the indigenous people who separate menstruating women from various categories of everyday life.

Frederique Marglin, having written extensively about her field work in Orissa, has suggested substituting the concepts “auspicious and inauspicious,” rather than “pure and impure.”(Marglin, 1985) Yet, as she would agree the two sets of terms are not analogous. A ritually impure person may nevertheless on certain occasions be auspicious. Likewise, “purity” can at times be harmful, as Savithri De Turreil tells us in an example of a mother coming from menstrual seclusion who has just bathed, and might do her children harm by touching them at that moment. She has a condition of *too much* “purity” and so

should eat something first, which will balance her powers, since the act of eating is mildly “polluting”. (De Tourreil, 42-43)

De Tourreil suggested that men are the primary category at risk for negative influence from menstruating women, but that the women in a family were not at risk and freely touch the menstruant. (41-2) This may be true for the families she studied, but is not supported by cross-cultural comparison, nor does it apply to all of Kerala’s very diverse communities. However, I certainly agree with her point that menstruation is separated from at-risk categories selectively, and not with any generalized negativity attached to menstruation as a state. De Tourreil consistently affirms that the maiden at menarche is an esteemed, dearly appreciated person.

In my research about menstrual practices cross-culturally in *Blood, Bread, and Roses*, I have had to come to terms with widespread practices that separated menstruants from all kinds of categories of people and activities—and also from the elements such as light, earth, fire and water. Sometimes the women of her own family, even her mother and grandmother as well as the men and children do not touch her. Menstruants in some cultures were prohibited from touching *themselves*, as is evidenced in the many anti-scratching prohibitions of North American indigenous peoples. In particular she could not touch her hair, but must use a special scratching stick. (Heizer, 1978, Vol. 8, 479)

In Kerala, menstruating women in general are separated from household gods, temple installations, and cooking. Additionally, everything the menstruant touches may be vulnerable to menstrual influence, including her bowl, cup, mat, clothing and so on. That this influence is an *emanation* more than that it is a particulate substance (only the blood itself) seems evident from several women’s choice of descriptive words highly

suggestive of concepts more familiarly found in modern physics and also in descriptions of shakti, than in the idea of “pollution”. In addition to emanation, the terms “influence,” “conductivity” and “insulation” were used in several contexts to describe the nature of menstruation’s effects, and actions taken to protect both the maiden and her surroundings. For example, Hema said that a maiden might be “insulated” from the sun by holding a parasol over her head. The sun, and also the earth, are understood as being capable of “stealing energy” from a person (De Turreil, 40). De Turreil spoke of the maiden as “being insulated from the earth” by sitting or lying on a mat during her menses. In one example from the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu, the mat may be carefully burned afterwards: the maiden and her mother take it to a place where three roads meet and burn it. (Kapadia, 100) Kerala practices call for the mat being specially treated in other ways; for example, some practices specify that no one else sits on or touches the mat during her seclusion, not even her girl companions. Again, this suggests a separation of disparate wave powers—at a time when the maiden has both heightened power and heightened vulnerability.

One woman I interviewed learned Kerala practice after she had moved there from her native France as a young woman in her early twenties. She described learning from a teacher whose community isolated menstruating women in a special structure “at the bottom of the garden”. She was told about the touch prohibitions in terms of conductivity—wood conducts, for instance. She said, “Well, you know menstruation is very private for us in the West, but here a woman will say, ‘Oh you have your period? Is this the first day? Second day?’ Because they have to know so you will not touch anything. You will stay apart for three days, you will not go to the temple, you will not

want to touch anything in your kitchen. You must not touch things that will remain impure....oil, butter, cooked things...What can you touch? Fruit, grains, raw things.” She explained how the bath, on the fourth day in the tradition she was following, must include the head, and washes away the “influences”. These latter are not only energetic, they are also cognitive: “When you hear ideas or influences you absorb them and become impure...” (Leuba Shilde) Water washes away the influences of others and conducts one’s own essential life force energy, magnifies and directs it, according to De Turreil, who said this is why it is best to perform or attend ritual in soaking wet clothing.

These examples are descriptive of a *wave* impact, and this is congruent with stories I have heard from native American feminists who use the phrase “separation of sacred powers” to explain why, for example, a nephew who plans on making a drum calls his aunt first to make certain she doesn't inadvertently come to his house that day if she is menstruating. The power of the drum and the power of menstruation are mutually incompatible, with the sense that the menstrual power is the essential power and can overwhelm the drum.

Similarly, it seems, as a Kerala priest explained to an American woman, menstruating women are expected to stay out of the temples as a “separation of sacred powers.” When I told this to De Turreil on her visit to California, she immediately used that phrase in response to a similar question asked about menstrual seclusion during her public presentation at Montclair, California in June, 1998, on goddess traditions in her family. Karin Kapadia, doing research in Tamil Nadu among women about their lives, has contributed the intriguing information that between communities, women avoid each

other's menstrual influences and that the household deities are "offended" by it, (Kapadia, 95-6). I will return to this contribution later in this study.

Yet this further amount of comprehension doesn't help with terminology. Words like influences, conductivity and insulation pertain to material processes and carry none of the phenomenal power, spirit and karmic force that I think need to be carried by a word descriptive of menstrual influence, in village Dravidian South India. At least the word "pollution" carries some of the awe needed to express the concept, for "pollution" in South Indian traditional usage is allied to "sacred". A term meaning "lacking ritual purity," (*ashutam*) is used for the state of the goddess herself when she is in her three day seclusion at Kodungallor Kurumba Bhagavati Temple after the blood event of her killing of the demon of violence (Darika). Another such term meaning "incurring slight ritual impurity" (*ceriya asuddhi*) (De Turreil, 50) is used for the goddess at Chengannor Bhagavati Temple when she is secluded for her menses (*trpputtu*) for three days.

We can see that a linguistic problem exists that rests on philosophical differences. In my hypothesis, these differences are metaformic, and stem from differing, actually oppositional (obverse) approaches to the subject of menstruation, and the understanding of sacred power as *emanation*. In U.S. mainstream culture menstrual blood is neither auspicious nor pure, nor can bathing affect a person ritually, nor can purity ever be harmful. Purity is frequently expressed as a percentage, of which 100 per cent is the ideal. Neither does menstrual blood in and of itself have ritual affect across distances or "for generations into the future" either positively or negatively. Yet in Kerala it does.

However, in U.S. popular culture, shame attaches to the sight of menstrual blood, and it is a substance which is to remain hidden and not discussed, especially in the

presence of men. In my experience, it is the substance of menstrual blood that causes the shame, not any “emanations” or nonparticulate influences of it (outside of its odors).

Though women in the U.S., Britain and Canada have begun to break free from older prohibitions¹ and tampon advertisements now use the word “period,” as of this writing the color of liquid substances used to illustrate menstrual blood in television ads for efficacious cotton pads remains blue, not red. The color blue as used for decades in television ads is related to soap and bleach, and therefore to “purity,” in the sense of both “spotlessness” and “not displaying the blood of menstruation”.

I think that in mainstream U.S. culture both purity and pollution are based in the concept of spotlessness, having no blood or ‘stain’ showing; in keeping with the masculinist approach to menstruation—that it is to be hidden, that it is a “stain” and that there is something shameful about the blood itself.

Shakti as force and deity

Before discussing *shakti*, I should explain my use of the term “goddess” in this study. By goddess I mean female deity, who may or may not be considered a creator, who may serve specific, limited village ritual purpose or be the cosmic force of Shakti as active female principle. I am also considering goddess—specific to the study—as a deified metaformic construct. But “goddess” is a painfully limited term.

While Malayalam and Tamil have dozens of names, both generic and specific, for female deity, English is restricted to one; even more reductively, “goddess” is diminutive of “god” and only rarely used to mean “creator” or “prime cause”. To complicate this, many writers of English language histories of South India –including Indians—have

participated in denigrating and erasing indigenous goddess religion in India by—for instance—refusing to grant goddess worship the status of other religious practices. This is effected through use of diminutive words like “cult,” “godling” and “demigod”. Historian Nilakanta Sastri, (1976) in fifty pages on male gods, summarized the goddess in two sentences, in which he calls her worship “addiction” to the female principle and “often degenerating into licentious orgies”. His single illustration of her worship is the offering of one’s own head to the deity, as depicted in sculpture and literature of earlier times. (433)

When goddess worship is acknowledged, sometimes her character of fierceness has been seriously distorted, for instance Reverend Henry Whitehead used the phrase “Queen of the demons” to describe Bhagavati. It took some research and listening to discover that this title refers to the fact that she is understood indigenously as “the only god who can control the demons.” In the absence of any sacred female principle, and certainly not one displaying tiger fangs (*dharmstra*), it is easy enough for non-Hindu writers to distort Indian goddesses, in particular the role of fierce goddesses, consistently and reductively referring to them as “bloodthirsty” which implies “inducing of violence”. While destruction certainly is one of her primary forces, and blood continues to be a primary image associated with Her, the fierce goddess can be and frequently is spoken of in Kerala as a protective presence. A peace-keeping role of Bhadrakali in Kerala is, in my opinion, expressed in her prime story of “killing the demon of violence,” as I will discuss in Chapter Six. And fierceness is only one aspect of a goddess tradition that is extremely complex and provides a multitude of attributes to the sacred feminine.

¹ See *The Wise Wound*, Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove, New York: Grove Press, 1978, 1986; *Red Flower: Rethinking Menstruation*, Dena Taylor, Freedom, Ca.: The Crossing Press, 1988; *Her Blood Is*

The obvious fear that some writers have had and continue to have of goddess worship is reflected more deeply in their vocabulary for Shakti, which is the immanence of the goddess. Terms such as “crazed,” or “frenzied,” even “possession” imply in English being dragged off by the scruff of the neck without any volition or invitation on the individual’s part. As though a devotee does not welcome her in, and as though ecstatic union with her isn’t as marvelous as any other devotional experience. To be sure, a *kundalini* experience is—like powerful emotion or orgasm—not under control of will. But being under constant control of one’s own will is surely only one approach to life’s possibilities—and hardly an artful one. I am reminded of Darwin’s example equating an “intellectual brow” with being “calm-eyed”. (Darwin 1981, 241)² I recall the special negative attention paid by the judges of Europe’s Inquisition to what they called “symptoms of demonic possession” including spots, frenzy, fits, and even *enthusiasm*—all grounds for accusation and arrest for witchcraft.³

Shakti is the active creative principle, understood as female, and having the quality of intentionality. (Scott 143-6; Radha, 48-49) Her position in the pantheon of creative deities depends on whom you ask. In Vedic teaching, Mahashakti carries on the actual work of manifestation, and is the power of Brahman (the all) in the cosmos—Brahman emanates masculine (experience) and feminine (energy). Shakti is energy or power (active “feminine” force), Shiva is contemplation and experience (passive masculine force). All of nature is understood as *Prakriti*, an active field of forces. While written Brahmanic version says Brahma is the ultimate all, the oral and written women’s tradition tells it differently. One highly trained devotee, a woman who performs temple

Gold: Celebrating the Power of Menstruation, Lara Owen, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.

² His model for this description was “the Brahmin”.

pujas, for instance says that Shakti created “everything, including all the gods”. In a published Mariamma creation myth, the gods Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma are specks inside the first of three eggs laid by the goddess in one of her many manifestations as a bird (40-41 Jayakar; Appendix F). The Mahatmaya also credits Devi with creation of everything in the world, including the bodies of the great gods. (Coburn, 41-2).

In describing scientific principles of Tantrism, most frequently Shakti (energy of creation) is paired with Shiva (contemplation, experience). In Kundalini yoga Shiva is associated with the crown *chakra*, and Kundalini with the *chakra* at the base of the spine. The partnership of these two “Brahmanic emanations” and the polarity of energies connected with them are a basic assumption of Tantric science. (Scott, 33)

When Brahmins brought vedic teachings into Kerala beginning perhaps 300 BCE (A. Sreedhara Menon, 14) the goddess and her male correlative had been there, perhaps brought south from the Harappan culture (Induchudan, 37,75,179). It is likely that, whether the pre-Aryan peoples called her Shakti or innumerable other names, the goddess of ancient times had characteristics that are now called *kundalini* and *shakti*, and her immanent presence was detected by sensations of tingling in the body, protruding eyes, trembling, erratic movements, making spontaneous sounds and oracular speech. It is likely that the goddess was even more immanent than she is now, given that both Brahminism and the more recent influence of Christian education emphasizes texts, and tends to intellectualize and avoid possession that has been characteristic of Dravidian religion. Yet in Kerala, as I observed in the *gramman* (religious neighborhood of Brahmins) even Brahmin men fell unconscious on the street in swoons of possession by Shakti, especially in her form of Kali. But most particularly women are frequently open

³ Described in the work of Margaret Murray, T.C. Lethbridge and Montague Summers. for example.

to being possessed by the energy of the goddess, whereas men must make special preparations to open themselves to the force.

As Shakti is energy, Kundalini—coiled in a snake form at the base of our spines, is a part of her, part of Mahakundalini, great energy pool. Kundalini in its form Shabdabrahman “holds the constituents of a form together for its divinely ordained span.” (Scott, 86) Shakti manifests as form, living, crafted, artful, transformative, sensate, beautiful and powerful. In iconography, the painting of the eyes guarantees that the icon awakens full of Shakti, and Jayakar postulated that the earliest movements towards creating crafted form in ancient India came about when the aniconic goddess as a stone was smeared with vermilion and painted with silver eyes, which “awakened” her Shakti. (164) The goddess, then, is raw Shakti energy, emanating and moving, manifesting as *form*. These forms include poetry, dance and song, which are used to invoke the goddess, and can also be used to induce her to enter another form; for example craftsmen may “sing” the goddess into a pot and then do ritual with it. (Frasca, 55)

Shakti can be demonic or chaotic as well as creative and orderly, and sometimes steps must be taken to control it:

“In Andhra, the potter molds the form of the malevolent Shakti, in darkness, at the dead of night. He enters, alone, the inner apartment, the holy place where the form of the goddess is given shape. While the potter is making the sacred image, another image is drawn outside in the dust. Rituals are then enacted to propitiate the demoniac Shakti and induce her to enter the image. Once the rituals are over, the Shakti is buried, and a nail hammered into her body to bind her movements. Sometimes, the image is taken and abandoned at the boundaries of the village.” (Jayakar, 32)

Most tantric teachings that have reached the Western world described the forms created by Shakti as Maya, interpreted as “illusion”—only the emanations are real. In a sense, this is the obverse of conclusions Western secular science reached prior to Einstein

that only matter exists, and the cosmos is a giant machine of randomly interacting particles.

Early in the 20th century, however in teaching what he called “integral yoga,” Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo has postulated a different theory, that Maya is not illusion but rather is reality that has become wrapped with so many dense layers of meaning that we can no longer see it, and must strip them away to view the form as it is. (Scott, 31-2) I find this perspective particularly congruent with my idea of metaform. It isn't that forms are fantasy or built of whimsy—they stem from genuine relationships. For example, the snake has been layered with a great amount of cultural meaning—at base, metaformic. When ecologists in the U.S. attempt to protect snakes they must cut through the many levels of myth that surround these reptiles, including revulsion, hatred, projections that they are devils, and so on. Probably this stems from Genesis mythology equating snakes with both female power (Eve as seductress) and death of paradise. Yet once the levels of myth are removed, people have capacity to know the snake anew, as a creature with its own life unrelated to that story about them, and enabling construction of a new and more protective story.

An important piece that Indian philosophy adds to metaformic theory is *how* forms came about in culture, interactively with *wave*—life force. The worldwide indigenous concern with the power of the gaze of menstruating women comes into focus here, as well as the susceptibility of maidens at menarche to invisible, chaotic forces, in addition to their carrying of powerful, benevolent creative forces.

“Ananku,” a possible early version of Shakti.

I came upon a very old word describing positive female power which may be connected to menstruation, and certainly comes into women at their puberty and manifests in their breasts. The term is *ananku*, from second century Tamil poetry, (Hart, 233, 246) used to describe a power specific to women, present in women and in two other categories of being: kings and gods. The force can be extremely benevolent and desirable, a power coming through women's bodies beginning at menarche, associated with allure and red flowers, with anything that induces sacred trance state, and located especially in the vulva and breasts. (Hart; Rajam 269-70) Kalpana Ram suggests that perhaps *ananku* is a Dravidian precursor of Shakti. (Ram, 69; see also Jenett, 2000)

Personal account of Shakti experience

In 1995, in the setting of Elinor Gadon's Women's Spirituality doctoral program, I was startled to receive a *shaktipat* (heart opening blessing) from viewing a few moments of film of a woman known as "The Mother"—Mirra Alfassa, also called Mira Richard. She worked and lived with Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo, at the utopian city they founded in 1926, Auroville near Pondicherry on the west coast of India. A European by birth, Mira was and still is acknowledged widely as having great spiritual power. The video tape that affected me so strongly was taken of her when she was ninety four or five, just a short time prior to her death November 17, in 1973. She was bestowing *darshan* (auspicious glance blessing) on a crowd of perhaps five thousand Indians when the film was shot from across the street. I was quite skeptical and impatient during the showing, and only immediately afterwards was struck with the extreme heart-opening and the powerful physiological sensation of utter ecstasy. Having never experienced *shaktipat*, and not believing it could be transferred by video, I remained

skeptical but the same thing happened on a second occasion with a different copy of the same brief footage.⁴

Though as an artist, performer and poet I had frequently experienced and haltingly learned to balance rushes of *shakti* energy (though not using the term) in my life and art, I had never received such a heart-opening from another person—particularly not one who had died twenty-five years previously. But though I have enough background not to be surprised by these factors, I was amazed that such a powerful action could be transferred through video, and gained a new respect for the medium.

That video can transfer *shakti* was further illustrated to me when Savithri De Turreil viewed footage of Theyyam performances Dianne and I had shot in Malabar in 1997. In editing a short film on Kerala Dianne had included about 20 seconds of a Theyyam actor embodying the goddess as a snake. An extremely powerful shaman and traditional oral poet, dressed and painted in blood red color, his effect is quite electrifying. Savithri turned to us: “Why do you want to include so much *shakti*,” she exclaimed, a reminder that people in Kerala (and India at large) respect and regulate the effects of this ever-present force of deity and life forms that in the west is but dimly recognized. In our fieldwork Dianne and I witnessed, somewhat heedlessly, a great deal of it, especially at Theyyam, Cavadyottum, Bharani and a Naga fire rite—all rituals in which the goddess Kali is embodied by certain highly prepared participants.

In the indigenous Indian system of thought, *wave* is the power, the creative power of Shakti is through wave, manifesting as both action and particle. And you can receive too much of it—in the sense that lightning is too much power for a human to bear. The only metaphor through which I have come to understand and at least partially explain this

⁴ Minou Alexander, formerly faculty in the Psychology department of CIIS, brought the footage.

power is through the analogy of electricity. Though Shakti is not electricity, per se, it has some similar qualities. (Appendix E)

In dealing with the creative power of subtle body energies, regulation of one's own *shakti* without influence of waves put out by others, seems to be the aim. The ritual bath accomplishes this, and helps explain why the head bath (with the crown *chakra* as focus) is so necessary for the ritually "pure" state required in approaching the sacred body of the deity.

One last thought on *shakti* and snake: Nagam is the name for the snake deities whose shrines are everywhere in Kerala, as are the living hooded cobras whose images are carved in the little stone icons. Naga rituals, a specialty of the Pulluva community, are fiery and involve possession and oracular pronouncement. Among these ritual specialists, if not among all Hindu communities, snake is the living embodiment of *shakti* that empowers and activates the earth itself. (Neff, 299)

CHAPTER THREE

Kerala: Communities, Goddesses and Contemporary Women on Menarche Celebrations

Kerala, “God’s Country”

History and myth are merged in Kerala accounts, appropriately enough for this land of oral storytellers and philosophers. The narrow coastal strip of state, bounded on the east by the Western Ghats and on the west by the Arabian Sea was originally formed, the brahmanic myth goes, by Parasurama, when he threw his ax as far as he could in a line along the seacoast, and dry land rose up in the ax’s path. Like California, Kerala is a focal point for diverse immigration and settlement, and has an indigenous history as well.

Linguistically, Dravidian and Indo-Aryan influences predominate, with Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic also present (Thapar, 55). Earliest African migration patterns (Cavalli-Sforza 1993) suggest that India was populated from that continent, (though migrations can move in both directions) and some elements of the rituals have close observable similarity. Red skirted shamans (*velichapads*) of the goddess in Malabar with crescent swords carried overhead and leg rattles resemble women of the Podokwo people of eastern Nigeria in harvest rites, for example. (Fisher 1984, 134)

The “*nagas*,” the “snakes”, meaning people with snake-religion were “always” in Kerala, before Parasurama threw his ax, before anyone else arrived to settle, according to mythology promoted by the Brahmins to justify their hegemony. Scholars recognize ancient connections between South India and the Harappan and Mohenjo Daro cultures of the Indus valley (Jayakar, 12-13; Induchudan, 37, 75; Sastri, 59) and believe the Dravidian (nonaryan, nonbrahmin) peoples may have migrated south from that

civilization, which even then had village goddess icons remarkably similar to current crafted versions. Male-female deified forces similar to Shiva-Shakti have also been identified (Induchudan, 37). Jayakar surmised that, following the Aryan invasions from the north, “an archaic peoples’ culture based on the primacy of the female principle survived in sacred women’s rites and fertility rituals.” (Jayakar, 14-15)

Coming from the south, the populous Ezhuva community relates their origins from Sri Lanka, an island off the southern tip of India, and peoples from the eastern state of Tamil Nadu, in turn fed by immigrants from southeast Asia, continue a flow that could be many millenia in length of time. Cultural traditions such as cheek piercing with a trident, which also exists throughout southeast Asia and extends to the Philippines, are also found in Kerala, and may stretch back to prehistoric times (Sastri, 57-8). Some Southeast Asian myths cut a wide swathe, such as stories of the black water buffalo as both demon and deity, and of a winged rice goddess who flies over the fields. To the north, goddess Bhadrakali is also worshipped in Nepal. That in her Kerala temple installations she always faces north seems noteworthy in this regard.

Diverse peoples in the ancient world of record, from at least the time of the Babylonians came to and traded with, Kerala, and teak logs in the temple of the Moon god at Ur suggest the Sumerians may have done the same. (Sastri, 80). Yemenites from Africa had connection to West India, as suggested by archeological evidence (Thapar, 120) and peoples from the interior of sub-sahara Africa may have made their way, bringing iron smelting. Solomon and Sheba may have sent ships to Kerala ports, probably from Yemen, as did Egyptians and other north Africans. The traffic was two-way, and the great temple of Solomon may have used Kerala teak. One source suggests that Dravidian

populations were driven to Kerala under pressure from the Greeks. (A. Sreedhara Menon, 1987, 8) Ships sailed the long way around the coastline, until Greeks discovered they could go on a direct course carried by trade winds that carried sailing vessels directly to the south coast. Pliny describes a “white island” and the port of Muziris/Meriotis, referring to the island of modern Ernakulum and the once-thriving port that is now Kodungallor.

Many, perhaps all of the immigrants to the state have brought their own religion, accounting—in addition to the complexity of indigenous practice—for the amazing diversity the British attempted to consolidate in the one word “Hindu”. The ancient town of Kodungallor/Meriotis served as entry point for Christians as early as 52 AD, as claimed by Syrian Christians who credit their lineage to St. Thomas. Jews arrived in 400 and Muslims in 800, both becoming traders interfaced between an increasingly mobile world and the by then incredibly rich spice, foodstuff and textile contributions from Kerala’s multiple populations. Kerala produces red and white rice and coconuts, plantains, pineapples from southeast Asia. Kerala was also producer of such spices as pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, and nutmeg. These spices became so desirable the Arab and European Christian medieval worlds would fight bitterly over them, and eventually Columbus would set out to find the Malabar coast of Kerala only to come upon the north American continent instead. When torrential flood rains in the fourteenth century clogged the channel that had made Kodungallor a major port, activity moved south to Cochin.

Perhaps it is impossible to know which immigrant populations included women who brought their menarchal customs from north Africa or Syria, Elam or Malay, to

name only a few of the locations that fed Kerala's wealth of diverse cultural societies. Certainly women's customs such as ululation, feeding the maiden an egg as "strong food" and belief in the "evil eye" exist in regions bordering the Mediterranean whose populations are known to have sent immigrants or at least sailors and traders to India in past centuries. (Birnbaum, oral communication, 1999)

The "caste" system known throughout the rest of India developed in Kerala as well, though with some notable differences. The system evidently began as four symbiotic groups based in parts of the human body, as initially outlined in antiquity in the Laws of Manu. The priests (Brahmins) represented the intellectual "head" and the warriors (Nayars) represented the "arms" of society structured as a human body. The agricultural laborers and craftsmen constituted the bulk of the population, and were also the lower caste levels—designated "untouchable". While in the rest of India a trader caste fulfilled the task of merchanting, in Kerala this function was filled by non-Hindu groups who settled in coastal towns. These included the Jews, Syrian Christians and Muslims, who settled in the ports and acted as interface with the outside world as Kerala became exporter for its highly desired and rare spice trade. In turn of the century ethnography some of these religious groups were constituted as "castes"—for instance the Jonakan Mapillas had been poor indigenous fisherpeople and converted to Islam while retaining a distinct caste place; likewise both Jews and Syrian Christians are treated as separate castes in an ethnographic study, *The Castes and Tribes of Cochin*, begun in 1889 by A. Ananatha Krishna Iyer. Brahmins were invited into the state by the Maharajahs to take on priestly and intellectual functions, but not until around 400-800, rather later than in other parts of India. They are credited with bringing the ideas of purity and

untouchability that tilted the system into a vertical hierarchy. Over the centuries of feudal development Kerala produced the most numerous caste designations anywhere in India, as well as some of the most oppressive excesses of this system. People at the bottom, some of them descendants (according to them) from Kerala's older kingly empire, the Chera, were slaves with no rights over their own children. The category of unseeability added a further oppression to groups who could be killed on sight, and therefore lived a shadow existence hiding in groves of trees and coming out only at night.

As I have said, broadly, caste categories described occupations. Agricultural workers who were serfs working on land owned by others were Pulayans, Vettuvans, and Parayans. Fisherpeople along the coast were Mukkuvans, and Valans. Craftsmen such as carpenters, potters, blacksmiths were Kammalans. The most numerous agricultural group, whose status was the highest of the untouchables, were the Ilavar, called Tiyya in the north Malabar region, who brought their coconut and toddy palm cultivation with them to Kerala. Weavers had the caste designation Chaliyans. Two names for the group who served as washerpeople for other groups are Manans and Vellans. Kanniyaans were astrologers. The upper castes were Nayars, warriors associated with kingship (the Maharajah) and Kshatriya. Numerous small castes served the temples as singers, flower arrangers, dancers, sweepers and so on. There were two Brahmin castes, Nambutiri, the highest, who call their compounds of houses *iloms* (a term used by other groups as well); and Tamil Brahmins, who lived in "sacred neighborhoods" called *grammans*. These various populations lived on the plains, while in the hills small groups lived by collecting forest products and hunting. These included Kadars, Kannikars and Malayans.

Recently the designations of groups into “tribe” and “caste” have been recognized as colonial categories brought by Europeans. The word “caste” was a Portuguese sixteenth century contribution that with its meaning “color” further exacerbated and racialized an already polarized situation. To avoid this I use “community” as modern Kerala people do, except in specific references from earlier ethnographic sources and in direct discussion of the system of separation. Currently affirmative action policies define the oppressed (*dalit*) as “scheduled castes” and “scheduled tribes” with such assistance as percentages of guaranteed government jobs and educational assistance. In keeping with progressive terminology these peoples are sometimes called “backward” to mark their degree of material and educational involvement in modernizing society.

A hundred years ago social systems within each community varied widely, especially marriage and inheritance customs. Not unusually, a woman married a number of brothers, and polygamy as well as polyandry were common forms of marital arrangement among some communities. The widespread system of matrilineality and *marumakkatayam*, inheritance from uncle to nephew along the female line, testify to a status of women that was based in a slight economic advantage that favored mothers and children and that was matrifocal. The extended family of the *taravad* among Nayers and most other groups meant that sisters lived together in the same compound throughout their lives. Among the agricultural groups inheritance was sometimes patrilineal, sometimes matrilineal. The highest caste, the Nambutiri Brahmins, also had the most restrictive rules toward behavior of women, a consequence of patrilineality and extreme rules about sexual, food and caste purity, and dangers of menstrual influence to males.

The social structure of Kerala traditionally included both matrilineality and patrilineality. As I said, common form of inheritance was *marumakkatayam*, from uncle to nephew in the maternal line. Marital customs varied extremely, with polyandry and polygamy both common forms. Not unusually, a woman would marry several brothers, a pan-Indian historic form that is reflected in the national epic *The Mahabharata*, the story of five brothers married to a princess, Draupadi. In Kerala, as well as elsewhere the priestly caste of Nambutiri Brahmins had an extreme form of patrilineality in which only the oldest son could marry. Nambutiri women were extremely restricted, living indoors in seclusion their entire lives, while younger Nambutiri younger sons made liaisons with Nayar women, perhaps the least restricted women. Nayars, indigenous Dravidian people who served as warriors and were closely connected to kingship and royalty, were matrilineal, with strong sororal ties.

Economically the peoples of Kerala consisted broadly of agricultural groups who settled the plains—of which the most populous is the Ilavar¹ people, from Ilam, Sri Lanka (Mateer, 83)—hill groups living on forest products, and fisher people along the coast (see discussion of “tribes, castes and race” as colonial categories in Vineetha Menon, 39-47). Following the Chola war a warrior class stabilized as the Nayar community. They were closely connected to the royal houses, and when the Maharajas began inviting Brahmins in to serve as temple priests, the males of the Nambutiri families who were not allowed to marry established liaisons with Nayar women. A pyramid social system evolved with extreme privilege and economic power at the top, among affluent landowners who were Nayars, Kshatriyas and Nambutiri Brahmins.

¹ This important community has nine or ten variant names, such as Ishuvan, Irhavar and so on.

“The upper crust of Kerala society, thus, was an extremely conservative and an excessively privileged one. Communities which could not be absorbed into the system of the four castes were depressed to the lowest levels, not only ‘untouchables’ but ‘unapproachables’ as well.” (Chaitanya, 50) The caste system in Kerala proliferated to an extreme and developed “appalling features” (ibid) as groups designated themselves untouchable by those closest in rank with whom they struggled for status. By 1931 “The Travancore Census...enumerated 77 main and 423 accessory castes,” resulting in stagnation of social change (Chaitanya, 50) and a stifling of spirit. Keralites then launched an “uncompromising war” against the system, making good headway through the twentieth century and continuing to struggle with methods of righting inequities, particularly economic ones.

Early in the nineteenth century Kerala’s maharajahs endorsed universal literacy and encouraged the establishment of Christian schools. Today the state has achieved ninety percent literacy (Hochschild 1999, 7). Other accomplishments include an average life expectancy of 72 years, a birth rate of 1.7 children per woman, no street beggars (except for a few women who come in from Tamil Nadu during the hot season), supplementary food programs and effective land reform. They have done this with “a per capita income that, on paper, is only about 1/70 that of the United States.” (Hochschild 1999, 8) One reason the economy works as well as it does is the presence of food-bearing trees everywhere, on the smallest plots of land and even in urban backyards. The house we rented had cement over all its area including outdoors, yet a tall coconut stood productively in a tiny patch of dirt outside the kitchen. Banana, mango, tamarind and coconut trees grow in every available plot, along with trees with useable leaves, like *thali*

or *neem* for soap. Pineapple tops are stuck along dirt walls, growing into luscious fruits each season.

Today Kerala citizens increasingly live in nuclear family units, though the village remains the primary social structure. With universal education and health care having been achieved, young men and women ride motorbikes to work while older people save to buy automobiles. Even in the cities these vehicles, as well as autorickshaws and buses share the road with ox carts, small buffalo herds, and men pulling enormously heavy carts with their muscles.

In the past forty years Kerala has been guided by an elected Marxist government, the current one Communist Party of India (Marxist). Countrywide India has struggled with issues of social justice throughout the 20th century, disassembling the caste system in religion with the temple entry act of 1939, and in the state with declaration of the individual as the unit of society. The “untouchable” castes of yesterday were re-described as *dalit*, meaning “the oppressed”. Affirmative action programs set aside government jobs to members of “scheduled castes” among people whose grandfathers and grandmothers could not walk down Brahmin streets on penalty of death. In Kerala, the powerful *Ilavar*, the highest in status of the formerly untouchable groups, have led in formation of active labor movements and helped sweep Marxian government into office. Parades of striking workers and masses of people gathered for rallies are common sights in the city of Thiruvananthapuram. In the countryside women organizers have struggled to bring women’s issues to the forefront, though less successfully than government officials had hoped. (Gulati, unpublished manuscript)

Kerala's accomplishments co-exist with its difficulties. The infrastructure for modernization is weak, especially with electricity and telephones. Bureaucratic inefficiency has proliferated, and residues of the caste system, like residues of the slave system in the U.S., continue to impact social and economic life. Members of the former untouchable communities are outspoken in criticisms of still-privileged classes: Brahmins and wealthy Nayars. Historic bitterness surfaces, as with one young man from a *dalit* (oppressed) community, who expressed alienation with his government job: "I don't go in to work for weeks at a time, and I don't intend to change that."

Education has not curtailed unemployment, which is 3-4 times higher than in India as a whole (Hochschild 1999, 14). People buy jobs, leading to increased cynicism. A professorship can be bought for \$5000-12,500 for instance, and increasingly dowry, which is detrimental to the status of women, is used to acquire successful husbands for daughters. Social and economic suffocation of the "scheduled" (economically depressed) castes and tribes causes thousands to convert from their indigenous religions to those connected to economies of the outside worlds—Christianity and Islam—and then to convert back again, depending on which way the economic wind blows in a given village. Not unusually a family will have two religious practices under the same roof. Not unusually a husband will be working in an oil-rich Islamic country sending money home, or an adult child will have gone to America, Canada, Australia or England to work in the software industry.

Goddesses of Kerala

With so much modern influence I did not expect so much attention to be paid to Devi worship, and was surprised by the amount of piety I found toward her among people of the majority of communities. Though Hindu and other indigenous practices revere a vast number of deities, and the largest and most prominent temples are those dedicated to Vishnu and other Vedic gods, Devi in all her varieties has nearly as many major, well-funded temples listed in guidebooks for visitors (*Festivals of Kerala* is one example). She is also omnipresent as the pre-eminent deity of common village practices all over the state and in embodied Theyyam performances on the north Malabar coast.

In Kerala, Dravidians historically may have worshipped primarily female deities (Induchudan, 64) thought by one early scholar to have been “personifications of the female reproductive functions” (Induchudan, 64). The Dravidians also constituted the bulk of the population, and are understood as the indigenous people, as distinguished from Aryans, who arrived later. This history may be mythologized in a story of Parasurama, the culture hero and matricide, who cut off his own mother’s head. He also cut off the head of a low-caste, untouchable *pariah* woman. When in an act of reconciliation he put the reassembled the bodies, the heads were put on the opposite trunks. The result, the myth continues, was that the outcaste body and the Brahmin head became goddess Mariamma. (Jayakar 1990, 43-45, Doniger 1999, 204-212).

Female deities based in “women’s reproductive functions” should not be taken to mean imagery of birth-giving as Kerala’s goddesses are not (or very rarely) represented in conjunction with either birth or pregnancy; especially this is not the imagery constituting Kerala’s main goddesses: **Bhagavati, Bhadrakali, Mariamma,**

Pattini. That leaves menstruation with its red imagery, and the sexuality of *yonis* and *lingam*, and the erect prominent breasts of *shakti* power, as the primary imagery of these deities, having to do with “women’s reproductive functions” in their *potential*, not actualized, forms. Ethnographic accounts from early in the twentieth century confirm that virtually every group, regardless of which male gods are worshipped, included at least one major goddess.

No one seems to worship the goddess alone; She takes numerous dynamic forms, and is accompanied by other deities, some of which are gendered and some not. A typical *puja* room—household worship center—in Kerala features posters and statues of a number of deities, including Shiva, Brahma, Ganapati, Hanuman, Ayappan, along with various aspects of the goddess. And frequently a family ancestor, usually a revered male, is worshipped in the *puja* room. In rural areas the family may own a sacred grove (*cava*), and the deities there consist of stone carved cobras (*nagas*), a tree sacred to the goddess, and perhaps a small hut containing pictures of one or two deities and a revered ancestor. (With modernization and deforestation these are fast disappearing.) I cannot stress enough that the goddess does not exist all by herself; she is contextualized with nonhuman beings such as sacred trees, gods, spirits, living gurus and ancestors. Ancestors may also be deified. As I describe goddesses, let us be aware that I am segmenting extremely complex and multi-faceted religious practices.

Some Forms and Names of Goddesses of Kerala

The identities of goddesses in Kerala are extremely complex. Each is both distinctive with her own stories and rites, *and* understood as an aspect of a greater deified principle most usually known as *Devi*. As one knowledgeable devotee, V. Subramanian,

described, a single goddess tradition could be thought of as a cup of water from the ocean of the totality of goddess power. Installed temple goddesses in Kerala are very much vivified through people's devotion and love, which is a palpable emanation from the icon. As Subramanian explained, the devotees come to her installation and pour out their love, their heart-opening-Shakti, which in turn empowers the icon to beam out benevolent power, which draws more devotees, and so on. This is why one must approach the installation in a state of "purity"—a preparedness that includes being free of "influences" with clean clothing, water bath (including the hair), and a contained demeanor. This allows the emanations of love to be exchanged without interference.

The generic Sanskrit word for goddess is *Devi*, sometimes Mahadevi, "Great Goddess"; and in the language of the South, also *Amma*, meaning "mother," and said with reverent affection. "Mother" is the most common word used to describe the goddess, despite that in Kerala she does not seem to be configured as having given birth or being pregnant, and this is true throughout India as well. "Devi" specifically refers to the goddess as a maiden, according to one devotee, Sjreemathi. "Ama" or "Amma" is frequently a suffix, especially for the *grama devata*, the village goddesses. The village goddess is understood not to have been created by the village but rather to have created the village.

Less than a hundred years ago the earth was understood as goddess Bhumi Devi, "Earth Mother" or "Earth Goddess". Her annual ritual was celebrated in January-February (De Turreil, 47) at *Makara Sankranti*, during the hot season when the rice paddies are fallow and the earth is "pre-menstrual" waiting for monsoons. The metaphor of women's menstrual blood and earth's menstrual blood both being prerequisites for

fertility continues in rites such as the sprinkling of *garusi* (*garuti*, red fluid) by the ritualist of a Mudiyetu troupe. (Caldwell Ch 4, 334). Agricultural rites and belief in rivers that menstruate have nearly disappeared with the advent of universal literacy, though probably powerful remnants continue in rural areas. Bharani Festival at Kodungallor may be a continuance of these ancient, formative rituals as well, as I will discuss in chapter five.

The pre-eminent village goddess of South India is exemplified by Mariamma, “the mighty goddess”. (Jayakar, 187) Contemporary women scholars are considering her a Great Goddess, a goddess who is creator of consciousness and the cosmos, and who can have male as well as female characteristics (Kapadia, 160). She takes a broad number of forms, including snake, stone, tree, bird, bison and sheep, among others. In one of her legends she was engendered by a northern Arya father, Bhagavan, and a *pariah* mother, the dark, luminous Adi (Jayakar, 187). She is mother of the Seven Virgins, who are worshipped by several communities. She is sometimes depicted as only her head, resting on the earth, which—delineating the boundaries of the village—is her body. Her name is sometimes spelled Mahri, Mari, Mariamman or Maryamma. *Mari* can mean certain kinds of flow, such as rainfall or a sudden eruption of smallpox, according to the distinguished professor and poet Ayappan Panniker (oral communication, 1998). Pupul Jayakar has collected a creation story of Pedamma-Mariamman (Jayakar 1990, 40), in which she takes the form of a bird and lays the cosmos with both good and evil forces in three eggs. In an oral account from a hereditary attendant of a Mariamma installation at Kodungallor temple, Mariamma appears with two other names: Manodari (as wife of the demon

Darika) and Vasurimala, meaning “a garland for smallpox.” The garland is a sheep. This story is in Appendix C.

The over-arching name for Devi in a large number of Kerala temples is Bhagavati. The name “Bhaga” is variously translated as womb or “doorway to the womb” (Jayakar, 125), a goddess, and the word also means “tiger” (ibid, 64-5; Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. 3, 351). As Bhagavati she is usually *Amma*, mother, and depicted in poster art as a young woman seated on a throne, with a tall crown and red skirt; the red skirt may be pleated in such a way as to suggest a spill or flow of blood between her legs. Frequently she has *dharmstra* fangs, slender silver teeth, one on each side of her perfectly formed, youthful mouth; the fangs are a reminder of her fierce tiger-mother side.

Women from different backgrounds responded similarly to questions about Devi’s fierceness. Women who were poor particularly tended to identify with the fierceness, as a quality of self-defense, ability to stand up for oneself, or of being protected. “You know she will fight for you.” Women with more affluence likewise describe this aspect as her ability to be protective and enforce justice; and also as one’s own ability to take self-protective action. At the same time women are adamant that Devi is “like a mother” and they are not afraid of her except in certain circumstances—depending on the context.

In her fierce aspect, the goddess is called Bhadrakali, a version particular to Kerala. In poster depictions Bhadrakali is not seated but rather is portrayed standing in dynamic motion, perhaps enraged or at least fiercely determined, and in the act of decapitating the head of the demon Darika. The story of her killing of the demon—an account not unlike Durga’s killing of Mishu or Mariamma’s killing of the buffalo demon-

- seems to be the only and certainly the most prevailing story in Kerala pertaining to this particular goddess.

As Shiva's wife, the goddess is Parvathi. In this form she and Shiva are both installed at Trichengannor Mahadeva Temple, at Chengannor, where Parvathi's menstruation is celebrated like a menarche or first menstruation, several times a year. The power of her menstruation is connected with human fertility and also with the all-important harmony of household well-being, and with the acquisition of desires. Devotees ask for desired events, including those suffering from infertility who visit with prayers for children. A prescription is given that women should offer special prayers on the third day of their own periods (a ritual called *spondidi*) in order to effect a desired outcome.

In temple rites, folk legend and formal epic poetry published as *The Tale of An Anklet (The Cilappatikaram of Ilanko Atikal)* a goddess named Pattini (also known as Kannaki) is worshipped throughout South India, as well as in Sri Lanka. She is depicted as a slender young woman. As the faithful wife Kannaki, her story of losing her husband to an unjust king is everywhere known in Kerala and the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu. Kannaki's husband is unjustly accused of stealing the queen's anklet, and murdered. In her rage and loss, Kannaki burns down the city of Madurai by tearing off her left breast and throwing it. Her life journey ends at the Bhagavati temple in Kodungallor on the north central coast of Kerala, where she is installed as goddess Pattini.

Pan-Indian goddesses such as Lakshmi, Sarasvathi and Durga are depicted in poster art for sale near Devi temples in Kerala, and appear in people's household *puja*

rooms. In addition, Dravidian and tribal deities are written about especially in older ethnographic accounts, and some are female.

As a goddess of immanence, Devi is frequently enacted in stunningly beautiful and powerful ceremonial rites. In Theyyam—a festival characteristic especially of Ilavar (also called Tiyya) and Cheruman (also called Pulaya) communities, men with hereditary rights to do these enactments embody various aspects of the goddess (and less frequently gods) in ritual dramas. In Malabar on the north coast of Kerala in 1997 we filmed several Theyyam dramas. One took place just before dawn, featuring a fierce goddess, Chamundi. The story was that Chamundi, in her aspect as “the world,” had become torpid, unable to dance or move, because she was filled with so much life, and death had not yet been created. The actor embodying her had undergone ritual preparations, including having his face painted with a base of orange and red turmeric, and then meticulous red and black lines and dots. This painting took four or five hours. His costume shaped his body into a huge globe, and as the goddess ritually entered the actor, She stood as great round mother earth on a stool rocking slowly in a torpor of inactivity. According to the story, Shiva saw the problem and decreed that death would now be invented; and a man in a white cloth knelt before a wide tub filled with the dramatic fluid *garuti*, a blood-appearing liquid, with flower petals floating on top. As drummers thundered he used rapid hand movements to splash the “blood” out in a spray. Faster and faster his arms moved until in a crescendo of drumbeats, he turned the empty bucket upside down and another participant placed two small oil lamps on top. The goddess then awoke, came down from her pedestal and began to dance, accompanied by an actor dressed as a red, white and black bird. Faster and faster the goddess whirled as dawn light

spread over the watching crowd. She blessed certain members of the audience, and then broke into a fierce rant. This oracular capacity was aimed at injustices that had occurred in the village during the previous year, a critique of the powerful in their treatment of the less fortunate.

The goddess (or god or ancestral spirit) possesses the body of the carefully prepared Theyyam actor, through his gazing into her sacred bronze mirror, *valkannadi*, or at the moment of the tying on of her tall and heavy headpiece, the *mudi*, which is frequently shaped like a serpent's hooded head. The Theyyam reacts to her power with symptoms of shaking, enormous energy and stamina, and may do fire-walking or other interaction with flames without harm. Theyyam dramas are a common feature of north Kerala villages during the hot season; the most ancient form "belonging to the aborigines of Kerala" is *Kaliyattam*, the dance of Kali (Pallath, 59). Theyyam enactments are done usually by male actors, but women also publicly enact the goddess for ritual and oracular purposes. Jenett in 1996 filmed a nighttime ritual of Pulayan women embodying the goddess in red dresses, dancing ecstatically with red cloth, and with full black hair loose. They too gazed into a mirror to receive the power of the goddess. They stood on raised altars serving as oracles as members of their community approached them with specific questions.

Shakti, a pan-Indian principle of creative power and the life-force in everything, is the female creation principle from whom all else flows, and immanent. In this form, the goddess can be embodied by anyone, and especially by women—quite spontaneously. Priests, on occasions when the goddess installed in a temple needs to be moved, may embody her spirit and move it to the new location, installing it with special incantations

and motions. At Chottanikara Temple when the priest “moves the goddess” to Kodungallor Sri Kurumba Bhagavati Temple by embodying her, a limb of the sacred *pala* tree in the temple courtyard falls off to signal that the transfer from the installation to the body of the priest has been successful, I was told by devotees.

Goddesses can take the form of snake. Nagas (snakes) are erect hooded cobras carved of stone or cast in silver, and are probably a particularly ancient form of deity in Kerala which may be associated with Devi but are independent deities. The statues are usually about a foot and a half high, and stand out in the open under a single tree or group of trees. They are sometimes singular but more frequently a pair or small group, or “family”. People give them yellow and orange turmeric (sometimes also red) which is poured over their heads. Eggs are also given, and red and white flower petals.

Temples and *Cavus*

Shrines in Kerala vary in size from tiny one-foot high wooden enclosures to 16 foot long thatched temporary sheds to ornate multiple-storied granite buildings with offices on seven acres or more. The outdoor *covil*, shrine or icon set in a sacred grove of trees, the *cavu*, is possibly the original size of most temples, which, if prosperous, grow up around this structure that becomes the sanctum sanctorum (Menon 1943, 139). The sanctum sanctorum of most Devi temples is left open to the skies as though to continue this tradition, and is frequently shaped like a small house or hut with a portico.

Temples are established in a number of ways. Some temples have origin stories beginning with something happening that indicates the presence of the goddess (or other deity) communicating with the devotee. A stone is accidentally struck by a crescent sword and bleeds; a man dreams of a maiden in red; a man falls unconscious after cutting

a sacred tree; rice harvesters see two cobras in a meadow. Astrologers, diviners and/or priests are sent for, and determine that the deity is present and desires a temple to be built on the spot. (Various personal communications). Local temples and also large, established, prosperous temples such as Attukal Bhagavati and Chottanikara have origin stories similar to the examples I have given.

The oldest Bhadrakali temple in Kerala, at Kodungallor, may be an extremely ancient site. The main building is built over a tunnel, lined with granite, and with an east-west axis, leading scholars to speculate on its place among South Indian megalithic structures that may have extreme antiquity (Induchudan, Ch. 3). By at least 800 ce the current buildings and installation of Bhadrakali were in place, but the major festival, Bharani, appears to revolve around the “secret chamber” and perhaps predates installed deities with iconic form. (see Chapter Five)

Established temples also become trusted repositories for household deities. Frequently, as life becomes more complicated or extended families break up, reducing available labor, people take their household deity (for example, in the form of a crescent sword if they are Nayars) to the local temple and turn its care over because they no longer have time to keep up the necessary daily rituals. “One never knows if it is cared for,” one devotee lamented. “Is the sword lying in the corner somewhere?”

Menstruation in the Nineteenth Century

One ethnographic account describes that for a hill-dwelling people, the Kadars, who live by gathering forest products, menstrual blood was considered so powerful in its capacity to affect people that no man would enter a river downstream from a place where a single drop of menstrual blood had gotten into the water. (Iyer, Vol. 1, 1981 1909. 5)

Among the plains people where most of the population lives, a woman did not travel unless she could take her washerwoman with her, as only women with this ritual office could properly purify the menstrual cloth of its influences. A man whose wife was menstruating did not undertake a journey during that time. While these and other regulations seem like “superstitions” to the modern mind, we will see in the course of this study that in the context of Indian philosophical organization of the world, they made/make sense.

Menarche, as I said in the introduction, was celebrated by all indigenous groups, Brahmanic as well as Dravidian. The following example is not “typical” because the details of menarche rites of groups differed, but the architecture of seclusion, bath, new clothing, gifts and feasting is a constant across communities. This is a menarche recorded for the Ilava people (Izhuvans in the account), who were in the mid-point of Kerala’s hierarchy:

As soon as a girl is known as having attained puberty, the women of the neighbourhood, chiefly friends and relations are invited. A kind of loud noise called *kurava* is made with the object of publicly announcing the glad tidings. The girl is bathed and dressed, after which she is lodged in a separate room care being taken not to allow anybody except her girl friends to mingle freely with her for fear of pollution. On the fourth day, the female friends and relations who are invited take her accompanied with the noise above referred to, to the nearest tank to bathe her, after which she wears the *mattu kacha* (ritually purified cloth) brought by the washerwoman. She is again lodged in the room. The caste-women are invited and entertained with *pan supari* (betel). On the seventh day, the same formalities are again gone through as on the fourth day, and the guests are invited to a luncheon. On the fifteenth day, a pandal is put up in front of the house and tastefully decorated, and the caste-women and others are again invited. A washerwoman, who is also invited, entertains the guests assembled with her songs, chiefly puranic, referring to the marriage of Subhadra, Sita, or some deity, and to the happy conjugal life which they enjoyed. There is also what is called *Ammana attam*. This consists of three hollow balls made either of wood or of bell-metal, containing some pebbles. The bells are thrown up and caught at regular intervals, so as to keep time to the tunes sung at the time. The woman, who is an expert, is looking up with her attention wholly directed to the

height to which the balls go and the way in which they should be caught during their descent and again thrown up. This is a very interesting game. The whole night is merrily spent, and on the sixteenth morning, after a few ceremonies, the girl, in the presence of the guests assembled, is led to touch the cooking utensils in the kitchen, mortar, pestle, etc... The guests assembled are there treated to a feast....For all her subsequent menses she has to bathe on the fourth day. The washerwoman's *mattu kacha* is indispensable, as, without it, she is not freed from pollution. Her room also has to be swept and cow-dunged and the water in which she bathes is also mixed with it; for it is believed to have a purifying influence. (Iyer, 1909: 283)

For non-Indian readers I should hasten to say that cow dung is a sacred substance in this society, and the term "pollution" is problematic and will be discussed at length in Chapter Three. The details of the washerwoman's juggling in time to the music are interesting in that Iyer, a Brahmin, clearly was not familiar with the washerwoman's "game"; more directly to the point is the washerwoman's indispensable role in supplying the purified cloth, and the "purifying influence" of the maiden's bath water.

Menarche, into the first two decades of the twentieth century, was a remarkably uniform and stable rite. Of the groups generally considered "Hindu" in religion, however varied their deities and practices, all practiced menarchal seclusion lasting at least 3 days, with emergence including a ritual bath, special clothing and celebratory feast. Perhaps the household rite most stable, most practiced, and most similar across groups who differed widely in their other rites, was menarche celebration.

Attitudes of Some Contemporary Women Toward Menarche

Contemporary women expressed a variety of attitudes toward their own menarche rites or lack of thereof. I found it revealing to group them by age.

Some of the middle-aged women from 45-60 stated their own sense of loss, that they belonged to a generation that had broken the older Kerala traditions of menarchal

seclusion and elaborate public celebration. These women are all college graduates whose Western style education and impetus toward modern urban lifestyles constitute a break with the past. Hema, a Tamil Brahmin professor of English literature, attended Catholic school as a girl. She and her husband are avid devotees of Goddess Bhagavati (among other Hindu deities) and highly knowledgeable and articulate on both Hindu philosophy and daily religious practice. When their daughter Kamala came of age, chances were great that Hema would be too far away from relatives steeped in the tradition to be able to give a proper menarche celebration. Hema was very happy when the event occurred while both she and Kamala were visiting Kamala's maternal grandmother, who immediately set about organizing the proceedings. "I wouldn't have known what to do," Hema said.

Savithri De Turreil from the Nayar community, a professor living with her Swiss-born husband in Montreal, Canada, also expressed regret over her generation's loss of women's ritual life. "We had no menarche celebration," she said of herself and her sisters, "and I feel that as a loss." Perhaps to compensate for this, she devoted her doctoral work to a study of Nayar (and others) women's rites—concentrating on tali-tying and menarche. So widespread was the break with women's rites among relatives and colleagues that at the time she completed her dissertation her informants told her that menarche was no longer celebrated in Kerala.

Living in urban Thiruvananthapuram and working as a sociology professor at the University of Kerala, Uma Devi says that when she was a young woman she decided to visit relatives in the country. Her friends teased that she would not be able to stay even a week, so strange and confining was she likely to find the customs—especially with

regard to menstruation. “But to everyone’s surprise, I stayed six weeks,” she said, “even through getting my period and all the rules attached, what you could and could not touch and all that.”

Kamala Bai, aided in her education by an English woman, is a retired literature professor. She comes from a now-successful family whose community of “scheduled caste” people were formerly among the most oppressed, and explained some of the customs of her family from the point of view of secular modernism—a self-conscious removal from “believer” to educated, “we know better”. “They still believe those things,” she said, after relating how her niece covered her head at menarche as a protection from “unseen gods”. She seemed slightly embarrassed at the older beliefs, including those concerning astrology at menarche. “No one believes these things any more,” she said.

Like these women whose age group I share, I too differ from the beliefs and practices of my mother. However, the direction of movement is opposite. Her shame toward menstruation, her generation’s belief that “swimming during your period would harm you,” and other beliefs are notions I have wanted to leave behind, at first only in order not to be “superstitious”—and later to find my way back to a positive view of the rites of women.

Others of the women in Kerala who discussed menstruation with me through a translator were over sixty. They were far less contradictory in their memories, and were matter of fact and unselfconscious in their descriptions; when asked directly they expressed pleasure and pride in remembering and discussing their own menarche celebrations. This group of women was not Western-educated and did not speak English. Their community backgrounds include Tamil Brahmin, Kshatriya (sister and niece of the

Maharajah of Kodungallor), a Nayar family attendant of goddess Mariamma at Kodungallor temple, two poor Nayar women at Chennganor's Mahadeva temple, an outcaste Nambutiri family connected to Kodungallor temple, a construction worker from Pulayan people, a brick carrier from Ilavar people, and a woman from a poor family of the goldsmith (Thattan) caste. Hence they represent a fairly broad swathe of communities and economic status. More than one of these women showed us with pleasure the *valkannadi* (mirror) they had held in seclusion. Several described the menarche celebration as "like a wedding!" or "like a festival!" or as otherwise a high point of life, in order to convey to our limited western sensibility something of the grand nature of the event and what it had meant to each of them.

The youngest group of women, aged 20 to 40, had the most contradictory feelings about menarche. These contradictions appear related to social changes brought about by recent influences of the West on Kerala culture. One young woman from a formerly untouchable community differed markedly from her mother's tradition because of her own conversion to Christianity. Vijiama's daughter, who appeared about 25 or 30 years of age, hid from us whenever we came to her mother's house. The small thatched house is set on the side of a hill covered with thatched unplastered mud brick dwellings, and the daughter would run away when she saw us; we could see her in a yard down the hill, doing chores, with her back turned to us. I asked about her. "She doesn't want to talk about menstruation," Vijiama explained, adding, "She has become a Christian and doesn't want to talk about such things."

Hema's daughter Kamala, 19, articulated the most excitement, pleasure and satisfaction with her menarche, though she also mentioned being surprised as she had not

been prepared for it. No one could have foreseen a celebration for her as her mother was working out of town; fortuitously, they were visiting a grandmother's home in the countryside when menarche arrived for her. Likewise a young Nayar woman, Asha, twenty-two at the time of the interview, seemed to have found her menarche a completely positive experience and thought it was identical to the one her own mother had. Yet she also articulated change in attitude from older times, she did not like how many people knew about her impending celebration; she would have wanted only the immediate family to know, as happened then later with the menarche of her younger sister.

Likewise Deva of the goldsmith family, fifteen at the time of her celebration, displayed obvious pride and pleasure in her menarche and again when we came to her house a second time to deliver family photographs of the event to her father. A sign of change imposed from outside the family appeared when women talked to us about how long Deva was in seclusion. The time was supposed to be sixteen days, but it had been cut short by two days because she had exams in school. Our impression was that it was increasingly difficult to fit the two calendars—spontaneous biological and clocked school—together, and also, girls are pressured to hide their menstruation at school because Christian and perhaps also television-influenced schoolmates would make fun of them. While we waited for the priest to arrange the *puja* materials during the filming of Deva's menarche, people around us discussed the disappearance of menarche rituals in the neighborhood. They named only three communities nearby that are continuing with the tradition.

Three young women expressed the contradictory clash of older traditions with demands of modernization. A woman from the Pulluva community, who has returned

with a college education sings songs to the *naga* shrine in the temple at Attukal. Yet though she knows the songs, she does not know much, she says, about their meanings. She doesn't recall her menarche. This presents a markedly different picture than that recorded for her people in the early twentieth century by Iyer. At that time a typical Pulluvatti (woman) went into seclusion at menarche for seven days and emerged to a celebration. These matrilineal people were ritual singers, desperately poor and suffering the social constrictions of extremely low caste status so that they had to take charity and do day work to survive. According to one ethnography, their religion revolved around stones, snake and spirits, especially Rahu, a giant sky-serpent who "swallows the moon" during eclipses.

One young Brahmin woman expressed outrage at what she experienced as physical indignities in older rural practices in her own family. Out in the country when her menarche began, she had been assigned to a room whose floor was covered with cow dung, on which she had to sit for three days, as custom mandated. Following this, which she described as an ordeal of watching worms, she was taken for her bath to one of two ponds on the property, and was put "into the slimier and mossier of the two". These rural practices which no doubt had quite comprehensible explanation in older beliefs and world views (cow dung as sacred, for instance), are an incongruous misfit with urban life and probably with Western secular views of what constitutes "clean". If this influence continues, at some point even women from Deva's Thattan community, for instance, may find the painting of walls with cow dung unacceptable. Yet in her menarche, the smooth brown walls helped establish the room as sacred space.

Another young woman, whose family had converted to Catholicism several generations ago, but who also had a Brahmin grandmother, spoke freely to me of her first period, which was not celebrated, and not publicized—as is the Christian custom. Her mother kept her home from school and gave her special food—eggs-- but she was not in a formal seclusion. She chided one of her schoolmates who had undergone a long seclusion with “no touch” prohibitions, and a celebration. “Are you going to do this for your daughter?” she said, her tone intimating that the practice is old-fashioned, at best.

Elderly men, too, reacted to the subject of menarche, describing memories from their childhood of their female relatives in seclusion. Men from groups such as the Nayers, who celebrated menarche as an auspicious community event, recalled the pride they felt when they were called to do the chore of taking food down to the seclusion house for their aunt, older sister or mother. Dr. P.K. Nambiar remembered a particular leaf, the *telli*, used by the women for bathing at the end of menstruation, and that at menarche the maidens received gold belts, bangles and other jewelry. “We men and boys weren’t told any details,” he said cheerfully. “Only the women know what went on.”

My overall impression is that menarche was an auspicious celebrated and major event for most of Kerala’s communities well into the 20th century, from the well-positioned who rode elephants in grand processions to poor agricultural workers who required their relatives to bring small donations of money to defray costs of the feast. Then at mid-century, the custom virtually disappeared in many families.

Contemporarily, women immersed in Kerala culture remain enthusiastic about menarche celebrations, though at least one young woman wanted less of a public display than her mother had received. A woman who had applied for jobs in a Western country

was vehemently opposed to the rite, though it had been customary in her family. Women who came of age at mid-century when menarches had virtually disappeared, perhaps as a result of intensive schooling led by Christian educators, felt they had missed something wonderful that their mothers had, and in some cases have revived the tradition.

CHAPTER FOUR

Application of Metaformic Categories to Menarche and Goddess Rites

Types of Metaform

I will begin with each of four types of metaforms: *wilderness*, *cosmetikos*, *narrative*, and *material*. Recalling that “metaform” means a container for an idea, one part of which has to do with menstruation, the categories describe broadly *how* ideas appear to have been held in place through human evolution. To repeat, I am looking for patterns of correlation, not meanings. “Wilderness” refers to creatures, plants and the like—what I call “nonhuman beings”. A good example is the open-mouthed snake as a synonym for the “cosmic vagina”. The term *cosmetikos* means “ordering the cosmos through the body” and so refers to any body art that embodies ideas about reality. “Narrative metaform” is a broad category of storied reality that implies an embodied literacy; and material metaforms are those crafted of earth’s materials: wood, stone, clay and so on. All human societies use all four types of metaforms—and more; the ordering is simply to distinguish between our relationships toward living beings, our own bodies, our stories, and our artifacts.

My thought at the time of first ordering it thusly was that wilderness metaforms—use of creatures to depict human ideas—would have probably preceded our ancestral abilities to perform such functions as cooking, drawing, making spears, carving, tying knots or speaking human languages. Wilderness metaforms, I thought, logically must have preceded either narrative or material metaforms as both of these require complex arts. However, in rethinking this, the use of body movement—*cosmetikos*-- to express an idea or the use of blood as a painted signal can easily be imagined as an activity our

hominid ancestresses undertook early in their journey. The comprehension of honey dripping down the crotch of a tree as “menstruation of the tree”—in aboriginal Australian mythology-- could have been an extremely early wilderness metaformic (or in Knight’s term, “synchronous”) idea. But not necessarily earlier than the cosmetikos idea imparted by a group of red-painted maidens dancing in a circle as though to imitate the shape of the sun or moon—recorded in European cave art—or a group of men removing a boy’s tooth to bleed ritually at his puberty—recorded in Australian aboriginal ritual (Grahn 1993, 45)—or similar practices of cosmetikos.

Likewise, we could argue that the use of red ochre to paint the body with an idea of “earth’s menstrual blood” is a use of craft and therefore falls into the category “material metaform”. We could also argue that thirteen maidens ring dancing in red paint is story-telling and therefore falls into the “narrative metaform” category. Because these categories overlap, no linear “order of origin” can be ascertained. We can speculate that simpler versions preceded more complex ones. And we can say that all societies today have elaborated complexly whatever forms ancestors first created to contain distinctly human ideas.

In each category I will include information connecting the specific metaform to: A. menarche; and B. goddess rites and imagery. The bits of information are presented in the form of lists, descriptive paragraphs, tables showing correlations, and fragments of stories or myths. I will also use journal notes and personal accounts where appropriate, and because they contain specific information.

Very little explanation is given of the various bits of information in this chapter, as discussion is reserved for chapter six. Keeping in mind the research question, “are

goddesses metaformic constructs,” I will apply the theory to information I have gathered on both menarche rites and goddess rites, and related information, from Kerala, India with also some information from the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu. As I have explained, the greater context for women’s rites includes this neighboring state, following the work of DeTourreil. One or two bits from Karnataka, a state contiguous to Kerala and from Tamil areas of Sri Lanka are also included, designated for sources. The correlational tables at the end of each section summarize the information and display the connections succinctly.

One: Wilderness Metaforms

Metaformic theory would expect the following creatures to be ritually and mythically significant—and to have direct connection to both menstruation and goddess rite: elephants, bison, cows and bulls, rams and goats—all for their crescent-shaped horns or tusks, since the theory proposes that horned animals were brought into domestication because they are living depictions of two crescent moons, and therefore are a living metaformic glyph indicating a period of lunar/menstrual time, and a living embodiment of both the moon and the bleeding woman. The glyph of time is a period of “bleeding” between two crescent moons, that is to say, perhaps a three-five day period. The horned or tusked animals are literally depictions of the metaformic moon walking on earth, provided they are made to bleed or at least to appear to bleed with some red substance. There are examples from many parts of the world. Horned animals are impersonated by women in menarche rites, and/or are goddesses and deeply understood as “women”. Evidently crescent shaped horns, tusks and even the long ears of hares reminded people of the crescent moon. The two curved shapes together, especially with

red “blood” between them is a glyph for the period of time of the “dark of the moon” imagined as the “menstruation of the moon”. The following examples give the general idea: eland antelopes, which are white and red, are understood as the moon and embodied by women during the menarche rites of a maiden of the San people of southern Africa (Power 1993, 4 ff); buffalo for North American plains people were “women” and White Buffalo Cow woman is mythologically important; menarchal maidens dress as hares among the !Kung, and /Xam hunting people of southern Africa, (Power 1993, 6 ff and 22,23; 48 ff) and hares are widely understood as the moon throughout indigenous Africa—(and also India.) In the South Indian epic poem *The Tale of an Anklet* (*Cilappatikaram*) the connections between tusk, moon and maiden are made clear in a description of a virgin (maiden who has passed through menarche and has not borne a child) who is dressed as the goddess with a crescent boar’s tusk put into her hair; a few lines later the tusk is imaged as the silver crescent of the moon (Parasarathy, 120).

Because of historic, mythic and ritual close association between women, menstruation and horned/tusked animals, my expectation of practices in India was that elephants would be part of menarche rites now or in the past; and also that the depiction and/or dressing of these animals would include something red between the tusks. In addition I would expect elephants to play a part in Bhagavati ritual, if not also hares—originally in all probability associated with the moon for their horn-like ears and/or round white tails and round noses.

Certain birds are metaformic in many cultures: red, white and black birds, waterbirds and birds that resemble the moon in shape and color, such as swans, or are otherwise connected to light (make noise at dawn); and birds with red or “menstrual”

appearance on their bodies such as turkeys with red wattles, red-headed woodpeckers and so on.

Snakes especially those with prominent crescent-shaped fangs, red markings, poisonous venom may be represented with a vulvular appearance or connection; snake is one of the most common forms for divinity, especially associated with the goddess, in Kerala, as well as other parts of the world (Grahn 1993, 57-66). Turtles, especially those with red spots or particular shapes associating them with “earth” or “sun” and likewise lizards or toads that are red or have red spots, or are born in conjunction with red muddy earth at monsoon, and red ants in mounds—all have played a part in mythology connecting them to menstruation (Grahn 1993, 55-7). As theriomorphic goddess figures tell us, woman, plant and animal were united in a nexus of power, gradually becoming separated.

In considering Kerala and its diversity of both Sanskritic and Dravidian indigenous practices, creatures have sacred and mythic dimension which in daily practice, are in close relationship to humans. Earth, plants and creatures remain living, intelligent, interactive beings in common life in Kerala. For example, a Brahmin woman explaining her relation to Bhagavati and creatures said, “We feed the crows first in the morning, before we eat it—we always give food to the crows first!” Rocks are believed to bleed to indicate the presence of the goddess. There is a science of divination based on the sounds and movements of lizards. In telling us stories of the goddess, the Princess (Aswathy Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bai) of Travancore paused to listen to a particular

sound made by a lizard nearby. “This story must be the true one,” she concluded. “I always thought that might be so, and now the lizard confirms it.”¹

In the application outline to follow, the *A.* category refers to menarche practices, the *B.* category to goddess ritual practices.

Creatures

1. Snake. As I said, snakes in South India, and especially cobras, are configured as sacred beings, and are worshipped. People co-exist with them, including in contemporary well-to-do urban neighborhoods. Snakes are conflated with *shakti* power, and among the Pulluva community, whose traditional caste role was to sing songs to snake deity and invoke their powers ritually, the snake creatures that abound in India *vivify the earth* and give it (that is to say, *Her*) *shakti* (Neff 299).

A. In menarche rites: While I did not ask about any direct connection between snakes and menarche practices, there is contemporarily a strong negative connection, a ritual separation, between snakes and menstrual blood. I was told by a Nayar woman that a woman should never leave a tampon or cloth with menstrual blood on it or even after it was washed, anywhere that a snake could find it, or the ensuing ill fortune could last for generations. Women are careful where they spread their washed menstrual cloths to dry for this reason. A cobra slithering over a menstrual cloth in nearby Tamil Nadu causes

¹ In some communities/eras, nothing at all is to be killed. The Jains wore scarves over their faces at all times lest they accidentally inhale a small gnat and cause its death. In the house in Thiruvananthapuram where we lived in the Brahmin *gramman*, (religious community), a huge cockroach jumped into Elinor’s hair (they favored leaping into our hair at odd moments). She knocked it loose and a Nayar woman who worked as servant in the house casually swept it away from us with her foot, exactly as one might a kitten. Dianne’s friend Mahalaksmi, a Brahmin, expressed a distinction between cockroaches in her Bombay apartment: “Devi might take the form of a cockroach in the puja room, so you must never kill them if they are there. But if they are in your kitchen, then you can take a broom and kill them.”

harm (*dosham*) that can be tempered by performing specific *pujas*. (Kapadia, 87-8) A name for menstrual hut on the east coast of India is “naga” (Jayakar, 132).

B. In goddess rites: In Kerala, *naga* is the name for snake as deity, as is true in the rest of India. Jayakar describes an ancient image of the *naga kanya*, the serpent maiden of Indian folklore as having the face of a sorceress, the “venom-filled striking power of the serpent.” (204-5). Snake is closely identified with Devi. She sometimes appears as a snake; the goddess Mariamma frequently takes the form of a cobra, and has the name *nagama* (goddess mother snake). Bhagavati temple installations are nearly always accompanied by an installation of *nagas*—stone sculptures of snakes. These sometimes are cobras with breasts, *naginis*; frequently they are a sexual male-female couple (*nagappa* and *nagama*). Endowing fertility is one of their powers, and they are associated with family well-being.

In Bhadrakali’s posters she nearly always holds at least one cobra, and has a canopy of five or more over her head. In a photograph of an installation of Bhadrakali at Kodungallur temple, taken in 1960, the goddess holds a cobra in one of her hands. In the installation of Bhadrakali at Attukal Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, the sanctum sanctorum roof has brass cobras protectively around its rim. While most temples, of gods as well as goddesses, have snake presence, snake has independent status as a synonym for the goddess. (Kersenboom, 55)

The connection between the cobra and the vagina is explicit in some Bhadrakali temples. At the Thozhuvancode temple outside Thiruvananthapuram, two tall full-bodied *yakshis* (demigods, probably older conceptions of the goddess) about ten feet tall are painted on columns guarding the back (west) entrance. Fifty or so snakes twine at the

ends of their loose black hair; cobras twine around their necks, waist, knees, wrists and ankles. Five large open-mouthed cobras pour out of each of their vaginas. The eyes of the *yakshis* protrude with *shakti* power, as do their nipples; the *yakshi* on the right has a red crescent between her eyes, the one of the left a red circle. (No one is allowed to take pictures of these extremely powerful images.)

In other temples, older carvings of goddesses or *yakshis* are *naginis*--serpents below the waist, arising out of the "mouth/vagina" of the cobra-- or are naked holding cobras in both hands. In many icons, cobras twine around the waist, neck or wrists of the goddess. *Naga* shrines are everywhere in the open air, especially under banyan trees. A snake temple, Manarasala, is officiated by a priestess.

At a *theyyam* festival in Cannanore in the north of Kerala, Dianne and I filmed a traditional *theyyam* actor who embodies the goddess in the form of a huge blood red cobra. After hours in a state of trance, she/he served as oracle for a crowd of people, especially women, who came individually to ask a question and receive a response from the deity. Earlier we had interviewed the *theyyam* enactor, and were told some of the *theyyam*—a story about two sisters, one of whom gave birth to the snake, and the other to the bird.

2. *Bird*. I identified two living bird species currently associated with Bhagavati rituals. One is the chicken, the second a form of kite, or "eagle" known as "Garuda bird".

Chicken. The chicken was probably initially domesticated in the Bay of Bengal region and other parts of southeast Asia, not for economic but for ritual blood letting and magical purpose, including for cock-fighting (Sauer, 32). In ritualized cock fights of South India "the blood must touch ground to please the Bhuta" (Thurston and

Rangachari, Vol. I, 157). The black chicken with black bones was particularly considered the most sacred (Sauer, 32). The chicken continues to be metaformic in shape, coloring and in its connection to dawn—which by crowing, the rooster announces. Metaformically the chicken is bred to enhance three colors: red, black and white—these are world wide significations for blood, dark moon and full moon. The black feathers of some birds are splashed with gold, as though breeders set about emphasizing a connection to sunlight. The crest and wattles are blood-like in appearance.

A. In menarche rites: Chicken sacrifice is used directly in menarche rites of the Kaniyan caste. After three days of the maiden's seclusion, "On the fourth day, she and her friends have an oil bath in a stream or tank close by. A triangular figure made of the bark of a plantain tree, with lighted candles and pieces of tender leaves of a cocoanut (sic) tree thrust on the three sides, on which is sprinkled the blood of a fowl just killed, is waved round the head of the girl as she plunges into the water." (Iyer, Vol 1, 201) Similarly, a sacrificed chicken may be a *kai bai* (offering held in the hand of a woman) that is waved over the maiden's head and then floated away, in menarche rites of the Kudan community (from early in the twentieth century at least) (Thurston and Rangachari Vol. IV, 93-4).

B. In goddess rites: Chicken sacrifice in former times probably characterized Bhadrakali rites with Dravidian (non-Brahmin) priests who did the sacrifices, and chickens continue to be brought to many temples even though they are no longer sacrificed, or it is publicly said that they are no longer sacrificed. Something of the magnitude of the power of these sacrifices can be caught by imagining the blood of ten thousand chickens, formerly sacrificed at dawn of a single day of the yearly Bharani

festival at Kodungallur, the blood then poured over two round white stones on the north side of the installation of Bhadrakali. Red cloths are now laid upon the stones as blood substitutions.

On the gate of the temple at Kodungallur are two depictions of white roosters, one standing on a pillar on each side of the gate; the gates themselves feature outlines of roosters in iron. The white roosters have high sweeping tails and round puffed up chests, emphasizing the white color and shape of the full moon with a sweeping tail spray, and the blood red crest on the head.

Karinkali (black Kali) loves black hens, I was told by a Nayar woman. At Thozhuvancode temple, a Chamundi Shakta temple featuring striking sculptured and painted imagery of the goddess in many different forms, the west gate held a massive (twelve feet tall) dramatic brilliantly painted sculpture of Bhadrakali holding Darika's bleeding head, which she had just severed. This towered on a platform above the wide gate. Seated directly in front of the grandly angry goddess was a life-size sculpture of a man, with a knife in hand and several chickens around him. He was facing the goddess and preparing to sacrifice one of the birds. Our guide and translator that day was B, a young Tamil Brahmin woman, sensitive to issues of blood. "That is a mistake," she said, "that man with the knife is out of place." Interestingly, I did not see this part of the sculptural group until she pointed it out—my eyes, unused to thinking in terms of blood, simply did not see the man with the knife.

Chicken sacrifice was a practice at Attukal temple as temple officials reluctantly admitted—as they are especially sensitive to issues of blood sacrifice—until 1956 in conjunction with the annual Pongala Festival, if not also on other occasions. The blood

rite was followed by 7 days of closure of the temple; that is to say, the goddess Bhadrakali was secluded for a ritually significant number of days following the sacrificial “bleeding” of the chickens.

2. Kite, called “Garuda.” This bird, who appears in oral and written mythology, stories, anecdotes and Puranic literature as “Garuda,” is a large hawk or kite, called “eagle” by some, and also “Pulaya kite” and “Brahminy kite” (*Haliastur indus*). The bird is revered throughout South India (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol III, 404) and indeed all over India (Gadon, personal communication). Subramanian described “Garuda bird” to us as having a white head, reddish-gray body with black markings and red wings. We saw several of them riding the updrafts of the cliffs overlooking the Arabian sea and were close enough to see all the colors and markings, which are remarkable, as is the majestic wide-winged floating of the birds. As a “lunar bird” Garuda carries the colors red, white and black. Like the *naga*, Garuda is a god in Dravidian belief, is an important oracular sign in Dravidian *kavu* rituals such as Sabarimala and Bharani, and in Vedic belief is the vehicle of Vishnu.

A. In menarche rites: I did not ask about Garuda and menstruation. In Tamil Nadu if not also Kerala belief Garuda, that is, any of the kites, must not fly over a menstrual cloth or harm will follow. “Because his shadow touches the cloths, the Eagle-God is polluted and angered.” (Kapadia, 88) This indicates necessity for a “separation of sacred powers”.

B. In goddess rites: Though Subramanian said the kite Garuda is a form of the vedic god Vishnu, which most written sources affirm, I have also heard the name pronounced “Garudi,” the feminine, and oral stories of this bird connect it to goddess

Bhadrakali and the major myth told of her in Kerala, of her killing the demon Darika. Her vehicle, the fierce female warrior Vetala, rides Garuda bird in the myth *Darikavadham*. A “vehicle” is an earlier form of the goddess herself. (Jayakar) In a South Indian rite of hookswinging called *Garudathukkum*, a ritually prepared man embodies Garuda while swinging high in the air from hooks, and Vetala comes to “drink the blood” from the wounds in his back. Kali is also named as the one who drinks the blood of the hookswinger. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. 2, 405).

At the annual Bharani Festival (discussed at length in Chapter Five) of Kodungallor Bhagavati Temple, forty-one days of ritual storied as Bhadrakali killing Darika culminate in the appearance, overhead, of Garuda bird.

Garuda’s birth story (Induchudan. 134) associates him with snake. The two creatures are cousins. “There were two sisters, and one of them gave birth to the bird, and the other to the snake.” (personal account, at Cannanore) Induchudan gives details of the goddess mothers: one sister asked for many children, and the other for just two. The many children were snakes; of the two eggs one was “opened too soon,” and became the vehicle for the sun. That is to say, the yellow yolk of an unhatched egg replicates the shape and color of the sun. The other egg produced Garuda, who is sometimes called “the lunar bird”—vehicle for the moon. In at least one temple in the south of Kerala the goddess is depicted as both bird and snake, as she is as well in Bengal (Gadon, personal communication). In his 1883 account, Samuel Mateer reported that an Ilavar temple near Chakki in the outskirts of Thiruvananthapuram, Bhadrakali was “depicted as a female, seated on an image having two wings, gilt and covered with serpents.” (Mateer, 92)

3. *Horned and Tusked Animals*

1. Elephant.

A. *In menarche rites*: Brahmin and Nayar maidens were carried to their menarchal ritual baths on elephants, at least as late as the turn of the century. (Iyer, Vol. II, ;Moore, 441; also in personal communications) The female elephant is conflated with “womanliness”. In Sanskrit court poetry a beautiful woman is said to walk like an elephant, her legs swaying. In the poem *Cilipatikaram*, and Sangam literature “tusk-like breasts” is a frequent metaphor for a maiden’s allure. The tusks of real elephants, who continue to be used in temple rites, are truncated and capped with silver whose shape resembles nipples.

B. *In goddess rites*: The portable icon of goddess Bhagavati (and other deities) is carried on an elephant in processions. The example we saw was her procession from Attukal temple to the Ayappan temple several kilometers away, at night, during the Festival of Pongala in Thiruvananthapuram. During the procession to the Pampa River for her ritual bath (*triputtu arattu*) when she has her menses, the goddess Parvathi at Chenganor Temple is taken on elephant-back. (Her menses is configured as a menarchal celebration).

The depiction of elephants in art forms on temple walls and in sculpture shows a clear connection between the upward curled trunk and “snake” as a shape. The elephant trunk in depiction is nearly always shown with a red line running down between the tusks. Not only are the tusks associated with crescents, the elephant’s ear is also called “half moon,” and its buttocks are associated with women’s buttocks in poetry, as I said. In depictions on posters with goddess Lakshmi two elephants flank her with upswept trunks; they are white, the color of the moon.

2. Cows and bulls.

A. *In menarche rites*: A practice among agricultural people of Orissa, in northeast India, calls for a maiden at menarche to stand for an hour on top of a pile of cow dung during seclusion (Marglin, 26). I bring this example in because the ethnographer, Frederique Marglin, makes clear how valued both the maiden and the dung are, in the culture. In contrast, a young Brahmin woman in urban Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, told me of having to stay in a cowshed with the dung, and for her it was an unpleasant experience. Generally, however, I was told that cow dung is auspicious. In some Dravidian groups, as soon as it is known that she has begun bleeding, the menarchal maiden as well as the inside house walls are washed with a solution of water and cow dung. In the *puja* done at Deva's Thattan community menarche (*catanngu*), a ball of fresh cow dung was placed on a banana leaf as one of the ritual objects. The walls of the room in which Deva was received by the women at her celebration, and in which the priest did her *puja*, were painted to about shoulder level with cow dung—giving a handsome smooth dark brown appearance to an otherwise undecorated room. Cow dung ash, called *verbuthi*, is part of the *puja*, and was used in Deva's menarche rite.

Cow dung is a highly valued substance, one of the sacred emissions of the cow—the others being milk, butter, ghee, curds. The dung is to ritually purify, and is also used as an antiseptic and insect repellent, invaluable in the intense insect life of the tropics. Homes we visited in the countryside were swept clear of all debris, even pebbles, for thirty yards around the entrance and washed with solutions of cowdung to keep away certain insects. There were times I wished we knew how to use it to protect our house on Valiachalai Street.

In appearance the dung is metaformic in the following ways: it is soft and slightly sticky, adhesive and a deep warm and very dark brown; product of a horned animal who is associated with the moon, and considered one of the five sacred substances produced by the cow.

B. In goddess rites: The cow is a goddess, “who fills all our needs,” according to a Brahmin woman ritual specialist. The bull is also the vehicle of the god Shiva, whose religion is closely connected to that of Bhagavati, and in some manifestations they are conjoined. For the Korava people of Tamil Nadu, the goddess is depicted in the form of cow dung with red turmeric and cowries in a basket (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol 3, 464).

3. Buffalo. *A. In menarche rites:* I did not explore for any direct connection between buffalo and menstruation, and would expect this in a rural, not urban, setting.

B. In goddess rites: In pan-Indian mythology Durga is the name of the goddess who kills the buffalo demon. In South India, Mariamma is a *grama devata* closely connected to the buffalo. In one of many versions of the myth Mariamma kills the buffalo demon, Dundhubi, who has sprung from a drop of blood that escaped her earth-sized tongue. She kills him in a myth that involves snakes and ants. (Jayakar, 40-43). A *bas* relief at Attukal temple in Thiruvananthapuram dramatically depicts a goddess with a trident, killing a buffalo, whose blood flows graphically and metaformically *between* the (crescent-shaped) horns. Jayakar described an image of half buffalo, half woman, (66) and of a goddess with widely curved buffalo horns behind her head, which could also “represent the disc of the moon”. (204)

In rural ritual to goddess Mariamma, a buffalo plays a prominent part. In some rites the buffalo's decapitated head is placed to bleed on the earth in front of a small hut with a clay image of the goddess within. (Jayakar, 42-43) In sacrificial rituals to Mariamma and other village goddesses, a buffalo's body is treated similarly to that of a maiden at menarche. First the buffalo is bathed, then smeared with *cumcum* (red powder) and yellow turmeric, just before the beheading produces copious bleeding. In some villages, a buffalo is smeared with red *cumcum* between its horns and let go (Whitehead, 56, 83; Jayakar, 40) without beheading yet with the image of bleeding between the horns.

4. Sheep. *A. In menarche rites:* I found no connections between menstruation and sheep in Kerala. However, Telugu-speaking people of South India, the Madiga people, a leather-working community, had the custom of sacrificing a sheep in front of the door when the maiden returned to her house from seclusion. She was marked on her face with the blood. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. IV, 322)

B. In goddess rites: A sheep-faced goddess—a *yogini*—was depicted in antiquity; Avi was the name of one sheep-headed goddess (Jayakar, illustration 1, 48). A sheep lies across the shoulders of a stone carving of goddess Mariamma in an outdoor installation at Kodungallur temple (Vasurimala story, Appendix C). Sheep and rams are/were common sacrificial animals, especially before altars of Mariamma (Thurston and Rangachari have several examples, ie Vol II, 374).

4. Tiger

Although the beautiful spotted and striped tiger is long gone from Kerala's village and urban scenes, the most prominent goddess, Bhagavati, is frequently depicted with *dharmstra*, tiger fangs at the corners of her mouth. One also easily finds in Kerala temple

precincts poster and mural art of northern India's goddess Durga, riding on a tiger. Women told me the fangs of the goddess and her fierce tiger aspect are protective qualities, part of her mother capacity. A connection between the tiger's body and the maiden's body is perhaps through the spots. "The coming of age of girls is marked by the appearance of beauty spots on her breasts and on the *alkul (mons veneris)*" (Kersenboom, 6). In the epic poem *Cilippatikaram*, (ca. 450 ce) (Kersenboom, 7) a tiger skin is wrapped around the waist of a maiden who is configured as the goddess; the spotted tiger skin is said to have *ananku*. "A robe of elephantskin covered her/and over it, as Ananku, a girdle of tigerskin" (Parthasarathy, 122). The word *ananku* means a power associated with menarche and the allure of women, a sacred power which is considered to be dangerous, but not always malevolent; it is also attractant (Kersenboom, 6; Hart, 238) and can indicate an oracle of the goddess (Parasarathy, 121). The spots are called *cunanku*, (Kersenboom, 7) a word intriguingly similar to *ananku*. The goddess is frequently portrayed with spots painted on her face, for example in *theyyam* embodiments of her. While these spots are currently connected to smallpox (according to oral sources) they could predate the appearance of this cattle-borne disease. For example, female creation figures in Australian aboriginal rock art associated with moon, menstruation and consciousness are portrayed with spots, identified as energy or rain dots (Grove 1998, Chapter Five and personal communication). In Kerala, certain forms of the goddess, the tiger and the menarchal maiden have similar qualities: of spots, and of power that is both positive and negative.

Table 1: Creatures associated with blood, the moon, the goddess, and menarche or menstruation

Creature	Blood	Moon	Goddess	Menarche/menstruation
Buffalo	Sac.	Crescent horns	Mariamamma	--
Elephant	red stripe	crescent tusks, ears	carries icon	carries maiden
Chicken	Sac.	color, shape	Kali	Blood drops, <i>kai bai</i>
Sheep/ram	Sac.	ram horns?	Mariamamma	(Tamil Nadu)
Snake/cobra	red <i>cumcum</i>	(Rahu)	Mariamamma	neg. relation
Kite (Garuda)	hookswing	“lunar bird”	her vehicle	neg. relation (TN)
Tiger	sheds blood	spots, fangs	<i>dharmstra</i> , spots	<i>ananku</i> , spots

Explanation of Table 1: Sac. is abbreviation for sacrifice, TN for Tamil Nadu. In depictions, the elephant faced god, Ganesh, has a red line down his trunk, between his tusk. Besides his crescent shaped tusks, an elephant’s ears are also said to be “half-moons”. A Dravidian and pan-Indian deity, Rahu, is a giant serpent in the sky (child of a goddess) and is understood to swallow the sun or moon during their period of eclipse. The red powder *cumcum* is applied to living cobras in some Indian rites, and also to *nagas*, icons of cobras. (Yellow-orange turmeric is more commonly applied to *nagas* than the red powder, however.) *Cumcum* is made with red turmeric, an ingredient in blood substitute liquids used in temple rites. Snakes have a powerful negative relation to menstrual blood, and the two powers are to be kept separated. The fangs or *dharmstra* of the goddess can be shaped like crescent moons.

Plants

In a general sense female sacred blood is associated with plants through the ritual use of “*garuti*,” a red liquid made of turmeric, lime and water. Though I heard it described as a “blood substitute” by a Brahmin friend, Jayakar describes a goddess named Garudi, who is “blood” or sap of plants (Jayakar, 181), making a direct “merged identification” between female and plant “blood”. In many cultures “flower” is metaformic of menstruation, the words for blood and bloom are similar in German, for example, and “flower” and “flow-er” are related in English. “Defloration” is a similar metaformically constructed term. In South India, “to flower, to become a flower” is a common metaphor for menarche.

1. Trees A well-known Harappan culture image of a goddess shows a tree spilling from her vagina and displays the antiquity of connection between goddess worship and the sacredness of trees. Metaformic theory holds these are *particular* trees, selected by ancestors who saw connection between their qualities and generative, metaformic qualities of women. A number of trees in Kerala are sacred and associated with goddesses—the next question is whether they are also connected to menarche or menstruation in general, and whether they show metaformic characteristics such as red flowers or medicinal use having to do with menstruation.

Jacktree, (*jak*) tree. The tree itself is identified as either male or female, and those I saw strikingly resemble a female torso with long breasts as the fruits, which are pendulous and huge—a foot and a half long—and lie directly against the trunk. The flesh of the tree is red, and the tree has sap, or “milk,” exuding a white liquid when cut. The fruit—jackfruit—is revered especially among the poorer people we met; it is pulpy and viscous with a heavy musk odor, and ranges in color from light orange to deep red.

A. In menarche rites: In Kerala I found a separation between the maiden and certain trees: In the Thattan community ritual Deva’s grandmother described a strong negative relationship between menarche and the jacktree—the maiden was not to be given anything from a tree “with sap” as it “would make the girl stink, she would be stinking.” In Sri Lanka to the south a menstruant in a Sinhalese village kneels for her ritual bath specifically under a jacktree (Baker, 6). In a Nayar tradition in Calicut the menarchal maiden’s shadow was supposed to be injurious to fruit-bearing trees like the jack and the coconut, and she had to avoid going near them. (Puthenkalam, 61). In a Tiyya menarchal rite in the 1970’s each female guest poured water on the maiden from a

spoon made of the jacktree (Puthenkalam, 69). In Sri Lanka the water was poured from a leaf cup (Baker, 6).

B. In goddess rites: The connection to Devi was made clear by several people describing how the goddess is carved from a *jak* tree. The installed icons of Bhagavati at both Kodungallur and Attukal temples were carved from living *jak* trees, I was told, and the tellers emphasized *living* to make the point that this crafting is a direct interaction with deity. The process of carving the Devi in the top of the living tree is hemmed around with ritual, especially finding the appropriate time for cutting “her” loose. The appropriate time is determined by trembling in the carving, that is to say, the top of the tree shakes with shakti energy, and devotees take this as a communication indicating Devi is ready to leave the tree. The carving was then cut free from the tree.

The goddess installation at Attukal Bhagavati temple was first a *jak* tree carving, and then after she was cut from the tree the carving was covered with a black pitch forest substance to make her water proof for the many washings she must undergo in her installation. Then, later, to protect even more from the effects of the washings the statue was coated with gold. (interviews with Attukal officials)

Coconut. This widely cultivated tree was brought to Kerala by Tiyya people, along with the toddy palm; both trees have been traditionally cultivated by these people, who are believed to have immigrated long ago to Kerala from Sri Lanka. The coconut is connected to menstruating women in a myth of agricultural people of the plains, who relate that long ago they did not need to climb the trees, as “the coconut used to bow down, whenever a person wanted to pluck a nut...but once a menstruating woman approached the tree, and ever since then it did not bow down any more and the

burdensome and dangerous palm-tree climbing has become necessary.” (Shashi, 118) The myth suggests that women, through selection and ritual, changed the shape of these trees for their own reasons, long ago.

A. In menarche rites: The maiden is taken to the foot of the coconut tree, is identified with the coconut tree or sits on 5 coconuts, in some menarche rites. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. 1, 163) In nineteenth century practice, on the morning of the fourth day of menarche the Nayar maiden was anointed with oil and the tender leaves of the coconut palm were tied around her head and her loins. (Iyer, Voll II, 29) In at least one community of South India her seclusion hut was made with coconut leaves (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. I, 358).

B. In goddess rites: Coconut is one of the sacred offerings on Talipali plates and other offerings to the goddess; it is usually cut exactly in half producing a white circular (ie full moon) appearance. Whole coconuts are also part of goddess rite and are sometimes a variety called “red coconut” or are colored red with red powder. The coconut is used for divination, and is also ritually thrown “to remove obstacles” from one’s course. Goddess Bhagavati fights demon Darika in the tops of coconut and toddy palms in Kerala enactments at village festivals that take place at night.

Other trees. A number of trees are sacred to the goddess, among them peepul, banyan, toddy palm, neem. The sacred *pala* tree (*Alstonia scholaris*) is described as “milk-exuding”. Other trees “with sap” are the cashew, jackfruit and banana.

Trees and Pulayan menarche:

Of trees considered sacred, the Pulayan people have four in particular, and at least some of them have metaformic characteristics.

A. *In menarche rites*: In Pulayan menarche, a branch of a sacred tree was set in the center of a courtyard, and after emerging from seclusion, the maiden circled this branch. (Pallath, 160) If as seems likely, the maiden sat in her circle as the center of the square imagined or marked off as the four directions, the figure made is of a mandala. Pallath makes this explicit comparison: “Most of life-cycle ceremonies take place in the courtyard, often under the branch of a sacred tree which is planted temporarily at the ‘centre’. Circular movements such as going around the ‘pole’ is the usual ritual in the life-cycle ceremonies, especially in the initiation rituals of girls. An aerial view of the lay-out of the offerings appears very similar to the picture of a ‘perfect mandala’” (Pallath, 160).

B. *In goddess rites*: This configuration of central circle in squared courtyard is graphically replicated in the paintings done to the faces of Theyyam actors, men (usually, though women also do this) of the Pulayan community, who embody (primarily) goddess Bhagavati (Pallath, 57, Chapter 3, 154, 160). The face painting is understood as a mandala, as are the figures of the *theyyam* dancing.

Pulayan sacred trees themselves, at least some of them, appear metaformic. The Pulayas do their rituals to Kali (and to Madan, a male guardian deity) in a square of four planted sacred trees. In the center a hut-shaped structure is built on a platform, and sprinkled with blood of a chicken. (Mateer, 54). One of the sacred trees is the *Rottlera* which blossoms in February and March when they do their rituals. “From the surface of the trilobed capsules of the plant, which are about the size of peas, a red mealy powder is obtained” which is brick or madder red, much used by the Hindu silk dyers, who obtain from it by boiling in carbonate of soda, a durable flame colour of great beauty.” The root

of the tree is used medicinally for removing pustules, among other cures. (Accessed December, 1999. <http://www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/k/kamala01.html>)

A second tree they use is the Erythina which has red flowers which droop at night and follow the sun during the day. The Pulayas worship the Sun (the male god Bhagavan) and the Five Virgins. Medically, among other uses, "Women take this juice (from the Erythina) to stimulate lactation and menstruation." The medical uses for red pustules, eruptions, various fluxes such as dysentary and so on also explain why these trees would be sacred to Bhagavati, and suggest that many illnesses gained both definition and medical treatment through metaformic associations that were a combination of science and religion. Another tree sacred to the Pulayas is the silk-cotton, which has red flowers (Parasarathy, 123).

(Accessed December, 1999. <http://fig.cox.miami.edu/Faculty/Tom/erythrina.html>) and <http://agrss.sherman.hawaii.edu/onfarm/tree/tree000c.html>)

As part of their incarnations of the Goddess, and of being "the civilization of the forest," trees in India are understood as able to "receive evil" (Mehta, 248-262); "the sin, the pollution" can be wiped away with the leaves of sacred trees. (ibid, 250). Pulaya community practice last century included pounding a nail into a peepul tree to transfer a chaotic spirit, detected by a maiden's onset of shaking during menarche. To detect demons Parayans (another formerly untouchable caste) play flute and drum while the maiden stands before them. "The girl leaps with frantic movements if she is possessed by with them, the Parayans transfer them to a tree close by, driving a nail into the trunk after due offerings."(Iyer, Vol 1, 99).

Trees in other communities:

A. In menarche rites: Neem leaves are used to wash maiden at menarche among Nayars, and probably many others as they are a coolant. The mango, which acquires a red flush when ripe, is associated with women; and the fruits protrude at the top of the slender tree in such a way as to look like two breasts; mango leaves were used ritually at Deva's menarche rite. Maidens frequently sit on a piece of wood at menarche, in Nayar practice this traditional seat is from the *pala* tree and called *mana* (Iyer Vol. III, 316).

B. In goddess rites: peepal and banyan and neem trees are all sacred to the goddess, who as Parvathi, is washed with neem at her own menses at Chennganor. According to Induchudan, goddess Kali has a piece of peepal tree in all her rites. The portable goddess is placed on a piece of wood. Banyan trees, as I have said, are a usual site of *naga* shrines.

2. Flowers

A. In menarche rites: Explicitly, *puttu*, "flowered" from the verb *pukkuka*, "to flower" (De Turreil, 49) is a common phrase in Kerala meaning menstruation, especially the attainment of menarche. The term, *tiraluka*, means to arrive at puberty; old Malayalam poetry associates the root *tiral* with honey in flowers (DeTurreil, 33-4). There is a separation from garlands, as maidens in general are expressly not to wear wreaths (*mala*) of flowers during the days of their seclusion (Iyer, Vol 1, 202), and then may receive one ceremonially at their emergence. A spray of coconut flowers is put into the seclusion room with the maiden in some communities including Nayar, as various women told me. In Deva's (Thattan) menarche, at least eight kinds of flowers were used. A packet of *ixora* (red) flowers was carefully sorted and used as part of the holy offering

(*prasadam*) wrapped in plantain leaf. An orange garland (*mala*) was put around the maiden's neck by attending aunts. A spray of coconut flowers in a water vessel played a prominent part in the puja for Deva's menarche; and women (her mother's brother's wife) circled her head three times with the spray of coconut flowers and then "threw the flowers to the east" (according to the priest's instructions) prior to pouring the water in the traditional bath. A string of jasmine flowers were tied into her hair as part of her post-bath dressing. Deva's uncle blessed her at menarche by spilling flower petals on her head.

B. In goddess rites: The word *puja* is a generic common term for "ritual offering," usually done by a priest in temples or outdoor rites. Literally, "puja" means "flower offering"—Devi's special flowers are *ixora*—small-petalled flowers, they are red in color. Flowers are a common offering made by devotees at temples; sellers display them in stands outside the temple gates. Red and white are the usual colors; a *mala* (garland) is a typical offering. Many fiercer, Dravidian goddesses will only accept red flowers. Loose flower petals are used ritually—as in making rose water. Men throw flower petals on women at the end of pongala cooking for the goddess. A spray of white coconut flowers typically stands in a silver colored vessel at Devi installations, and a string of white jasmine may be tied around its neck. Women typically wear white jasmine strings in their hair when they go to the temple.

Posters of Kodungalloor Devi show a conch shell whose slit is filled with red *ixora* petals—suggesting a menstrual image.

Two: Cosmetikos Metaforms

Cosmetikos means “ordering the cosmos through the body.” This includes not only gestures and body arts but also customs regulating eating and drinking, and even the appearance and consistency of food substances. Expectations of the theory from customs on other continents (Grahn 1993, 72-122) are that the menstruant would have special methods of eating and drinking, that perhaps she would not touch the food directly or the liquid directly, and that she would be fed special dishes, and abstain from others. She would likely have her own “fire” and vessels. She would be under restrictions about touching others, and perhaps about being seen. When going outside during menses she might be separated with a head covering from sun, moon and even the light of planets.

Categories included in this section are body decorations, gestures, food substances and dance. Gestures include *kuruva*, (a women’s calling sound or ululation), drinking without touching the lips to the liquid, covering the head, and the ritual of “circling.” The circling motion (*arrati*) is panIndian, and calls in a blessing from the divine. Women in Kerala said the circling motion “can prevent the evil eye—the eye of envy.”

Body Decorations

The term “decoration” is misleading as its definition is limited to aesthetic, a beautification device. In practice in Kerala as in other places body markings, ornaments and so on are a language, a method of ordering reality--*cosmetikos*. Even to the inexperienced eye of the researcher, the smudge of red between a child’s eyes or three lines of sandalwood on a man’s bare chest speak of what temple the person likely just came from. Likewise, when the neighborhood children playfully marked Dianne’s hair

with *cumcum* a warning hand shot out to stop a boy from so marking me, as the red sign means “married woman” and everyone knew I am single.

Women pay especially close attention to the details of their hair and clothing, everything about their appearance. People “read” appearance for information about marital and class status, community affiliation, religion, mental state, whether the person takes care of herself, her health, age, and so on.

1. Red marking.

Cumcum. Typically face marking is done with *cum-cum*. This red powder cosmetic, usually made of red turmeric—in its more expensive form of red saffron--is used by women all over Kerala; dipping the tip of one finger into the powder, they make a small attractive dot—called a *bindi*-- between the eyes, over the *ajna chakra*, as though ancestral women wanted to draw a connection between women’s blood and consciousness or inner vision.

A. In menarche rites: In the one menarche we observed, of the goldsmith family in Thiruvananthapuram the women of the family anointed the maiden with the red powder during the gift-giving on the day of her emergence from seclusion and her ritual bath. Following her final dressing in an adult sari, she had been seated, facing east, inside the specially decorated room with women relatives and neighbors. The women lined up inside the small room and one by one approached and gave her presents.

Dianne and I had brought a present to the menarche ritual, and I was designated to deliver it while Dianne filmed the gift-giving portion of the rite. Through the translator, Renu, I was told the proper procedure. First, wrap the money in a plantain leaf. Hold this packet plus the small purse holding the brush and hair clip in my right hand. (One

never delivers or accepts a sacred offering with the left hand.) Wait to be told when to go forward; then bend and put the packets on the metal plate at the maiden's right side in front of her. Then reach with the middle right finger and dip into the bowl of *cum-cum*; anoint her between the eyes. Then straighten to upright posture, and she touches both your feet with her hands as a gesture of honor to her elders. By the time I was anointing her, about fifteen women had put *cum cum* powder between her eyes so she was quite thickly reddened between the eyes and up onto her forehead. I point this out not in the least to embarrass her, but simply to note that the ordinary red *bindi* mark was lushly emphasized at this part of her menarche.

Hindu cosmetic practice places red on the upper face and head—as though ancestral women sought to emphasize connection between menstruation and the mind and gaze. Married women wear *cum cum* in the center parting of their black hair, emphasizing their upper foreheads.

B. In goddess rites: Cum cum is given as *prasadam* in Devi temples, and put on the foreheads of devotees by the priests. I rarely saw *prasad* that did not include some of the red powder, and a small packet is an appropriate gift to bring the goddess. The priests in the Bhagavati temples always marked us with *cum-cum*. That *cum-cum* can raise shakti is perhaps illustrated by the fact that, once when I marked a *naga* with it rather than with the usual yellow turmeric, my Hindu companion was aghast and told me that one must never mark a *naga* with *cum cum*. Nevertheless from the appearance of the *naga* shrines I saw at times that devotees had done just that. On one occasion while visiting a palace we saw a carving in a wooden column, of a sheila-na-gig type of figure, a female with a gaping vulva. Devotees had put many offerings of *cum cum* into this

orifice, substantiating a folk connection between the red powder and menstrual blood, and my own interpretation of the open sacred vulva as a menstruating vessel.

Betel. Another reddening substance is betel, a stimulant which is chewed in its commercial form of *pan*. The substance reddens tongue, teeth, lips and saliva. In appearance *pan* resembles little shiny dark red hard clots (mixed with sugar crystal).

A. In menarche rites: In a contemporary Nayar menarche, the maiden covered her face with two betel leaves as she sat outside on the day of her emergence, ritual bath and receiving of gifts. Betel nut is a common offering at menarche rituals. Hema and Kamala described the Brahmin practice of their family in detail for us, and Hema produced a betel, or *areca* nut so we could see the dark red bloodlike substance at the core of the nut, which from its hairy outside appearance is called “a little coconut”. In their family only men chew betel, but we sometimes saw older women of other communities chewing it. In the goldsmith family the paternal grandmother, Chellama, chewed it, giving her mouth and tongue the characteristic red coloring. Hema prepared the betel with a bit of lime in a leaf and offered it to me; in joking with me as I chewed it and showed my red lips and tongue, Kamala called it, “Indian lipstick”. According to Mahalaksmi, another Hindu woman, “chewing betel is very sexy”.

B. In goddess rituals: Betel is a characteristic offering, and is frequently one of the sacred items, along with flower petals, *cumcum* and turmeric powder wrapped in a small plantain leaf and given to devotees as *prasadam* at Bhagavati temples. At Deva’s menarche rite the priest tied two betel leaves to the neck of a silver water vessel that was dressed and treated as a goddess. In a description of the virgin goddess in the epic poem, *Cilipatikaram*, betel is probably what gave the maiden “coral lips”.

2. Ornaments.

Bangles, ring, waist band of gold.

A. In menarche rites: repeatedly people said that gold ornaments were a typical gift received from family members at menarche. These constitute a portable wealth for women, which they usually melt down into various forms or sell sometime during their lives. One elder Nayar man described a wide waist band as part of the wealth his sisters had received at menarche. Ornaments are also protective, and are worn for that purpose throughout life. An older woman of the Tiyya community at Cannanore was so upset that I was not wearing arm bangles (*kappu*, bracelet) that I went out immediately to get some.

B. In goddess rites: As part of Pongala Festival at Attikal Temple, Devi receives a bracelet, which is put on her in an early morning (dawn) ritual which we attended, and found it drew a crush of devotees. Goddess posters depict her usually with gold ornaments, sometimes also silver (Chottanikara Devi for instance has both.) Carved wooden icons of the goddess in some temple installations are coated completely in gold, as at Attikal and Kodungallor. The Chief Priest at Attikal Temple said this coating was a waterproofing because of the many bathings the Devi receives.

Anklet. *A. In menarche:* Deva received silver anklets in her menarche rite, and it is probable that other communities besides Thattan have this custom.

B. In goddess rites: Heavy silver anklets are worn by *velichapads* (shamans of the goddess); they are hollow and filled with jewels or other materials that make a tinkling sound when they dance. In the epic poem *Cilappatikaram*, "The Tale of an Anklet," Devi in the form of the faithful wife Kannaki burns down the city of Madurai after her husband is killed by the king who falsely accused him of stealing the queen's anklet. Goddess

posters depict her wearing anklets and sometimes holding an anklet, emblematic of the story of Kannaki. An anklet can also be the goddess, and *pujas* are done for it in at least one community. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol VI)

3. Dress, cloth.

Traditional dress in Kerala is a length of cloth three yards or more in length and a yard wide. The *mundu*, a women's garment, wraps around the waist with a length remaining that is thrown over one shoulder. Folding and squaring the pleats is an art that gives the wearer both sensual grace and classical geometric neatness.

Mattu. A. In menarche rites: The ritually washed garment, the *mattu*, was/is indispensable in menarche. The washerpeople, whose caste name was Velan, Vannan or Mannan, play(ed) major roles in supplying menarche cloth to communities "below the Nayers; the *Veluthedan*, considered a low-caste of the Nayers is the Nayar launderer" (Puthenkalam, 57).

Typically, the *mannatti* (washerwoman) brings a ritually washed garment, *mattu* or *mattu kacha* and receiving in turn the menstrually stained dress. She then ritually washed this and passed it on to another maiden. In communities that continue menarche this custom may also continue. According to research published in 1977 by Puthenkalam S.J., about fifty percent of Kerala women continued to use ritually washed menstrual cloths for their monthly periods, supplied by *vannathi*, or washer woman. The percentage was 55.7 for use of *vannathimattu* at menarche (*Tirandukuli*); this percentage was higher in rural and lower in urban areas, and highest for the center of the state. (Puthenkalam, 64)

Nineteenth century Nayar women from North Malabar did not travel outside the state even when their husbands were employed elsewhere because they were so dependent on the *vannathimattu*, the ritually washed garment supplied to them by the washerwoman following menstruation. (Puthenkalam, 55). The washerwoman's importance is also indicated by the fact that "The washerwoman and the barber woman will guide and instruct the girl every step" through her ritual bath in the river, lake or tank. "She will follow all their prescriptions." (De Turreil, 36) Nayar ritual required two types of washerwomen/men. (ibid)

The washing procedures included use of ash and lye, and pounding the garment on stones. The washerwoman or man "took on" the 'pollution' of the cloth. Probably for this reason, occult powers attached to the office of washing menstrual garments and cleaning them ritually. That the garments themselves had special powers is indicated by the highly desirable powers attributed to the menstrual garment (*udayada*) of the goddess at Chennganor, who periodically menstruates. Also, in Tamil Nadu village dramas of goddess Thirupadi, who was dragged out of menstrual seclusion against her will by the villain of the story, Duhsasana, the garment refuses to be pulled off her body, instead becoming longer and longer as Duhsasana pulls on it, thus shaming him. This drama is central to the great pan-Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, and though the village enactments take place in Tamil Nadu, there is a close connection between the Pulayan people who do them and the rituals of *theyyam* in North Kerala. (Frasca, 49, 197)

The traditional menarchal cloth was/is white in some communities, red in others (ie Brahmin). Maidens sometimes sat or stood on a special cloth as part of their coming of age rite; sometimes pieces of cloth were spread on the ground as they walked back

home from the tank or pond following the ritual bath, and evidently were not to touch the earth with their feet. In Nayar practice, the maiden sits on a white cloth that is spread on top of a black wool cloth considered so auspicious it is also used as a seat for honored persons. (It is important to note that, with the presence of her blood, the colors are red, black and white—colors specified as sacred in many indigenous traditions).

Menarche is a change of dress for the maiden; *mattu* means “change”; relatives bring gifts of cloth to her, and she is dressed in an adult sari for the first time, and takes off her school girl clothes of skirt and blouse. According to De Turreil, silk “cannot be polluted” and that is why Brahmins especially wear silk saris (personal communication). Wet cloth also resists retaining emanations, and *pujas* are still done soaking wet; formerly this was very common practice, I was told.

The *mattu* delivered at menarche received ceremonial treatment. For example, It was “solemnly deposited on a plank around which lighted lamps” and rice offerings were placed. (Puthenkalam, 57) sometimes the *vannan* spoke the names of goddesses over it; and it was carried ceremonially in procession to the tank with the maiden for her bath (61).

B. In goddess rites: The Goddess is given gifts of cloth by devotees. Her cloth is very auspicious and auctioned to devotees at Attukal and other places. Her cloth may be washed by designated washerpeople or replaced with new cloth brought by devotees. The icon of Sri Kurumba Bhagavati at Kodungallur is wrapped in a red cloth (Gentes, 299).

Icons of Devi that I saw in Kerala were piled to the waist with red and white flower petal offerings. In poster art goddesses of Kerala are not portrayed with saris; they wear red skirts below the waist. Some goddesses, such as Karinkali, (Black Kali) only

accept red cloth, one devotee told me. As I have said, the petticoat (*udayada*) of Goddess Parvati at Changannor Bhagavati Temple is sold as a highly desirable sacred object following her periodic menses celebration. The traditional cloth of Kerala is the dignified plain white *mundu*, worn at Pongala Festival, for example, and said by some Kerala women to be a sign of humility, devotion and equality. The *mundu* is also worn at Thalappoli, processions of women carrying auspicious objects. In the oral folklore, Devi is in the crowd and one might see her in particular in her guise as an old woman dressed in red.

4. Gestures

The categories such as ululation, drinking without touching, ritual bathing, are broadly common for many or “all” communities.

Kuruva. This calling sound is ululation, made only by women, with tongue moving rapidly horizontally and with the mouth covered; the sound marks auspicious occasions involving an intensifying of shakti, menarche being one such occasion, and means “may it be well.”

A. In menarche rites: This sound has various spellings in different locations. Pulayan women use *kuruva* as announcement of a maiden’s menarche, to notify the neighborhood. A Nayar ceremony described as a “grand affair,” in the procession of the maiden home from her bath: “...women cackled the shrill ‘*kuruva*’ all along the way” (Puthenkalam, 60).

Older women from poorer communities are who I saw make the sound in 1997-8. Only two or three of the dozen or so women present at Deva’s menarche made the *kuruva* on the day we were present. They made the sound when the turmeric was rubbed on her

during her bath, continuing as her aunts picked up the tall stainless steel vessel and poured the consecrated water over her head. They made the sound a second time when the attending aunts put the *mala* with orange flowers, around Deva's neck during the dressing portion of her celebration.

B. In goddess rites: kuruva sounds were made by older devotees at the temples when the priests opened the doors of the sanctum sanctorum and revealed the icon of the goddess. *Kuruva* sounds are made by large numbers of women in the mass porridge cooking festival of pongala held in Thiruvananthapuram during February. *Kuruva* sound is made three times during the pongala cooking, or at least that is what I observed. The first occurs when the fires are first lit (the fire is handed from the temple and passed woman to woman, or a priest brings it around). The second sounding marks putting the rice into the pot or the water boiling; and the third is made when the priest sprinkles rose water on the pots at the end of the day to mark the finish of the ritual.

Drinking without touching the water. On several continents, in indigenous customs, menstruating women were prohibited from touching their lips directly to water (Grahn 1993, 27-30).

Drinking without touching lips to the liquid is a widespread practice for everyone, in all drinking in Kerala. The head is tilted backward and the cup held several inches above. Even hot liquid is poured into the mouth in this manner. Drinking from the cupped right hand is done similarly. According to Kamala Bai the Europeans brought cups and "sipped" from them—her gestures indicated that previously all Kerala people

drank from their hands and other cuplike objects in a single graceful sweeping motion—without touching the lips.²

A. In menarche rites: Into the first quarter of the twentieth century, evidently drinking only from their cupped hands, pouring the water into their mouths, was specified for menstruating women in Kerala and South India in general: (Iyer. Vol 1, 202) He implies this was true for “all” menstruating women in Kerala.

B. In goddess rites: I witnessed drinking in the temple only once, and this was of a *garuthi* (blood substitute) *prasad* offered at Chottanikara temple. A woman attendant poured the red liquid into the right palm of the devotee, who poured it without touching into his mouth and sprinkled a few drops over the top of his head.

Touching the body.

A. In menarche rites: the maiden is not to be touched, sometimes not by certain people, sometimes not by anyone at all.

B. In Goddess rites: the icon is touched only by priests, and sometimes not even they can touch her, for example when the goddess is in seclusion, as she is at Kodungallor at the end of Bharani Festival two women attendants wash and dress her, according to V.K. Saraswathiamma, the hereditary priestess at the Mariamma installation there.

Bathing. *A. In menarche rites:* An essential part of the menarche rite is the ritual bath done at the end of seclusion. This bath, which formerly was done with a full

² In Brahmin cosmetikos, the saliva is particularly inauspicious (“polluting”) and conveys negative influence. Drinking without touching the container keeps it “uncontaminated” for others. The modern explanation for the practice is clearly tailored for European understanding of negative or inauspicious influence—the germ theory of disease. Our Tamil Brahmin neighbors on Valiachalai Street made a special explanation that seemed designed to please us (from their

procession to the river, lake, pond or tank, can also be as simple as the pouring of water over the maiden's head. A purpose of the bath is to help remove *dosham*, the inauspicious elements that occur from the placement of the stars at the moment of first bleeding. Water is understood to neutralize the effects of energetic emanations, "pollution". The bath of the Pulaya people is called *therandu kuli* (Pallath, 50).

The bath water itself, once it is poured over the maiden's head, may be considered purifying, according to the account of nineteenth century Ilavar practice (Iyer, Vol. 1, 284) In this community if not also many others, the maiden's room "has to be swept and cow-dunged and the water in which she bathes is also mixed with it; for it is believed to have a purifying influence". (ibid)

B. In goddess rites: The goddess' sacred bath is *arattu*. Her bath water is considered purifying; devotees in the temple may sprinkle drops onto their heads and also drink a small amount, for blessing. At Chennanganor Temple, the occasion of the menses of Parvathi is *Trpputtarattu*, a term De Turreil describes as three parts: *tiru*, "sacred, auspicious"; *puttu*, "flowered"; and *arattu*, "immersion bath of an image of the deity in a river, the sea or a tank...Altogether, the compounds means 'the sacred, auspicious immersion bath after menses'" (De Turreil, 49).

Head covering.

Like drinking without touching the fluid, head covering is a menarchal practice recorded last century in North America and Asia, usually explained as separating her from the sun or stars.

expressions), that drinking without touching the cup with one's lips prevents germs from being carried from person to person.

A. In menarche rites: the sister and niece of the Maharajah in Kodungallur reported that in their experience, a companion accompanied the secluded menstruant whenever she went to the toilet, which was located in an outbuilding. The two went out at night only, and an umbrella was used to cover the menstruant's head. (They reported this with enthusiasm for our interest; I had no sense of any negative connection to the practice.) Kamala Bai (Cheruman/Pulayan community practice) reported that her niece had covered her head with cloth as a protection from "the unseen gods" of the air. Likewise, Deva's grandmother said yes, Deva used a head covering of cloth (her gesture indicated the end of her scarf) whenever she needed to go outside, not only to be unseen by persons but also to be unseen by "evil spirits who would disturb her".

Evidently a belief was that spirits in the air might impregnate or rape. If a Nayar or Tiyya woman "disregards any of the prohibitions, she may be raped by evil spirits, appearing as hairy animals. This circumstance results in a hysterical, dissociated behavior or in a dangerous loss of blood." (Gough 1955, 63). A number of songs describe the maiden, at the time of her menarchal bath, dying and being transformed into a goddess; "at this time she may be impregnated by supernaturals, to later give birth to teyyam deities" (Freeman, 310). The maiden covers her head to "insulate herself" from the influences of both the sun and the wind, I was told, and this is referred to in *The Mahabharata* as well, as Draupadi says, after being dragged out of menstrual seclusion dressed only in a bloody cloth, "I whom neither sun nor wind have seen before in my house". (van Buitenen, Vol. 2, 148)

B. In goddess rites: The Maharaja's family also described taking their umbrella to the temple (of Bhadrakali, at Kodungallur). Umbrellas cover the heads of both female

and male deities on outings, for instance when they are mounted for procession on elephants. The umbrellas are in place whether the procession takes place during the day or at night.

5. Circling and Circle Dance

The gesture of drawing a circle seems likely to be one of the oldest. The circle is probably the oldest metaformic shape because it is the shape of light in the sky, both full moon and sun, and replication of the shape continues to be a common feature of embodied human language. The circle is an intricate part of religious practice from one end of the world to the other. The shape is also associated with menarche rites, and Kerala rites are no exception to this.

Circling.

The making of a circular motion in front of or over the head of, the maiden, a motion made with some object, such as a bowl or small lamp, held in one or both hands is a method of averting the “evil eye”. A term for this motion with the flame of the oil burning lamp is “*arati*”—an inherent part of *puja* everywhere in India (Gadon, personal communication). Several Kerala women told me that the “evil eye” is the eye of envy, and circling averts it. More specifically, De Turreil identifies “circling” as a major female ritual and a part of menarche.

A. In menarche rites: DeTurreil found that a major portion of menarche ritual among Nayar families and also others, was a special ritual called “circling,” which for Nayar women was the circling of a flaming triangle over the maiden’s head during her ritual bath. Hema described that in Brahmin practice, a form of circling would occur when the maiden returned from her bath at the tank. Accompanied by her companions

and a procession of people, she would walk down the street of the Brahmin *gramman*, with houses on both sides. Household women would come out from each house and wave a bowl of *garuthi* (blood substitute) before her, to ward off the evil eye. After circling with the liquid, they would pour it into the center of the *kolams* that are typically drawn on the street in front of each doorway. (The center of a kolam is considered “the waters of the world”) (Nagarajan 1998 presentation).

During Deva’s menarche rite, the priest instructed the women to take the spray of coconut flowers from the water vessel and circle Deva’s head, which they did three times, then throwing the flowers, according to his instruction, “to the east.” Metaformically this direction, site of the rising of both sun and moon, suggests that the spray of white flowers is associated with light, as the circle shape also indicates the shape of light.

B. In goddess rites: In Deva’s menarche ritual, the priest made circling motions with several objects. When his *puja* was completed, he handed a small camphor lamp to her, she passed it to her aunt, who passed it out the door to the visitors and men. (This *puja* was not necessarily a Devi ritual, it was generic). *Arati*, circling, with flame is a typical part of Bhagavati ritual at the temples. A portion of the fire is handed out of the sanctum sanctorum and a priest takes it among the crowd, who reach into the flame with the right hand and then pat their cheeks—the effect is of putting clean air on one’s face, and of inhaling the flame.

As one informant described the circling motion, the center of the circle motion is “the god”—and the circling is a depiction of our human life course around the center of deity. “Everything we do is for the god”. This suggests (following DeTourel’s argument that the Nayar menarchal maiden embodied a goddess) that the gesture of

circling placed the menstruant as “the goddess” in the center of life’s path. When *arati* (circling flame for example) is done in front of a person or deity, one meaning is that the circle is one’s path, which is always around the deity, who is the center of one’s life. The gesture absolves individual tension in favor of the mystery at the center of everything.

In the use of circling to avert the evil eye in its meaning of “envy,” perhaps the dangerous strong feeling would be diminished with this graphic reminder that the maiden’s beauty and good fortune was the direct result of the presence of the goddess, and emanations from eyes dissolved by the emanations from the flame or bowl of red *garuti*. The gesture reminds us that the vitality of the young woman’s “beauty” and *cosmetikos* is the goddess and not a personal possession, not a private wealth but rather a consequence of the common humanity and common divinity of all in the community. Meanings, however, change over time. What does not change is the gesture, which replicates the shape of light, and its connection to the maiden at menarche.

Circle dance.

Metaformic theory would expect some kinds of dance associated with menarche, that imitated snakes or the shapes of light: crescent, half moon or full moon.

A. In menarche rites: One dance in particular, the circle dance, (*Thiruvathirakali*) is mentioned in connection with menarche celebrations. This dance is performed by the women (usually on the day the maiden emerges, following her ritual bath, procession, and dressing in new beautiful clothing). Enthusiastically, Hema demonstrated the bending motions of the dance. Besides in Hema’s Brahmin community, the Nayars have a menarchal dance called *kaikottikali* and *circle* dance is mentioned as part of menarches

for such diverse people as: Kaniyans, Pannikans and others. Dances may be performed with a tall lamp in the center of the circle.

B. In goddess rites: The circle dance *Thiruvathirakali* is performed by women from all communities, dressed in the Kerala traditional white *mundu* as part of Onam (New Year's) and other festivals. The version we filmed was performed at Kovalam Village Fair, January, 1997. The young women were dressed in red and white, with white jasmine streams in their hair; the central lamp was also adorned with jasmine. This dance, we were told, is now secularly popular: "the national dance of Kerala". In one portion of the dance the women, in pairs, grip hands high in the air; then they bend to the left, slapping their palms together; as they rise, they reach an open hand to either side and slap the palm of the women who flank them. At the same time the entire group moves in a clockwise direction. (see illustration in film *A Menarche Ritual* by Grahn and Jenett, 1998).

6. Possession.

A trance state with symptoms of staring eyes, lurching and trembling is a sign of goddess power and is seen as auspicious, though also the same symptoms can be considered to come from chaotic sources and be inauspicious. In embodied goddess rites they are the quintessential evidence of her immanence.

A. In menarche rites: In Cheruman (Pulayan) tradition (Iyer, Vol 1, 99) at menarche the maiden was checked to see if she was trembling or showing other signs of excess *shakti*, which was seen by Christian writers as "demonic possession". Trembling and shaking, falling to the ground, fainting, groaning are understood as evidence of benevolent powerful possession by the goddess, or in some contexts of *bhuta*, spirits of harmful

effect. In a latterday contemporary description of perhaps a similar phenomenon Kamala Bai reported that members of the Cheruman (Pulayan) community remain concerned about the menarchal girls' susceptibility to "unseen gods" that occupy the air.

J: Does she cover her head?

K: Only the Muslims—(niece breaks in...) oh because it is in the countryside, she says it is covered. Because there is a false belief, that the ##### (Ghadarvan?) is traveling across the sky, "unseen god". There are so many gods in the Hindu system as I told you about Parasurama, they are always going up and down, traveling in the sky, unseen by us, and such a pretty girl, she is tender, she may not be very beautiful but she is a human being, and always the ##### want the human being. And that is the reason why they cover the head and face, they cover the head and face with a scarf like.

As I said earlier, Gough reported that spirits could inhabit the maiden, a symptom of this being hysteria; Puthenkalam identifies a negative goddess, Chettati, who required exorcism through songs. In general young women are protected from unwanted intrusions of the immanence of the goddess as well as other beings.

That maidens at menarchal age are susceptible to what could be called chaotic or unstable *shakti* forces is commonly understood and well-illustrated by the following story I heard from a Pulayan woman at Akkulum Colony in Thiruvananthapuram. She said that a particular middle-aged woman in the neighborhood had "gotten the power" from Devi. Her graphic description of this *shakti* possession was of concentration of face muscles, clenching of hands and energized, protruding eyes—the typical depiction of goddess Bhadrakali in poster art. The woman who had "gotten the power" subsequently had capacity to speak oracular truth as an illuminator of the goddess. But when young women in her household came into puberty, they were believed to be too vulnerable to be under the same roof with this force. So the woman went to the temple and asked Devi to take the power back (which she did). Devi's power can, in certain circumstances, be too much, be harmful.

B. In Goddess Rites:

“Getting the power,” is a common expression for *shakti* that comes from Devi. In states of possession the devotee can become an oracle, and can have special powers of endurance and invulnerability. An example of its effects is in a Tamil ritual in which the devotee after “getting the power,” can be resistant to extreme heat, and after pouring boiling *pongala* rice porridge on the body or extracting rice from the boiling water, not be burned. (oral communication) Fire walking is a village devotional act and offering to Bhagavati; Dianne and I together in 1997 saw a *theyyam* of Cannanore interact with fiery torches around his waist without being burned, as in the rite of *Karavaryl*, putting one’s hand in boiling oil without harm (Pallath, 160). The puncture wounds of cheek piercing in *cavadyottum* heal without trace in three days, we were told by a devotee; and likewise the broad head cuts of *velichapad* practice at Bharani Festival “healed with only the application of turmeric paste” the application of which we witnessed, and “within three days”. A story of Maryamma is that prior to becoming a goddess she was so pious a woman she could boil water “simply by putting a pot of water on her head.” (Kinsley, 201)

7. Food substances.

Cross-cultural connections between food preparation and menses: On several continents meat and fish are strictly separated from menstruation; in some Kerala menarches they were included, however, as “strong food” necessary for the maiden’s growth. Cooking and the handling of family food are in general prohibited for menstruating women and maidens at menarche traditionally throughout the world, including Kerala.

A. In menarche rites: In all cases of seclusion reported to me, menstruating women, and especially at menarche, are separated from the kitchen. They not only do not cook, they do not enter the kitchen. Even poor families go to great lengths to create this separation. Baker (1998) describes a contemporary family in Sri Lanka, living in slender circumstances who had no room in their home to accommodate a seclusion and so put their daughter under the kitchen table covered by a separating cloth, for two months. Photos showed the young woman evidently delighted with her menarche, not downcast or “oppressed”.

Members of the maiden’s family cook for her during her seclusion; in small families husbands cook for wives during menstrual separation. According to one woman a menstruating women must not touch cooked things, or oil or butter, “as these will remain impure” while it is permissible for her to touch raw things.

The maidens at menarche are fed special foods, while other foods are designated as not appropriate to be given to them. These vary and sometimes contrast depending on the community.

Contemporary people from several communities had quite different voices when they described cooking for maidens: as purposeful (Deva’s grandmother Chellama); an accomplishment formerly labor intensive, involving large numbers of women (Kamala Bai); a joyful, exacting event requiring traditional skills (Hema,); or a disappointment because modern young people will no longer eat the older prescribed foods. (Vijiamma)

Coconut.

Metaformically coconuts resemble the head with hair, and are commonly understood to have a male and a female side, the latter being the end with three “eyes”. In

India, the coconut is worshipped as the androgynous whole of deity (Gadon, personal communication). When cut evenly in half they resemble two full moons, and the juice is called "milk". Red coconuts, coconuts in ritual use are sometimes colored red to exaggerate a reddish tinge to the natural coloring of what are called "red" coconuts.

A. In menarche rites: In a menarche of Tiyya people, the maiden sits on five coconuts, as she does in other agricultural communities (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. I, 163). The maiden holds a coconut in her lap; or has it placed in the room with her, (Thurston and Rangachari, 154) among the Kanakkans, whose occupations included harvesting coconuts from the trees. Coconut milk is or was poured over the maiden's head (Thurston and Rangachari, 155) in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, among the Pulayan people (Iyer, Vol. 1, 98) if not also others.

The coconut is used for divination during menarche in Sri Lanka; thrown by the maiden; cut in half by her uncle at the moment she crosses her parents' threshold in her new status of adult (Baker 1998, 7). Making a green coconut leaf hut for menarche was a Tamil Nadu practice. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. 3, 358)

B. In goddess rites: coconuts sometimes are Devi, and are broken by Kali herself in a Mudi yettu performance. Coconuts are thrown in temples of the elephant headed god, Ganesh, to overturn obstacles; they are also thrown in Bhagavati temples. The coconut tree is associated with the goddess. In Tamil Nadu if not also Kerala a coconut may be made to look like a woman with jewelry, flowers and turmeric powder. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. 3, 330)

Pongala—rice and jaggery.

Pongala is a porridge made of rice and *jaggery* (*jaggery* is a dark sugar made of palm tree sap). The mixture of sweetener and rice is a common food prepared at menarche, with several names, depending on the way it is made. Powdered rice goes into the making of *puttu*, made for menarche by a Brahmin family at Thiruvananthapuram. Another Brahmin woman told me that a *pongala* dish was made for her menarche, the porridge dyed with yellow turmeric, probably as an offering to the sun god. Another rice porridge cooked at menarche, without attention to the spilling over characteristic of *pongala*, is *chakarachora*, meaning sweet rice, a combination of *chakara* (*jaggery*) and *chora* (rice); still another, dark red and viscous, made of *jaggery*, turmeric and wild rice, is *variri*.

A. *In menarche rites*: The crude sugar product *jaggery* is used in *pongala* porridge and other rice porridges or puddings made for the maidens at menarche in many communities, and frequently listed as a gift or special food, “sweets,” given at that time. A viscous dark red syrup of *jaggery* with bits of rice, *vari ari*, is given to the maiden at menarche by one community.

Typical, everyday rice in Kerala is red, or called “red”, though once it is cooked it is white with red spots in appearance. In rinsing it the water gives off a red coloring. Rice is identified with blood in India in Jayakar’s *The Earth Mother*. She gives an example of rice and barley as peaceful substitutes for human blood sacrifice. (While this is a single example, other grains also appear to have been connected to blood and to menstruation: a grain named *fonio* in East Africa, also millet in Africa and corn in South America are associated with both menstruation and goddesses of grain .) While the connection between major grains and menstrual and sacrificial blood remains thinly

researched, it is worth pointing out that in several Kerala communities, including Nayar (DeTourel, 35) rice may be placed *under* the maiden at menarche—usually under the woven mat on which she, and she alone, sits. In the Nayar example, she sits on a ritually laundered white cloth atop an auspicious black wool blanket. That she sits on top of rice suggests a possible ancestral analogy, confirming of Jayakar’s connection of grain and blood, of both the sacredness and the similarity between grain—especially “red” grain, and menstrual blood. Numerous connections are made between rice and blood in sacrificial rituals (Whitehead, 80, 93, 101, 109).

In one community, rice is heaped around the maiden as a kind of border during seclusion; spread over the floor by another, in Malabar (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol II, 13). In Nayar community practice rice may be placed in her seclusion room in a vessel; in one Nayar menarche the maiden’s bed was delineated by a border of white rice flour (Puthenkalam, 59). In the Brahminic *puja* for Deva’s menarche, two kinds of rice were layered over each of two *kolam* drawings on the floor; plantain leaves were spread over each. On top of one layer was placed the shining metal water vessel and on top of the other, the lamp—both decked with jasmine and treated as deities.

B. In goddess rites: Rice is the goddess; in some harvest rituals, the rice is “dressed” in thread, and worshipped (Panniker, personal communication). *Jaggery* is a sweet offered to the goddess, especially as a frequent ingredient of *prasad*, giving a red-brown coloring and viscous texture. The reportedly “most sacred” *prasad* is *vari ari*, or *ariri*, a deep viscous dark red with small lumps (rice) that resemble clots.

Pongala, rice with jaggery and other ingredients, is perhaps the most common offering women make to the goddess, as a thanks or healing offering. Rice mixed with

honey and vegetables is made by virgins for the community of the Kadar people as an offering to Kali. (Iyer, Vol. 1, 11) In nineteenth century ethnographic reports, women of various Dravidian communities boiled rice in pots and mixed it with blood and flesh of sacrificed chickens at many temple rites. The blood was used to draw a circle around the temple. This ritual dish, (perhaps an origin of “chicken stew”) was then either distributed to all or taken home to the extended family to eat. (Mateer, 94)

The head priest of the Thozhuvancode Shakta temple near Thiruvananthapuram told me that *pongala* was the most effective prayer anyone could make, and only women make it as a home offering, by cooking the porridge using traditional pot, ingredients and fuel of coconut tree leaves. He was adamant that his temple featured women daily cooking this sacred offering, and that as a prayer, “Women can get whatever they want.” A portion of the temple, with covered roof but open walls, was set aside for women to cook daily or weekly *pongala* offering, each with her own fire and pot(s) as is the customary form of the rite.

Pongala Festival at Attukal Temple in February at full moon is the world’s largest gathering of women,³ as devotees of goddess Bhagavati arrive from all over India to cook the porridge offering. Their lines stretch seven kilometers out from the temple (Jenett 1999).

***Gingelly* oil, eggs; “strong foods” and “fattening”**. The red oil of toasted sesame seeds, called *gingelly* in Kerala, is used as both a menarchal head bathing substance and a food in several communities. A young Brahmin woman gave a description of her oil bath, of women in her family pouring *gingelly* oil over her head,

³ This has been submitted to and accepted by the Guinness Book of World Records by officials at Attukal temple in Thiruvananthapuram.

and other communities use an oil bath as well. As a menarchal food, *gingelly* oil was linked with the giving of raw egg, the two being a daily fare of “strong food” to help the maiden. The term “strong foods” recurred, meaning in general foods that would help the maiden be healthy, fill out and become strong. “Strong foods, good foods,” was sometimes the phrase, and also “special foods”. As stated above, these are frequently sweets, and a sweet rice dish. Fish and meat, eggs and milk were also described as “strong food”. Toddy and arrack are also given in some menarches. Communities may give one or more of these “strong foods” or (in the case of meat, fish and alcohol especially) strictly prohibit them.

Both Cheruman and Thattan women described the giving of egg and *gingelly* oil daily as for the purpose of the maiden’s “fattening”. Since the seclusion time for most communities at menarche is three to seven days, the term “fattening” should not be taken literally, in the sense of high calorie diet that causes weight gain. The sense I had was more on the order of the foods’ triggering or accompanying her body filling out to a womanly form—a hormonal function. “Come back in a few weeks,” a translator said with enthusiasm, on the day the maiden was emerging from seclusion, “and you will see that she has filled out,” and she made a fist to show her arm muscle. In some communities in the past at any rate, the amount of daily *gingelly* oil—a cup or more-- actually acted as a purgative, (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol 3, 234) and would have diminished the girl’s actual body weight. Perhaps, however, *gingelly* and egg in combination has a positive hormonal effect.

B: In goddess rites: Gingelly oil is one of the substances used to wash the goddess at Chengannor temple, when she has her menses and is taken to the Pampa River for a

ritual bath (*triputtu arattu*). *Gingelly* is a typical offering at Devi temples; the devotee buys a small cup of the red oil, waits in the intense lines of devotees waiting to see Devi, and—at Attukal temple—passes a special container for pouring in the oil, which is used to burn in the lamps. The redness of the oil in the bronze lamps adds to the warm beauty of Hindu temple rites, and the smell of the oil is musky and luscious.

The goddess eats *gingelly* oil in foods prepared for her, especially in certain *prasads*. The daily offering of it to the goddess, followed by drinking it, was suggested to me as an antidote to depression. The *nagas* in their outdoor *kavus* are fed raw eggs. Three eggs containing various elements of the known universe, were laid by goddess Mariamma in her self-created form of bird, in a South Indian creation story recorded by Jayakar (40-2). Eggs are connected to snakes as well as to birds as mythologized beings.

Prasad, “eating first”.

A. *In menarche rites*: A contemporary Nayar woman said that in her family practice, it is essential that at menarche the maiden “eats first”. Thereafter women in seclusion for regular menstruation “eat last”. This same reversal of eating order is noted by Puthenkalam in Nayar ritual of the 1970’s (60). (Of interest would be learning whether eating the leftovers of maidens imparts auspiciousness, blessing.)

The terms “*prasadum, prasad*” refers to the offerings given the goddess. The idea, we were told, is that she “eats” the food and this blesses it, following which the priest passes the blessed food to the devotee. The offerings, which may be food, though are most usually some combination of flowers, ash of burnt cowdung (*verbuthi*) sandalwood paste, turmeric and cum-cum are folded in a plantain leaf which is handed to devotees by the priests. In Deva’s menarche the priest arranged *prasad* of plantains, *verbuthi*, flowers

and sandalwood paste, as part of her *puja*, and handed the folded green leaf to her when he had finished his part of the ritual. Without opening the leaf, she then offered this to her father. After the ritual, Deva and the women were “fed first,” served by the men in a reversal of everyday eating priorities.

B. In goddess rites: “Devi always eats first,” we were told, and this is why women pinch the rice cooking for *pongala* to see if it is done, rather than tasting it. The idea of *prasad* is that it is food given to Devi. She receives the first offering, and when she eats of it, the substances gain her power. In eating after her, one is blessed. Deva did not open the *prasad* but passed it to her father. In other menarche rites it is common for the maiden to fix something and feed everyone else without eating herself.) The value of self-control and giving to others is embodied in this part of the rite; and perhaps also the idea that since Devi is present in the maiden, she does not touch the food directly but “eats” it on a different plane.

Savithri De Turreil cites a tantalizing reference (from Battachayya) in matriarchal Tantras, to the offering of the substance of menstrual blood itself as food to deities Shiva and Devi.(44)

Prasad we were given from the temples varied from honey-covered plantain slices to combinations of whole plantains, ash, sandalwood paste, *cum cum*. The *prasad* called “*variri*” emphatically and repeatedly described as “the most holy” by our host Subramanian had also –from my observation--the closest possible resemblance to characteristics of menstrual blood: The substance consisted of about three tablespoons of thickly viscous, sticky liquid sauce, with a few “clots” of whole rice grains, and in color

deep, dark red, with an ironish rich smell. (I reacted with a solar plexus sensation every time I saw it—as though the substance imparted *shakti*).

Other foods.

The plantains we saw in temple rituals and also in feasts were invariably the small yellow sweet variety. We were told that the large red ones are the “most sacred” and have become too costly for most people to afford. Inspired by a recipe for banana jam in Arundathi Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things*. I experimented and was pleased to find that small red plantains, though their flesh is cream white, rendered a red-brown, viscous, densely blood-like sauce. I also noticed that usually an offering plate contains two (not one or three or four) small yellow plantains—as though possibly their crescent shape is a replication of a lunar figure. The plantain flower is purple red and appeared more than once in goddess ritual, flanking the entrance to the temple during festivals.

I did not determine what the palm-tree alcoholic drink *toddy* looks like; it is given at menarche in some communities, and can be an offering to the goddess. In at least one community of Tamil Nadu, if not also in Kerala, the pot of toddy can be the goddess, and is worshipped. I have included applesauce in Table 2, because it is one of a number of substances used to wash goddess Mookambika in Karnataka, and then offered as a *prasad*. Two substances that resemble blood are tamarind and pepper. Pepper is red when undried, and is a prominent feature of the ritual pollution of the temple of Kodungallur, as well as appearing in a story about the goddess (“Vasurimala” in Appendix C). I would look for it in menarche rites of pepper-raising communities. In Bhadrakali’s story pepper is connected to smallpox, which is one of the diseases understood as a form of possession (Ram, 57). Tamarind trees grow all over Kerala, and

tamarind is an ingredient in curries and also a popular cold drink; Kerala children eat the dark red seeds. Tamarind is one of the most metaformic-looking substances I have ever seen—the flesh of the pod is dark red, sticky and viscous; the seeds are droplike and shiny dark red; the flowers of the tree are bright blood red. Tamarind is given as an offering to the goddess, but as I was told by one devotee, (Mahalakshmi) only if it is sweetened. Otherwise, “the connection between you and the goddess would be broken”. Tamarind is used to help women in childbirth and pregnancy rites. (Moore, 380)

Table 2. Food substances compared to menarche and goddess rites, and the substance of menstrual blood

Substance	Menarche	Goddess Rites	Like Menstrual Blood
Plantain	with milk in drink	yes, commonly	red “most sacred” two crescents, sauce
Honey	--	<i>prasad</i> at shakta temp	sticky, color
Jaggery	yes, commonly	yes, commonly	dark, sticky, viscous
Sugarcane	--	poster she holds	cane is red
Pongal	yes, commonly	yes, commonly	red rice, red pot
Meat	prohibited/”strong”	non-brahmin, tantric	yes
Fish	prohibited/”strong”	non-brahmin, tantric	--
Toddy	yes (TN)/no	nonbrahmin, tantric	from tree sap
<i>Prasad</i>	yes	yes	“most sacred”
Turmeric	yes	yes, Bharani	red, use in <i>garuthi</i>
Applesauce	(apples)	yes, wash (K)	viscous/red?
Tamarind	--	yes, if sweetened	red, droplike, sticky
Betel (pan)	yes	yes	red, droplike, stim.
Rice, raw	yes	yes	red, (blood association)
Coconut (unhusked)	sits on 5 (Tiyyan)	yes, on columns	no
Coconut (husked)	in lap, in vessel	yes, and is goddess	“red”
Coconut (halved)	divination	on plate, goddess divines	full moon
shape/color			
Coconut milk	bathed in	bathed in	“milk”

Explanation of Table 2: it summarizes connections between the appearance of food substances that are commonly mandatory in various menarche rites, and their appearance in goddess rites. Plantains, honey; *jaggery/sugarcane*; *pongal* and other rice dishes; meat and fish; alcohol, toddy, *arrak*; the most sacred *prasad*; tamarind; applesauce; turmeric; betel.

The first two columns reflect the connection between food substances and menarche. The third column asks if this substance also appears in goddess rites,

especially as offerings to her. The fourth column asks if the substance resembles menstrual blood itself—by being red (either bright red or dark), or having blood qualities of: viscosity, stickiness, or a liquid with lumps or “clots”. Even forest honey can have such a description, and most of the substances fit this profile. The halved coconut when looked at straight on the cut side, fits the description of “full moon”.

From the selection of examples, which barely suggest the rich practices of Kerala people, of how women have conveyed meaning through “ordering of the body” at menarche, I now turn to how certain practices make connected “story”.

3. Narrative Metaform

Metaformic theory describes “narrative metaform” by holding that our stories come from rituals (rites develop first and stories use them as structure). “Characters”—entities understood to have storied relation to humans-- also derived from ritual relationships. Perhaps the earliest “character” was the moon (light) itself, changing shape as it traveled above and also walking on earth in the form of the maiden, who imitated its course and shapes. As such the “character” of the moon was that of a deity—a storied being with a life-cycle tied to that of a human beings; and the maiden too was/is a “living goddess.” In the projection she is combining a cosmological idea (the moon is an entity) with herself (as “woman”) through the connecting ritual of menstruation. I call this supposed connection “merged identification” to describe its characteristic. And in the mirroring, “woman” as entity (perhaps at first a collectivity) emerged as a “character” as well.

The merged identification between women and certain “womanlike” elements of nature constitutes perhaps (after menstruation itself) a most central differentiating characteristic. We appear to have developed a merged identification with natural elements that allowed the lights in the sky, earth’s various forms and eventually “the

earth” itself to reflect us to ourselves, and each in turn to come into our reflective view as a living persona, an interactive *metabeing*, a deity.

Through merged identification, we personified the elements, and this must surely have begun with the elements of light, of the moon. The moon, and the menstruant in its guise, became characters in human drama, the earliest human drama—menstrual rite. (In crossovers, these elements –gradually—became merged with males as well, in a shifting gender-dance of reflection). The course of the moon and the course of the menstruant—bleeding/darkness/seclusion/silence followed by emergence/bath/dressing/celebration constitute a dialectical round from which many “plots” are derived.

So, by “narrative metaform” I mean any discernible elements of this *r'tu* story, of merged identification, character, course and reflection. Story always involves characters moving in a time frame, a frame of time. The merged identification of the maiden with the moon and with elements, such as horned animals or particular trees, contains cognitive metaforms. (As I have said, I call them *metaforms* rather than symbols because they are embodied and because they are living relationships with nature—that is to say, they have spiritual and emotional dimension not implied in the term “symbol”.)

Likewise the *cosmetikos* of women (in Kerala as well as elsewhere) can be “read” to know what “time” of her life she is currently in. Young women wear umbrella-shaped earrings; married Brahmin women wear red cum-cum in the parting of their hair; widows wear white clothing and no *cum-cum*; when menstruating, women do not wear the red *bindi* dot in the center of the forehead, etc. Women in Kerala, especially in rural areas, paid close attention to our bracelets, earrings, clothing and hair. As I said earlier, my lack of bracelets was cause for distress from an elderly woman of a Tiyyan family in

Cannanore, she insisted that I buy some bangles (to protect) myself. Some jewelry indicates what community one is from; certain earrings are only for the young, for example.

Embodied literacy

Metaformic theory also holds that menstrual ritual contains within it various kinds of (and perhaps earlier forms of) embodied and nonembodied “literacy”. This is literacy in the sense of relatedness, of relating story through metaformic symbols. “Narrative literacy” is here understood as a method of containing information that is not carried as part of the body, such as in the form of *cosmetikos*—jewelry, dress, scarification, gestures—which are also forms of embodied literacy. Narrative metaforms are methods of literacy, of telling story, that are for that purpose, and that are “read”. Drawings on walls, tattoo marks that are put on trees, the “language of the goddess” that Gimbutas deciphered from pots with incisions and other marks—these are examples of what I mean. Metaformic theory seeks to connect these kinds of markings to menstruation.

The theory expects then that menarche rites contain elemental forms of such “literacy”. The elemental form is the thing itself—this is the essential invention-- and what follows after are the elaborations—all the ways of applying and embellishing the elemental metaforms.

Most obviously narrative are songs and oral stories. Songs are an integral part of menarche rite for many communities, some of them intended to impart sexual information, and some are part of the ritual of freeing the maiden from “pollution’s” negative forces. Traditional singers from the Pullovan community would sing the songs for some of the Brahmins who talked to us; Velans (washerpeople) also sang songs at

menarche and other rites . In the following section I will concentrate on a number of arts that appear to embody literacy, or are said by the people to be literacy, and are also connected to menarche. These arts are: songs, drawings in the form of handprints, hand painting and kolams, Theyyam face painting, and astrological divination from menarchal blood drops.

1. Songs.

A. In menarche rites: Songs are a big part of the proceedings, among the women, for several though not all communities. Sometimes these songs have been sexually explicit, and perhaps served as an introduction of the maiden to sexual information, and acknowledgement of her state of sexual fertility and marriagability. In the past especially, singers from the Cheruman/Pulayan community were often hired to perform this service for other castes, I was told by Subramanian, and songs sung at puberty rites were in part for the purpose of sexual instruction.

The washerpeople, Velans or Mannans, sang songs at menarche (Iyer, Vol 1, 157). At least one purpose of these was to exorcise negative “haunting” spirits (forms of the goddess) from the body of the menarchal maiden. “The haunting of puberty and menses was called ‘Chettathi’, supposed to be the elder sister of Maha Lakshmi” (Puthenkalam, 57) The songs of the washerpeople drove away the Chettathi from the body of the girl. Puthenkalam associates Chettathi with the Dravidian pantheon and dark Kali, *Karinkali*, “for whose worship Mannan is the shaman” (*veliccappatu*). (Puthenkalam, *ibid*). That is to say, Dravidian practice understood the negative forces attracted to menarche to be a goddess, Chettathi, exorcised by the songs of the

washerpeople, who were understood as able to regulate such forces in the culture as a whole.

B. In goddess rites: Some songs for Devi are called *bajans*, a generic pan-Indian term for devotional songs. They praise her, describing her characteristics and the attitude of the devotee toward her, “Devi plays like this, she dresses like this...”

One major temple festival, at Kodungallor, said to be the oldest Devi temple in Kerala, has a notorious reputation because of the ritual singing of “obscene” songs to the Goddess. By “obscene” is meant sexually explicit, and ribald, insulting or satirical. The occasion for this is Bharani Festival. Local guidebooks make much of this feature, which seems to have been scandalous for decades, to the point that the singing of “obscene” songs at the Festival was outlawed. This does not mean the practice has stopped; Gentes reported it from her visit in 1991 (318-9). As Dianne and I were filming parts of Bharani Festival in 1997, old men sang the explicit songs, while young men turned their eyes to us to determine what effect the lyrics were having on us. Since we could not understand the words, we gave them a perhaps puzzling response of cheery smiles. Only fragments of the lyrics have appeared in print in English, “If you have to fuck Kodungallor Amma you’ll have to have a penis the size of a flagpost,” (Caldwell, Chapter 6, 395). The joking content is reminiscent of sexually explicit ritual content of Bona Dea Festivals in Rome in which matrons carried dildoes in procession; and in the Eulysianian rites of Greece, the accosting of Demeter by the prankster Baubo, who caused the grieving Mother Goddess to laugh by lifting her skirt and displaying her vulva to her. Lucia Birnbaum also reports the ribald content of Italian and Sicilian festivals celebrating the “dark mother”. (personal communication)

Subramanian gave an explanation for the sexual songs at Sri Kurumba temple's Bharani Festival: their purpose is to arouse the Devi, *who is a maiden come into her maturity*, but who does not (except in a very few of her stories) have sex. Her arousal creates more power. In other words, the purpose of the song is to deliberately arouse heated Shakti energy which, because she does not expend it in sexual intercourse, is then for the use and benefit of her devotees.

2. Drawings.

Hand prints. *A. In menarche rites:* Nayar women, on their return from their ritual bath, were required to make hand prints on the walls of the house, using rice powder as the printing substance. (DeTourreil, 37)

B. In goddess ritual: According to Jayakar, "The woman operated in a magico-religious domain of *mandala* and *vrata* (sacred vow) ritual. She painted walls with diagrams...and the auspicious marks of her palms." (26) Brahmin houses, for example, had hand prints on the outside walls at the turn of the century, to ward off the "evil eye" (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol 1, 280). The hands of goddesses in poster art are frequently shown with symbolic red markings.

Face Painting.

A. In menarche rites: In Pulayan menarche, the maiden's face was coated with turmeric and spots were added. (Iyer Vol. 1, 99) As I have said, the appearance of light-colored spots on a girl's body are understood as indicative of impending menarche, and also of deity and of allure in post-pubescent women (Hart, 238; Kersenboom, 6-7). Both red turmeric and yellow turmeric are used as paint. A black substance, *mai*, highlights the eyebrows and protects the maiden, in Nayar practice at least. (De Tourreil, 36)

B. In goddess rites: in *Theyyam* (ritual dramas of Bhadrakali and other deities) the faces of men who embody the goddess in trance states are painted with designs which the participants call *ezhuvu*, “writing”. These men are Pulayans and also Tiyyans. The markings on the forehead, as I have said, may replicate the *mandala* form of the ground plan of a courtyard set up for the menarche celebration of Pulayan in north Malabar (Pallath 160). The painting is done by first coating the men’s faces with orange turmeric in an oil base, and then adding rows of dots and additional narrow lines red and black. The men lie asleep while this painting is being done for several hours, and arise to take on their costumes and headpieces, gaze into the mirror and go into trance state of possession by the goddess.

Dots on an actor’s face painted to be the goddess can represent smallpox pustules; Bhagavati is completely associated with diseases of spotting and pustules, especially smallpox and chicken pox, which she can both give and cure by taking them upon herself.

Kolams. Kolams are pan-Indian line drawings done on the ground or floor either inside or outside a house. As household arts they are done by women, who insist they are “writing”—not painting. (Nagarajan, oral presentation) The drawings are currently done using rice powder, usually white.

A. In menarche rites: *Kolams* are commonly done at menarche in—especially—lower caste households and one done in turmeric was filmed by us just inside the threshold at the goldsmith family’s menarche. Within families, the maiden’s mother or grandmother might do the drawing, or the maiden herself might. She sat *on* the drawing (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol II, 350) in at least one community (in Mysore). When the

Brahmin maiden returns from her ritual bath on the fourth day, she passes down a narrow street of Brahmin houses, each of which has a *kolam* on the outside threshold. The women householders stand outside “circling” (*arathi*) the maiden as she passes each house, to ward of the evil eye —of envy—with a bowl of *garuti* (red fluid) which they then pour into the center of the *kolam*. The center of a *kolam* is “the mother of all rivers,” or the flowing of “all rivers”—a particularly holy place. (Nagarajan, oral presentation)

B. In goddess ritual: the *kolam* invokes the goddess (ibid). In Mudi yettu, an enactment by male actors of Bhadrakali killing the demon Darika, the goddess is drawn on the ground with a *kolam* that is three dimensional of her face and breasts. A similar *kolam* drawing of Bhadrakali was part of a women’s *shakti* possession ritual of the Pulayan community, filmed by Dianne in 1996. Three participating women, embodying the energy of the goddess while sitting on the *kolam* dressed in red and holding a mirror, wiped out the drawing with the swaying motions of their hips.

At Kodungallor Bhagavati temple a *garuti* (red liquid) offering is placed on a drawing of a *kolam* lotus; the bowl of *garuthi* is set in the center of the flower. The goddess (probably in her portable form), was set on a drawing in a 1883 report.

(Thurston and Rangachari, Vol II)

Table 3. Narrative forms compared to menarche and goddess rites

Narrative Form:	Menarche	Goddess Rites
1. Songs praising Devi	Yes	Yes, Bajans
2. Songs, sexual, raucous	Yes	Yes, Bharani Festival
3. Handprints	Yes	--
4. Painted palms (<i>milanji</i>)	--(tali-tying)	Goddess palms red
5. map of courtyard	Yes (Tiyya/Palaya)	<i>Theyyam</i> face paint
6. <i>Kolams</i>	Yes, commonly	Yes, and goddess is <i>kolam</i>
7. Astrological divination	Yes, from drops	yes, bowl of blood

Explanation of Table 3: The chart compares the metaformic definition of “narrative forms” described so far with both menarche and goddess rites; the hand is very important to goddess iconography, but I did not come upon a reference to its use in and of itself in temple art. Henna-painted palms, called *milanji*, is common in Kerala as it is elsewhere, and women use it as part of tali-tying and wedding rites; I don’t know if they use it at menarche as well. Augury readings, such as of betel leaves floating in the water at the time of the maiden’s ritual bath, were done at menarches (Puthenkalam, 59). It would be fruitful to know if cowrie shell divination, which is complexly developed, was part of South Indian menarche rites.

Astrological divination from drops of menarchal blood will be taken up in the next section.

3. *Astrological divination.*

I have made this a separate section because while it is “embodied literacy” in the sense that the women “read” the drops of the maiden’s first bleeding, the ancestral people were in all probability “reading” emanations on a much bigger scale. The practice of doing an astrological “reading” of the maiden’s first blood drops is a clear example of a ritualized connection between women and nonhuman being at the cosmic (stellar) level.

“After ascertaining the exact time at which the girl attained maturity, the astrologer will make prognostications. Depending on the day, the time, the ruling asterism, the lunar fortnight and the month, the event may be declared propitious or otherwise, for the kin group. *Even without a professional astrologer, older females are able to reckon whether the time was propitious or not.*” (De Turreil, 35) (Emphasis mine).

Menon (1996, 108) credits the development of astrology as a folk art to indigenous practices in Kerala, especially by the astrologer caste named Kaniyans, as does De Turreil, who says “In Kerala, Kaniyan means astrologer.” Ilavar and other communities also studied the practice of astrology, which is typically done with the use of cowrie shells. Brahmins practice astrology and do readings for other communities; they do not do a chart at menarche as the Dravidians do, however; they do a birth chart.

Maidens in menarche rites on other continents are connected to stellar beings, for example the maiden embodies the sun with macaw feathers when she emerges from seclusion in the practice of the Tukuna people of the Northwest Amazon forest (Lincoln 54, 63). Mescalero Apache people paint a four-pointed star on the maiden at menarche, connected to both the sky and the four directions. (Krupp, 287-8) Metaformic theory posits that both the astrological and augury reading of blood drops began among women; and if these practices are as extremely old as they seem, connections between astrology and menarche, or at least between stellar beings and menarche, should be found indigenously in widespread places, such as both India and South America.

A. In menarche rites: Older women in the family “read” the first drops of the maiden’s blood for its astrological significance, according to what time it was first observed. An astrologer from the Kaniyan caste may be called in to do a full divination and make a chart, but the reading of first drops seems to have been widespread among women in many communities. A sample of the kinds of comparison used for divination is in Iyer, from his early twentieth century version, a portion of which is reproduced below. The maiden’s chart is made through taking into account such factors as the relationship of the maiden to the person who first saw the blood, and what day of the week, time of the day and in what lunar-stellar correlation. The shapes of the drops are also taken into account—round, oval, square; and the number. The alignment with planets is done in the system of “lunar constellations”—meaning the placement of the moon in relation to particular named groupings of stars. Both auspicious and inauspicious influences come into play at this confluence of her first menstrual drops and stellar/lunar setting. Not only the maiden but her extended family is understood to be

powerfully affected by the astrological confluence. Such major factors as wealth, misery, health and sickness, presence of love in the family, total ruin or prosperity of the family, are indicated by the lunar-stellar divination from her first drops. One reason given for the ritual of “circling” as part of menarche rites is that it is a method of mitigating the possible negative stellar influences that would otherwise dominate their lives. (Kapadia, 117).

The following chart, published in 1909 L.K. Ananatha Krishna Iyer, gives a picture of the complexity of the divination and also point out the use of lunar tracking—what day of the lunar month, what constellation did the moon appear in—as well as who first saw the blood, etc.

Table 4. Astrological divination from first drops of menarchal blood

(From Iyer, *The Cochin Tribes and Castes*, p. 203-7 in his section on the Kaniyans)

No.	1. Appearance of the first menses	Results of married life
<i>(1) in the different months</i>		
1	Medam (April-May)	Unhappiness or misery to the husband
2	Edavam (May-June)	Increase of cows
3	Mithunam (June-July)	Happy conjugal life
4	Karkadakam (July-August)	Tendency to prostitution. Affection to the members of the family
5	Chingam (August-September)	Many children
6	Kanni (September-October)	Evil disposition
7	Thulam (October-November)	Possession of a son. Widowhood
8	Vrischikam (Nov-December)	Tendency to malign others
9	Dhanu (December-January)	Handsome children
10	Makaram (January-February)	Intention to be virtuous
11	Kumbham (February-March)	Wealth. Affection to family.
12	Meenam (March-April)	Possession of children. Happiness.
<i>(2) in the different days of the week</i>		
1	Sunday	Illness. Family ruin.
2	Monday	Chastity. Long life.
3	Tuesday	Poverty. Loss of chastity.
4	Wednesday	Possession of children, fortune, and prosperity.

5	Thursday	Felicity, increase of wealth and wealthy children.
6	Friday	Beauty, affection to husband and mother to many sons
7	Saturday	Misery, ruin. and barrenness

(3) In the different days after the full or new moon.

1	Pradhama (first day after the full or new moon)	Short life, shortly happy.
2	Dwitiya (second ditto)	Barrenness.
3	Thrithiya (third ditto)	Barrenness.
4	Chathurthi (fourth ditto)	Premature death of the women.
5	Panchami (fifth ditto)	Disposition to quarrel.
6	Shasthi (sixth)	Tendency to prostitute.
7	Sapthami (seventh ditto)	Mother to one child.
8	Ashtami (eighth ditto)	Termagant.
9	Navami (ninth ditto)	Sorrow and misfortune.
10	Desami (tenth ditto)	Possession of children.
11	Ekadesi (eleventh ditto)	Neatness and beauty.
12	Dwadesi (twelfth ditto)	Maligning propensity.
13	Thrayodesi (thirteenth ditto)	Barrenness.
14	Chaturdesi (fourteenth ditto)	Tendency to prostitute, poverty.
15	Full moon	Piety and good fortune.
16	New Moon	Poverty and premature old age.
No	1. Appearance of the first menses	Results of married life

(4. In the different days of the lunar asterisms)

1	Aswathi	1 st constellation	Happiness
2	Bharani	2 nd constellation	Vagrancy
3	Karthika	3 rd constellation	Poverty
4	Rohini	4 th constellation	Sons
5	Makaram	5 th constellation	Beauty
6	Ardra	6 th constellation	Chastity
7	Punartham	7 th constellation	Love to husband
8	Pooyam	8 th constellation	Hypocrisy
9	Ayilyam	9 th constellation	Loss of children
10	Makam	10 th constellation	Abortion
11	Pooram	11 th constellation	Increase of wealth & property
12	Uthram	12 th constellation	Support to relatives.
13	Astham	13 th constellation	Chastity.
14	Chithira	14 th constellation	Many children
15	Swathi	15 th constellation	Beauty
16	Visakham	16 th constellation	Love to husband
17	Anusham	17 th constellation	Divorce
18	Ketta	18 th constellation	Sons
19	Moolam	19 th constellation	Sorrow
20	Pooradam	20 th constellation	Wealth
21	Uthradam	21 st constellation	Happiness
22	Thiruvonam	22 nd constellation	Sons
23	Avittam	23 rd constellation	Long and happy married life

24	Chathayam	24 th constellation	Possession of a good husband
25	Poorattathi	25 th constellation	Happiness
26	Uthrattathi	26 th constellation	Wealth and Prosperity
27	Revathi	27 th constellation	Misery

No	II. First observation of the menses by--	Results in married life.
1	a girl	Sorrow
2	a virgin	Virtue
3	a widow	Widowhood
4	a sickly woman	Illness
5	a dancing woman	Enjoyment
6	a married woman with oil in hand	Long married life
7	a man	Sorrow
8	a maid servant	Poverty

III. Indications from the cloth
Worn at the time.

1	Red cloth	Virtue
2	White cloth	Anger
3	Black cloth	Fame

IV Nature of blood drops.

1.	Round red drops	Wealth
2	Square red drops	Destruction of enemies
3	Crescent red drops	Long life
4	Lengthy red drops	Sorrow
5	Oval red drops	Riches
6	Cluster of red drops	Sons or children

Explanation of Table 4: Computations included mathematical formulae involving minutes, days of the week and relation to particular days of the new moon.⁴ Iyer also included lists of actions maidens and their families could take to mitigate inauspicious astrological readings with their attached *dosham* (negative influences). The table shows deep connections between divination and menstrual blood, in conjunction with lunar-stellar time, and also with family relations and economy.

⁴ Iyer continues "When, on a girl attaining her puberty, her parents consult an astrologer as to her destiny, the latter ascertains the number of *ghatikas* (Periods of twenty four minutes each) at the time of the first appearance of the menses, and then deducts three from it. To this remainder are added the day's *thithi* (a day after the full or new moon) and *vara* (day of the week). The number thus got is divided by twelve, and the remainder known. If it be two, four, seven, nine, ten, or twelve, the astrologer predicts misery, while three, five, six, eight, or eleven, indicate virtue. If, for example, a girl attains puberty on the twenty-fifth Vrischikam 1079 at two o'clock, the day being Wednesday and the *thithi Chathurdesi* (fourteenth day of the moon) the number of *ghatikas* is first determined which is twenty. From this, three is deducted. This remainder with the *thithi* and the day amounts to thirty-five which, divided by twelve, leaves the remainder eleven. This predicts virtue." Iyer, Vol. 1, 206)

B. In goddess rituals: Many temple accounts include as part of their history a founding moment determined through astrological divination. An astrologer or group of astrologers is called in when an unusual occurrence might mean the presence of a deity. For example, in a village, Maranalloor, about forty miles from Thiruvananthapuram, some centuries ago a man fell unconscious while a (probably sacred) tree was being cut on his property. Because “he was a religious-minded man, he stopped the tree cutting,” and an astrologer was immediately called to do a *devapraranam* (sacred divination) and determined that the goddess Mariyamma was present and wanted a temple built. A *moothesari* (carpenter-architect) designed and placed the temple. Decisions about what offerings would be made was determined by the astrologer who performed a *devaprasnam* (astrological determination) which revealed the additional information that only people of the *Panaram* caste should do the religious ceremonies and offerings to the goddess. (Satheesh Bose, personal correspondence; Appendix A). I include these details because they show not only village interconnections with the goddess speaking through a tree, but more to the point the central importance of astrology in determining the most vital decisions.

There is some indication that blood and blood substitutes are or were used for divination. Reading the ripples in a bowl of blood substitute was part of a diviner’s skill (Shankaranarayanan, 14), and scrying still is done by highly skilled readers using a single drop of oil. In some temples the planets are present in iconic form, deified, for example at Thozhuvancode, a Shakti temple owned by an Ilavar family.

So far, narrative metaforms I have described are symbol-making parts of menarche rites, done by women. These could be extremely ancient, as both hand-prints

and ground (*kolam*) drawings are ritually done on other continents. In both places ancient women had the painting substance—menstrual blood—to have initiated these important markings. The fact that both are intricately connected to menarche seems significant; that the maiden herself sometimes draws the *kolam* at menarche is suggestive. Logically the earliest “ink” for this would have been her own blood, and one explanation for later use of a blood substitute such as red turmeric may have been that women’s science had defined earth energy as a force from which the maiden and her blood needed to be separated for mutual protection.

The astrological connection seems particularly important here, because it describes a relationship between women’s blood, stars and lunar time that is complexly “storied” and situates narrative metaform in the realm of the evolution of science.

In the next, final section of narrative metaform I will consider the goddess as a projection, or outgrowth, of menarchal rites.

Goddess as a menarchal construct or collective persona

In the section Wilderness metaform I described the goddess in theriomorphic form—her conflation with metaformic creatures and plants. In this section, I want to consider her as a persona in anthropomorphic form. This addresses the question, in what ways is the goddess—with her rituals—constructed as a collective menarchal maiden? This question implies also its opposite: that communities, collectively and originally—that is to say in the distant past—contributed the sacred attributes of maidens at menarche, to what would become a variety of constructs of the goddess as a maiden—the most powerful imaginable maiden.

We need to keep in mind that by “rites” I mean temple goddess rites in general, and not the particular rites at Chennganor Bhagavati Temple for the goddess during her

menstruation, which is ritualized like a menarche, as De Turreil also perceives (57). We were told by two Nayar women who sit with Devi in her menses, that the menarche rite that serves as the model is that of Brahmins.

By comparing menarchal rites in general with goddess temple rites in general, we are broadening our inquiry to the scope of possible influence that the menarchal rites of *varied* communities have had on the development of the persona and powers of the goddess. The question then becomes an attempt to see the influence of the multiplicity of Kerala's indigenous community menarche rites on the functions of deity as locations of human interaction.

Maiden as Goddess.

a. In menarche rites:

In a striking example of merged identification with the goddess in which the maiden was understood to be the goddess, Puthenkalam (1977) describes the following nineteenth century *tirandukuli* ritual typical of Travancore. While the women were performing the ritual purificatory bath for the maiden, the Mannan prepared coconut bangles, "snake garlands" (garlands resembling snakes, woven out of tender white coconut leaves) and two sticks from the Panal palm with a tuft of leaves left at the tip. When the maiden returned from her bath she put the coconut bracelets on her wrist and upper arm, the "snake garlands" around her neck, covered her head with a cloth, decked her head and loins with the tender leaves of the coconut, and held the two sticks in her hands which she then used to spear a plate full of *kum kum* and *sindhuram* (blood red powders). Puthenkalam remarks, "In this attire she looked a picture of the goddess Kali" (58). The Mannan (Velan) then sang songs to evoke the goddess (Chettati) asking her to

leave the maiden, and as the song mentioned each part of her body, the girl took off the appropriate ornament and threw it away, ending its “possession” of her. In discarding the negative (inauspicious) aspects of the goddess, Chettati, the rite leaves the positive (auspicious) goddess, Bhagavati.

One of the songs which the washerpeople (Velan) men and women sang at menarche rites describes how various goddess’s care for their menstrual cloths, and how the humans came to have someone who would care for theirs:

“One day a girl and her friends were playing merrily on the banks of a river, when one of them noticed some blood on her dress. They took her home, and her parents believed it to have been caused by some wound, but on enquiry knew that their daughter was in her menses. The daughter asked her mother as to what she did with the cloth she wore during her menses, when she was told that she bathed and came home, leaving it on a branch of a mango tree. On further enquiry she knew that goddess Ganga purified herself by a bath, leaving her cloth in the river; that goddess Earth buried it in the earth; and that Panchali (a tree goddess?) returned home after a bath, leaving her dress on one of the branches of a banyan tree. Unwilling to lose her dress, the girl went to the god Parameswara (husband of Parvathi) and implored his aid to get somebody to have her cloth washed; when, muttering a mantram, he sprinkled some water, a few drops of which went up and became stars, and from a few more which fell on the leaves of a banyan tree, there came out a man, to whom was assigned the task of washing the cloths of the women in their courses, wearing which alone, the women are purified by a bath.” (Iyer, Vol. 1, 157)

The menarchal maiden is explicitly understood as the goddess even in contemporary practice according to one Tamil Brahmin woman, who said menarche is “a very sacred occasion, a holy occasion. Even with a wedding we try to relate it to the gods, Shiva and Parvathi. When you are getting married it is the gods’ wedding that is being celebrated; the bride and the bridegroom replace Parvathi and Shiva. So too when a girl attains puberty, she is Devi herself.” In a different community, within recent memory in Nayar menarche the maiden held the bronze mirror called *valkannadi* that is associated

with, and sometimes worshipped as Bhagavati, I was told. (DeTourreil, 40, 46). In the past the maiden is likely to have embodied Devi at the moment she looked into the mirror. When male actors in Theyyam and other Bhagavati rites contemporarily look into the same kind of mirror, they “become the goddess” by going into intense states of trance, suggesting that at one time so did menarchal maidens from communities who perform Theyyam, such as Tiyya or Pulayan, as well as Nayar. As I said earlier in this chapter, such a maiden might be impregnated by spirits and give birth to a Theyyam, which is a version of Bhadrakali; she might die at menarche and be reborn as a Theyyam.

A young Brahmin woman described having been deeply humiliated, even traumatized, by an event in her early teens. A priest from a temple serving “demigods” had been called to her father’s house. Needing a virgin to serve as deity for a puja, he asked her to participate in the rite that included worshipping her as though she was Devi. I include this as an example of current practice for virgins, unmarried young women, to embody the goddess, and also to show that this was not at all her own practice, and she was distressed by the event.

Connie Jones, a professor at CIIS, witnessed a menarche during the 1980’s in Tamil Nadu in which the maiden was dressed as a different goddess every day for the 7 days of her seclusion. Savathri De Tourreil also notes a Tamil Nadu practice in which she is dressed as a different hero or heroine every day of her seclusion. The goddess in Kerala temples is most frequently Bhagavati, who with her *dharmstra* (tiger fangs) always has a fierce aspect, and is not married. Though the “major” temples, meaning the largest, feature male gods Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, Ganapathi, Ayappa and Krishna, goddess temples considered large enough to be listed number nearly as many as all of them.

Bhagavati alone has more temples considered of tourist interest than even Shiva, the most popular of the male gods. As formerly stated, every village has a *gramma devata*, a village goddess, the most common being Maryamma. In poster art these goddesses are usually seated, young with virginal breasts, and red skirts. Like menarchal maidens they wear garlands (*mala*) and jewelry such as anklets, gold belts and so on.

As noted, the term “Devi,” I was told by a Nayar devotee, indicates the goddess as a maiden. While that is a single example, both the temple installations and embodied (as in theyyam) goddess in Kerala appears primarily to be constructed as a “virginal”—menarchal-- maiden with a fierce aspect, as others have said. Jayakar described a plant goddess, worshipped in the form of a virgin maiden (181), a goddess who was to be meditated upon in the form of a 16 year-old maiden, (124) and how the goddess easily communicates through young women, who speak with her voice and dance her frenzied dance.

Goddess rites and menarche rites

“Rituals are not sudden inventions. They grow by a process of evolution. When a new goddess is installed, new rituals are not invented but they grow out of existing usages.” (Induchudan p. 116)

Goddess rites can be seen as containing, even exaggerating, sections or portions of menarche rites. For example she is carried in procession. The daily goddess rites of Mookambika include a nightly ritual of carrying her in a palanquin. (Lastreto, oral presentation). Devotees gather as the priests bring out the traveling version of Devi and place it in the palanquin- shaped temple cart, which is then pulled down the road by

participants to the accompaniment of drums and shouts. This goddess is washed several times a day and dressed in a new *sari*, brought by the thousands by devotees.

At Thozhuvancode temple outside Thiruvananthapuram, as I have said, *pongala*, a sweet porridge commonly made at menarche, is cooked every day by women as an offering to the goddess. Goddess Bhagavati at Attikal temple is offered *pongala* by masses of women during the Full Moon of the month of Khombum. As late as the 1950's blood offerings in the form of chicken sacrifice was part of this rite, following which the temple was closed and the goddess was in seclusion for a week. Less dramatically, but equally evocative of menarchal rites, devotees will crowd the porticoes at Attikal during *pongala's* nine days for such events as the tying on of a bracelet. Bracelet and anklet giving are a major gift-giving of menarche, and the goddess receives these items as well.

In *Talipali* processions, a feature of many Bhagavati temples, girls are dressed as "companions of the goddess" with heavy *mai* eye-make-up, with black kohl, *cumcum*, and sandalwood dots and lines on their faces; they wear crowns and white jasmine in their hair, similar to descriptions of maidens at menarche in some of the formerly lower caste groups, such as Pulayan. During *Talipali* women line the roads with plates of auspicious objects, all of which play a part in menarche rites of the past—flowers, mirror, coconuts, incense, plantains and so on.

Like maidens of the Brahmin and Nayar families of last century, the goddess is carried on an elephant (as are also some of the gods) in many processions, and not only in the one celebrating her menses at Cennganor. The circle dance done by Brahmin women at menarche, is an annual festival dance at some temples. Temples may feature traditional

women's dances of various communities, and it would be of interest to know if these too are part of the menarche celebrations of one community or another.

Table 5. Some practices of goddess rites compared to practices of menarche rites

Attributes	Goddess Rites	Menarche Rites
Carried in Procession	the icon carried	Maiden carried
Carried on elephant	yes	yes, Nayar, Brahmin
Cannot be touched	yes	yes
Cannot touch ground	yes	yes
Ritual Bathing	yes	yes
Seclusion	of a smaller icon	yes
Considered "polluted"	yes, Chennganor*/Kodungallor	at menarche/menstruation
Dressing in new sari	yes	yes
Sits on wood	yes, throne or turtle shape	yes, wood block
Astrological divination done	for installation	with first drops
Cooking of <i>pongala</i>	at temple	yes
Plate of flowers, etc	yes	yes
Feeding sweets/ <i>prasad</i>	yes	yes
Circling (<i>arathi</i>)	yes	yes
Circle dance	<i>Thiruvathirakali</i> , others	yes, various

Explanation of Table 5. The entries for menarches, as in other tables, do not represent any single community, but are a composite drawn from many. However, these are probably typical practices in most historic Kerala menarches. The goddess in her menses is considered to have "a mild loss of ritual purity" (De Turreil, 52). At Kodungallor Kurumba Bhagavati Temple, following her killing of Darika, Kali is *ashutam*, "having lost her ritual purity" (Saraswatiama K.)

In this section on "Narrative metaform" I have attempted to discern connections between menarche rites and the folk arts of divination, deeply symbolic drawing and face painting, and comprehension of deity as a "character" who takes particular human form. These arts could be considered "embodied literacies". They are important to metaformic theory because they could be from such ancient wells of human endeavor and capacity to order the cosmos meaningfully. They are narratives that precede story, and perhaps are what gave it content and form. Some stories told in Kerala about various goddesses I have described in Chapter Five, in the section on Menstrual Logic.

From considering the goddess in various guises, and the maiden in various communities, as metaformic narrative forces deeply interactive with each other, I want to turn now to a fourth way that the goddess has been embodied in Kerala (as well as the rest of India) through the handicrafts of the artisan.

4. Material Metaform

Jayakar has told us that India has two streams of goddess tradition—one through the women’s maternal lineage, and the other through the craftsmen, who insisted on their sacred right to make the iconic forms of the goddess. So, while women of course make crafts, including the elemental forms that seem particularly female, such as pots—and in women-only pongala offerings of earlier times making a new pot to cook the porridge was part of the ritual. Likewise in some crafts made mostly by men, such as umbrellas, a portion of the work needed to be done by a woman. But the stone and wood carvings of icons, the making of the costumes for Theyyam, the beautiful carpentry and masonry of the temples, the arts of smithing and so on, were taken on centuries ago by men who saw crafts as their sacred offices, dedicated to the gods. (Jayakar, 26 ff).

In *Blood, Bread and Roses*, I defined material metaform as crafted forms that can be shown to have connection to menarche rituals. In metaformic theory, crafts derived from the ideas developed in seclusion rites. For example, wanting to separate the maiden’s blood from the earth surface would lead to placing objects such as leaves or bark under her—and elaborations of this practice lead to what we later made and use as “furniture”. Crafted materials such as clay pots or use of metallurgy came about through people identifying certain earth substances as “menstrual blood” and then applying ritual transformational metaformic actions to it. In chapter one I gave examples of clay, gold

and iron having such probable histories. Woven and twisted string fibers have close connection to menstrual blood in both Africa and Australia. (Griaule, 22-23; Grove 1999 and oral communication) As I said in Chapter One, Indian mythology has an origin story of metal created by the union of goddess and *agni*, god of fire; she aborted his too-hot product, which flowed from her womb as the world's metals.

In my study, I looked for connections between Kerala crafts and their use in menarche or other connection to menstruation and its qualities, and also their use in goddess rituals. Some extended descriptions of selected material metaforms follow, including my subjective experiences and notes.

1. Material crafted forms: Cloth, Pot, Lamp, Umbrella, Iron Nail, Val, and Mirror.

Cloth

A. In menarche ritual: red cloth is given to the maiden in Brahmin practice; white cloth given by the Nayars. By "cloth" is meant an entire garment, usually a yard wide and three yards long, wrapped around the waist.

Maidens sometimes sit on cloth rather than woven mats. In Nayar practice she may be seated on a black or dark wool blanket with a ritually laundered white cotton cloth on top. This combination, called *vellayum karimpatavum*, is otherwise reserved for honored guests. (DeTourel, 39). A Parayan maiden may sit on a stool which is covered with a white cloth. (Caldwell, Chapter 1, 74) In one contemporary Cheruman practice, the maiden was dressed in a "beautiful cloth" of no specified color. Maidens of the goldsmith community stood on a white cloth, and in that community as well as others a maiden returning from her ritual bath walks on white cloth coming back from the public pond or temple tank (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol II, 416).

Used clothing was passed among the women, in a sense uniting them through the intermediary mediumship of the washerpeople, the people who could handle the menstrual blood and its attendant chaotic energies successfully. At menstruation the washerwoman brought a *mattu* (ritually laundered cloth) that had been received from a different woman; she took away the bloodstained cloth for washing, and passed that along to someone else (Puthenkalam, 57).

B. In goddess ritual: a red cloth can be the goddess (Induchudan, 13).

In the *puja* for Deva, the metal vessel used for the ritual bath was wrapped in a white cloth. The installed icons of the goddess represented as a woman are wrapped in cloth. She is frequently dressed, undressed, bathed and redressed. At Kodungallor's Kurumba Bhagavati Temple a red cloth hangs over the opening of the "secret chamber," a tunnel that may have been a dolmen belonging to the earth goddess. (Induchudan, 13)

The equation of red cloth with blood is clear at Bharani Festival, where a neat stack of red cotton cloth covers two sacred stones, as substitution for the blood of ten thousand sacrificed cocks, in former times. The *velichapads* dance near the cloth, and may speak oracularly or (as I witnessed) even fall prostrate in possession in front of this impressive mound of red cloth.

Goddess' menstrual cloth: The cloth (*utayata*) that wraps the goddess in her form as Parvathi (with Shiva) at the temple of Cennganor indicates her menstruation periodically. The marks of possible menstruation are first seen by a priest attending her in her inner sanctum, (*srikovil*), who passes the cloth to the women in the family of the Chief Tantri of the temple. If the woman there makes the assessment that the goddess is menstruating, the cloth is then passed for examination by a woman in a second family

associated with the temple. Once the designated women of both houses decide the goddess is menstruating, she is put into seclusion and the women (Nayar women) whose hereditary office is to sit with her are notified.

Magical qualities of the menstrual cloth in *The Mahabharata*, the great epic of Indian literature, is a quintessential part of the story. Draupadi (Tiraupatti in village Tamil Nadu) the wife of the Pandava brothers, the eldest of whom gambled them and her away to their cousin Duhsasana. The villain of the long tale, he grabs her from her menstrual seclusion to make her work in the kitchen, a serious breach of old menstrual law. In the written epic, the poetry describes her “cloth, my one cloth and me in my courses” and “her cloth wet and besmirched with blood”.(van Buitenen, 165) After Duhsasana drags her from her seclusion into the Hall he tries to pull the cloth from her body, but by its magic (ascribed to Lord Krishna) a new cloth appears each time he unwinds it, and finally he stops in shame. (van Buitenen, 146) This story is enacted in Tamil Nadu as sacred village drama to goddess Tiraupatti. The ritual actors who play the parts of Draupadi/Thiraupatti and her tormentor are most frequently members of the washer caste Vanan. According to Frasca, the women of the caste wash the menstrual and other ritual garments, and the men participate in the village ritual drama of Thiraupatti’s story, including trance possession, firewalking and other direct connection with the divine and regulation of shakti. The sorcery and magic associated with the people who washed the menstrual (and birthing and death) garments helps explain why the cloth itself can be worshipped as the goddess. The necessity to regulate the extreme “power” within menstrual blood helps explain why the washerpeople developed abilities to do sorcery

and magic, and devised healing practices based in the idea that “demons” in the sense of erratic energies, cause illness (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. VII, 355-7).

Pot

A. In menarche rites: in many communities, a pot is put into the seclusion room with the maiden, and she was to use her own dishes. At the turn of the century, commonly women at menstruation were expected to eat from an earthenware pot, “a concave pot of baked clay” (Iyer, Vol. I, 203).

A new pot is also immediately put into service to make the standard *pongol*, or other sweet rice porridge or pudding that is for many communities a feature of menarche. Hema described the large pot used to make the sweet pudding *puttu*. The family’s women took the wide mouthed vessel outdoors, and several worked on the exacting dish, whose ingredients have to be heated and stirred to perfection and added at a precisely timed moment (or the fine sumptuous pudding is lost into a small useless lump). The earthenware pot is “homologous to the female sexual organ” (Gentes, 301) and sometimes decorated as though it is a maiden (personal observation). In one custom it is marked with vermilion as part of a menarche rite, and five attending virgins at the ritual mark their foreheads in the same manner as the pot.

B. In goddess rites:

The pot used to boil clothes is worshipped by the washerpeople, whose method of washing, highly ritualized, included pounding the cloth (*mattu*) on a stone; since the Velans worshipped the goddess as a stone, I wonder if this action is not yet another way that stones “bleed” in Kerala (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. VII, 356). The pot has been termed as “low form of goddess” (Frasca, chap 6). A pot of red “garusi” (*garuti*), a

Mudiyettu performer related, contains “the menstrual blood of the goddess.” (Caldwell, Chapter 4, 334) “Garusi” is a term for blood of animal sacrifice.

The earthen pot with a red cloth tied over its wide mouth is recognized as a form of the goddess, people in Kerala told me. We saw many examples of this. This pot appears in temples, sometimes on its own altar (as at a Mariamman temple where Dianne and I filmed the men’s ritual of *cavadyottum*). We saw the red pot sometimes in front of street installations of goddess Bhadrakali near Attukal temple during the Festival of Pongala. In footage Dianne took of a Pulaya *shakti* “possession rite”, the red-cloth covered pot was placed on the altar along with a *val*, or crescent sword.

Installations of Goddess Bhadrakali near Attukal temple featured a tall shining metal vessel tied with a white cloth around it and with a spray of coconut flowers out the top. These stood in front of and to the side of large posters of the goddess—exactly the same relative position as in the menarche we witnessed, for a similar tall metal vessel was used by the priest in the *puja* he performed as part of the menarche ritual we filmed for the goldsmith family. His *puja* was a generalized common rite and he treated the vessel as a deity. (De Turreil, personal communication). He annointed the pot with sandalwood paste and then tied green betel leaves at its neck. Into the top of the pot he placed a tall spray of coconut flowers, a coconut, an areca nut and a string of jasmine flowers.⁵

The decorated pot in an ordinary Brahminic *puja* is to be addressed as a number of male vedic deities, but includes the goddesses: “May the Lord Vishnu be invoked in

⁵ We were unable to interview the priest concerning any meanings of the pot or other elements of his *puja*, and in any case priests are trained not to divulge such esoteric information, particularly not to Westerners.

the mouth of the pot, Lord Rudra in the throat, Lord Brahma in the base and the Mothers of the World in the middle portion.”⁶

The “Mothers of the World” are its river waters, also named in the prayer: “O Rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri—please be present in this holy water. May all the sacred rivers of the world be present here.” We can imagine that formerly maidens of many communities would have been ritually bathed in rivers and other natural bodies of water—perhaps the “Mothers of the World.” transferred for practical reasons into the contents of the sacred vessel. This vessel is dressed similarly to the maiden.

“Daub sandalwood paste and *kumkum* on three sides of the pot containing sacred water and put flowers and holy leaves, sandalwood paste and rice in the pot and holding the right hand on the mouth of the pot, pray:” the *puja* instruction booklet says. This is similar to the treatment the priest gave the pot of water in the filmed menarche ritual of the goldsmith family, and typical of pan-Indian ritual. On viewing our film, Savithri DeTourreil said the priest was treating the pot as if it were a deity. He is also treating the pot as if it were the maiden—with the jasmine flowers in its hair, coconut for head, betel leaves over its “face” which is also daubed with sandalwood paste. Like the maiden, the pot is given specific, significant flowers and wrapped in a clean cloth. The vessel is first placed on the cloth, which is then tied up around the top. In some menarche practices, the maiden at menarche stood on a white cloth (Kapadia, 109). In the menarche of a contemporary Nayar family in Kerala, the maiden holds betel leaves to her face at one point. Sprays of coconut flowers are put with the maiden in seclusion in contemporary

⁶ According to the instruction booklet ‘Puja, The Process of Ritualistic Worship’ (Mata Amritanandamayi Center, 1992)

practice of various communities, Areca nut is given at menarche to maidens in some communities, and jasmine flowers were tied in the hair, for example in the menarche of the goldsmith's daughter Deva. Hence, as nearly as I can tell all the elements that went into the dressing of the pot are also present in contemporary local menarche rites—though differing in detail from community to community.

This all suggests that the earthen pot and also the water vessel in menarche rites is or was a form of Devi, and also that it is a form that derives directly from the rites themselves.

According to Jayakar (26), the craft guild potter in India was male, though some pots cannot be completed without a woman's hand, and pots made using the archaic technique of coiling instead of the wheel, are made by women, and she describes them circumambulating the clay as they shape it.

Lamp

General description: The lamp is a bowl shape and may or may not include a stem. The bowl is filled with *gingelly* oil, and against the bronze of the lamp its natural color gleams all the more red. Some lamps have a *yoni* appearance, such as one I brought home that has a lip with a slot for the wick in a most clitoral-like shape. This one also has a back piece featuring a cast of goddess Lakshmi—a *dipalakshmi*; the rim of the bowl has two cast birds—roosters. Other typical Kerala lamps include a *lingam* shape rising from the bowl. Wicks of white twisted cotton lie in the bowl; saturated with *gingelly* oil, their tips are turned up at the rim to keep the small flame burning bright and free.

Typically two wicks are joined together, and 2, 3 or 4 flames set evenly apart, burn at the

edges of each bowl. The beauty, symmetry and energy of blazing lamps in Hindu ritual help make the proceedings particularly dynamic.

Coconut shells and lemon skins (turned inside out) also serve as bowls for lamps, and these easily available materials obviously could have been use long before the age of bronze-making.

A. In menarche rites: As soon as the maiden is put in a separate room for her seclusion, a lamp is put with her, according to a Brahmin woman. This lamp can have several tiers and be very bright. At Nayar menarche as well: “The typical bronze lamp, *nilavilakku*, will be lit and placed in the room.”(De Turreil, 35) According to one young Nayar woman, at menarche: “every day the lamp will be lit for her in the room.”

As related earlier in the section on circular shapes (narrative metaforms), the maiden has a burning lamp circled in front of her face in the practice of Nayar community, and a triangular shaped object with lit wicks may be circled over head during her ritual bath at either a tank or the river.

The negative influences (*dosha*) of the planets present at the moment of menarche may be mitigated by the maiden later performing special pujas using dried lemon skin lamps (contemporary Nayar).

B. In goddess rites: One woman described a meaning of the act of circling:
(from my interview with Leuba Shilde, at her school in Arunmula, 1997):

In the *puja*, circling the fire (demonstrates a circling motion around her own face) is symbolic of your life, the course of your living. The fire is about burning without leaving a residue. The god is at the center of the flame, so we turn around a god, showing your activity is around that. Do... anything... and then immediately it falls away, this is the ideal, the most ideal realization of the **Bhagavati** practices.

In temple practice, “*Arati* is a big lamp lit by the head priest at the end of a puja; he circles it in front of the goddess. They put part of the sanctified fire on a plate and pass it around to devotees, who reach into it and put it on themselves” (Lestreto, oral presentation). The lamp is sometimes understood mythically as a version of, and as related to, the sun, whether god or goddess. The pious woman’s task of lighting the lamp at dusk preserves the sun’s light until morning (Panniker, oral poem, personal communication). In rituals the lamp may become infused with the spirit of the goddess, as for example, at Mudiyettu (Caldwell, Chapter 3, 139-40). In the form of the lamp, she is offered prayers and flowers. In pan-Indian religion, goddess Lakshmi is a lamp.

Tall lamps stand directly outside the temple installations of the goddess, and these may have a dozen or more tiers reachable by ladder—thirty feet high. The goddess faces the lamp, and this placement of the lamp “before her” is identical to descriptions of the placing of the lamp before the maiden in menarche rites given to me by Hema and Kamala Subramanian. Also, when goddess Parvati, in Trichengannoor Mahadeva Temple at Chengannoor, undergoes her ritual menstrual bath (*triputtu arattu*) immersed in the Pampa River (Vaidyanathan, 48-9) a flaming triangle is waved over her head and then released into the river, as in some Brahmin and other community practices with menarchal maidens.

Women of a Tiyya community in north Malabar, at Cannanore—who are not Muslim—told us a story about two sisters (goddesses), one of whom went to live in the local mosque in the form of a lamp. My own experience of knowing the goddess as a lamp follows:

Attukal temple, Full Moon ritual, in which Dianne participated in February of 1997 and both of us participated in March of the same year. In this night ritual, we sat shoulder to shoulder with lines of women facing each other on an open pavilion at the east side of the temple. A Nayar woman who had graciously met with us previously was the leader of the *bajans*. These songs, which we sang in call and response form, all centered on praising Devi. The ritual consisted of numerous exact small motions surrounding the lamp; each participant had a small lamp with two wicks, a plantain leaf and a number of small items wrapped in newspaper—flowers, incense, sandalwood paste and cum-cum and so on—the standard items used in *pujas*. In effect, each of us was her own priestess performing a *puja* identical to those of all the other women.

My journal notes on Full Moon ritual at Attukal Temple:

“Sunday (March 23, 1997). I was sick from bus exhaust and moth balls – could not eat. Finished the copy editing. The heat debilitating. Dianne went to the men’s Ayappa street fair, and ate the feast (everyone says her ability to eat paisam—the runny rice pudding—with her hand means she lived a former life as a Hindu). She drew me a pretty kolam with her chalks and I rallied to attend the Full Moon women’s ritual at Attukal Temple. This rite is growing—from 200 2 months ago to 350 and more—I didn’t think I could possibly sit cross-legged for 2 hours but I actually did as well as some of the other first-timers. We had to unwrap 6 or 8 packages, place everything right on banana leaves, light 2 wicks of lamps and mark the 4 sides with 3 pastes, hold flowers and pile them a certain way, hold cum-cum and pile it a certain way, all while holding positions, using only certain fingers, moving rapidly, chanting verses, and tending the fires—we walked down the narrow mats without setting fire to ourselves, touched foreheads to the floor with out

knocking anything about—the woman sitting behind me rested her back against mine, which helped settle my energy—then we went into the temple, saw the Nagas and then Devi—I fell in front of Devi and bruised my leg—astonishing myself and others.”

I see from these notes how concerned I was with my stamina, my ability to contain my body and not be clumsy in these close quarters. We sat cross-legged, knee to knee on the floor—not my most favored posture. The lamp was central to our attention and required much care. As we—three hundred women-- touched our faces and hearts with the flower petals, in time with each other and with the rhythm of the song, we then piled them a few at a time at the base of the lamp in front of us. I soon began to see Devi in the form, with her skirt of red and white petals, her abdominal bowl of glowing red oil, her *shakti* flames alive with interactive animation, the top of the lamp her *lingam* of inclusiveness and bi-gendering. The interaction of the rite included that the lamp required each woman’s intermittent care with the level of oil—we passed around the vessel of oil-- and the burning wicks, which need intermittent rearrangement (with one’s fingertips) to keep from falling into the oil.

From seeing Devi in the shape of the lamp I began to see and feel Her in myself as well, especially because the ritual required touching a few flower petals to my body before placing them in Her “skirt”. The lamp reflected and described the Devi in me, and in the women sitting opposite and beside me. I saw—in heightened sensibility—the incredible beauty of their dress and demeanor, and the efforts we all made to make our motions timely and graceful. I also saw that a few of the other women were as new at doing this rite as I, and they too struggled not to lose attentiveness to the flame at the wick’s tip. One of them too had difficulty with the cross-legged posture or had sweat on

her upper lip keeping up the pace of intricate motions. This observation calmed me, I stopped judging myself so harshly. I had empathy for them and thus for myself as a beginner.

When my back muscles collapsed in pain under the unaccustomed posture almost immediately the woman behind me shifted and leaned her own back against mine, supporting me. Helpless, I was held, an experience repeated often during my stay in Kerala.

The last portion of the Full Moon rite we all stood and walked the course of our narrow lines, like a labyrinth between the rows of plantain leaves and burning lamps, still singing, stepping with our heads up, trusting our clothing would not drift into the fire. Now, instead of tending the vulnerable wicks of the lamp, we moved in appreciation of Her terrible power. Once returned to our own places we sat for the last *bajan* and the clean-up of our paraphernalia. My journal notes record that we touched our foreheads to the floor, though I now have no memory of this and cannot imagine how I did it in such close quarters. I was proud of my accomplishment of this rite—to feel so much that night like a woman among women in a society and an era in which women’s work is exacting, rigorous and artful.

I could now know the lamp as the goddess in an embodied, experiential way.

Umbrella, Parasol

A. In menarche rites: In the Maharaja’s family women are accompanied to bathroom outdoors and covered with umbrella. (I would also expect that Brahmin maidens had umbrellas over their heads when they rode elephants to their menarchal baths at the turn of the century.) The menarchal imperative to keep the maiden’s head

covered as protection from the sun, and also to prevent her looking at the night sky, coupled with the lunar shape of the implement, would make the umbrella a perfect women's tool. Further research might uncover such uses, though probably not in Kerala among groups whose where the umbrella is believed to have been brought by the Brahmins, who forbade its use by untouchable castes in the feudal era.

B. In goddess rites: We were told that the goddess was in the form of a red umbrella in the *puja* room of a traditional matrilineal extended family home (*taravad*) reconstruction at Kovalam village fair, 1997. An umbrella is a usual covering for a deity or royalty who is riding on an elephant. An imposing bronze umbrella is mounted at the top of a column just outside the temple entrance at Attukal Bhagavati temple. Devi in poster art is frequently covered overhead by an umbrella. In the poetry of *Cilippatikarum* as I have said, the parasol is equated with the moon.

We were waiting for the umbrella to be raised as a signal at Bharani Festival, for the *velichapads* to run around (circumambulate) the temple building containing the installation of Kodungallor Bhagavati.

Iron nail

A. In menarche rites: I have already described the Cheruman (Pulayan) community's, early twentieth century practice included the pounding of a nail into the sacred tree to transfer the "demon"—that is, the chaotic energy-- from the maiden to the tree—if she trembled and showed other signs of possession at menarche.

The metal iron was frequently though by no means always mentioned by women I spoke with; they related the imperative that women hold a piece of it in hand at both menarche and later menstruations in Kerala. The iron object could be anything, keys are a favorite.

This was reported by several modern women in a variety of communities. Hema explained that the iron would conduct inauspicious forces to keep them from affecting the maiden. According to Jayakar, “Iron drives away” *shakti* as power. (202)

B. In goddess rites: At Chottanikkara goddess temple (three are installed there) devotees (usually women) who are in states of mental distress and chaotic possession go for treatment. Extreme cases are said to be cured through the use of iron nails. The afflicted pound the long iron nails into banyan trees in the lower temple yard—with their bare hands or foreheads. The nails are large, actually spikes, at least six inches long and perhaps a third of an inch in diameter. Hundreds of them have been pounded into the trees. Following the act of driving the nail into the tree the afflicted person falls unconscious and on reviving, is relieved of all symptoms, according to accounts. Dianne and I visited this temple and were very moved by the sight of the trees full of nails, and the afflicted women. It seems useful to note that the *prasad* at this temple is *garuti*, a blood substitute, offered to devotees from a bowl. The attendant, a woman, poured a few drops into the right palm of the devotee, who poured it into his/her mouth and then sprinkled the remainder across the top of his/her head.

Val.

A *val* is a crescent-shaped implement, called a “sword” though basically the shape is of a farm implement, a harvesting sickle with a long handle. When the goddess holds it in poster art, the inside arc is depicted with blood in a clear connection between blood and the moon in its dark phase; this is called *chandra bindu*, or *chandra hassan*, “crescent moon” according to Hema.

A. *In menarche rite*: an iron sickle, shaped like a *val*, is given to the maiden at menarche, (also to women at birthing) by Parayans (Caldwell Chapter One, 74).

B. *In goddess rites*: In imagery: the posters of both Bhadrakali and Bhagavati usually depict her holding a *val*. A photograph of her installation icon at Kodungallur shows her with a *val*. In a night Kuttyotum procession at Attikul, a Theyyam embodiment (done by a man) was of Devi wearing red paint, red skirts, red *mudi* (headpiece) and carrying a *val*.

In rituals: The *velichapad* (shaman or oracle of the goddess) dancing at Theyyam in Cannor carried a *val*. The *velichapattu* who come to Bharani, both women and men, carry and dance with *vals*, and use them to flow blood from their heads.

Val as a form of the goddess: A *val* sits in the tower room at Kodungallur Bhagavati temple; the crescent sword trembles when the power of the goddess runs through it. Lamps and decorations are put with it during Bharani Festival. (Induchudan, 263) A *val* sat on a pedestal as the goddess during the Pulayan community possession rite (Jenett 1999, 254) that Jenett filmed with women in red. In the often repeated story of a Cherumi, a Pulaya agricultural woman hitting a stone with her sickle, and when the stone bleeds this is later determined to be the goddess, the sickle is the *val*.

Mirror

A. *In menarche rites*: The surface of a bowl of *gingelly* oil can be used as a mirror, and in earlier times metal was not used for mirrors, a polished surface such as oil was used, I was told by a ritual specialist. The mirror used in menarche rites is called a *valkannadi*, 'long-handled mirror'. The *valkannadi* is made of brass with (when it is a functional mirror) a highly polished face, that is oval-shaped, like a human face. The

polishing substance is a red powder. A single family in Arunmula makes these ceremonial objects, for sale to the general public. Those found in stores tend to be larger than the ones shown to us by women talking about their menarche rituals. These are also inscribed decoratively and frequently have backing stands. The *valkannadi* used in menarche is small and plain, designed to be held in the hand. In form it is shaped like a cobra with spread hood, and this is the shadow that a variety of sizes of Arunmula mirrors casts on the ground. We discovered this by accident when we photographed a group of six mirrors outside in the driveway of Dianne's home in California.

According to Leuba Shilde, the crafts people who make the mirror are extremely carefully to separate their tools, procedures and the mirrors themselves, from any contact with menstruating women. "They do it for the gods," she reminded us. "Everything here is done for the gods." They approach every part of the work of making the mirrors as a ritual.

A number of women said that a (*valkannadi*) mirror was part of menarche rites in their experience. In Kodungallur, the Maharaja's sister and niece brought the mirror out to show us; the older woman was probably in her seventies. Also in Kodungallur, in an outcasted formerly Nambuthrithi Brahmin family, a menarchal *valkannadi* was brought out to show us; the woman, Saraswathy, told us that after menarche a Nambutiri woman carried her mirror whenever the family moved as it brought auspiciousness to the family and especially to her husband.

In contrast in Hema's (Tamil Brahmin) menarche the mirror was not important, and at menarche the maiden "did not look into a mirror but she was to look very beautiful". Ilavan and Cheruma/Pulaya people did not use the mirror. No mirror was in

evidence at Deva's Thattan menarche. A woman of the Pulluva community, conversely, said that in her memory of menarche, her mother had specifically warned her *not* to look into a mirror at that time. Likewise in the Cheruma family, Kamala Bai, after asking her niece, said: "nowadays she can look into the mirror but I think in former times she was not allowed to look." A contemporary Nayar said no mirror was used in her menarche. But in a reconstruction of a *taravad* (traditional matrilineal extended family home of old Kerala) at Kovalam beach (1997), the menstrual seclusion/birthing room contained a small rectangular glass hand mirror (not a *valkannati*, which is polished bronze).

Use of the mirror in menarche rituals is specified in Savithri DeTourreil's work on Nayar women. "She will be given a bronze hand-mirror, *valkannati*, typical of Kerala, to hold. This mirror is a well-known symbol of Bhagavati, the Goddess." (De Tourreil, 35) When the maiden looked into the mirror the goddess entered her; she became the goddess. Other examples from modern Kerala women contain hints of the former power of the mirror—in some practices requiring its presence at menarche. Equally importantly, the Pulayas and others may have prohibited the maiden from looking into a mirror at menarche and this also testifies to the mirror's power to bring on a trance state of goddess possession.

B. In goddess ritual:

The mirror is a mandatory accompaniment for goddess Parvathi at Chennganor; this is the goddess who menstruates 3 or 4 times a year and formerly did so monthly. A large float sculpture of Bhagavati in a procession from Attukal temple contained a mirror.

Besides a goddess icon or Theyyam actor possessed by the goddess carrying a mirror, the mirror by itself can be the goddess. At an annual pongala festival held near

Asha's home, in a field, a thatched hut was erected containing the goddess, who stood within in the form of a mirror on a small stool. This goddess ordinarily resided in the home of some carpenters.

The *Talipali* plates carried by women and little girls as "companions of the goddess" contain small glass mirrors. Glass mirrors are in several locations in the lower goddess installation of Chottinakara temple. Embodiments of Devi enacted by ritually painted men at Theyyam at Cannore and also in the procession at Attukal temple included the carrying of small brass mirrors—*valkannadi*. When Theyyam actors look into the mirror at the appropriate moment of their dressing as the goddess, and as or after the *mudi*, the large headpiece, has been put in place, the goddess enters them.

2. Material metaforms worshipped as goddess

Certain crafted objects that appear in menarche are worshipped in other contexts as forms of Bhadrakali: These include the pot, especially the red clay pot whose mouth is covered with a red cloth but also the washerman's pot with boiling clothes and the silver, steel or brass water vessel with a spray of coconut flowers. Other objects are the cloth, the mirror, umbrella, *val*, and lamp. Notably these forms are conflated with metaformic nonhuman beings: the mirror is shaped like a cobra; the umbrella is compared to the moon; the *val* is depicted as the bleeding crescent moon, and the lamp is connected ritually with the sun. The vessel, like mother earth, contains the rivers.

In Table 6, I have selected seven cultural forms that have prominent place in some menarche rites, and compared them with their presence in goddess rites. The fourth column indicates that the form is sometimes considered to be the goddess herself.

Table 6. Material forms in menarche rites compared to goddess rite and goddess identity

Form	Menarche Rite	Goddess Rite	Is Goddess
1. cloth	sits on cloth	yes	yes
2. pot	w/red cloth, others	yes	yes
3. lamp	she has her own lamp	yes	yes
4. umbrella	Nambuthiri, Kshatriya	on elephant	yes, Kovalam
5. nail	Pulayan/Cheruman	mental cure	part of icon
6. <i>val</i>	Parayan	Bharani, Mudi yettu	yes
7. mirror	Nayar, etc	commonly	yes

Explanation of Table 6: Six of the forms that commonly occur in the menarche rites of various communities (but note that probably not all six occur in the menarche rites of any *single* community) are also worshipped in other contexts as forms of the goddess. The exception to this is the nail, which is used to transfer an evil force or chaotic *shakti* from the maiden to a tree of the goddess, the *pala*. Again, the idea is to transfer the chaotic power to the trees. While in my short stay I came on no information that the nail is ever worshipped by itself as a goddess, it may well be, somewhere—perhaps in communities of traditional carpenters. Jayakar describes a nail driven into the waist of a wooden icon of Shakti, as though to “nail” a negative spirit to the goddess to contain its power. Another writer reported in 1983 that the nails in trees at Chottanikara temple were smeared with *cumcum* and some had red rags tied to them (Kapur, 93).

In this chapter I have presented examples for all four types of metaform:

Wilderness, Cosmetikos, Narrative and Material. The tables 1-6 summarize much of this information and display correlations. The four categories seem to work well with Kerala practices as a method of sorting extremely complex relationships. The information suggests, among other ideas, that Kerala’s multiple communities have “fed” goddess ritual from traditions they may have brought with them as immigrants or developed centuries or millennia ago.

CHAPTER FIVE

Application of Metaformic Principles to Menarche and Goddess Rites

Parallel Menstruation and Menstrual Logic

The next sections continue the application of metaformic theory center on ideas, or principles, of how culture develops according to metaformic theory. These principles are: Parallel Menstruation and Menstrual Logic. I want to stress in this section in particular that though I am using anecdotal or story-type examples, it is metaformic patterns that I am looking for, and not current meanings. As with Chapter Four, Tables (7-12) summarize metaformic relationships.

Parallel Menstruation

The first category in this section, Parallel Menstruation, addresses the question of how human males are connected to blood and its rituals. If females began the human journey by recognizing the relation between their own cycles and those of the moon and by extension other nonhuman beings such as snakes and certain trees, and of developing seclusion rites and the body signals of *Cosmetikos*, what then were males doing? Ancestral, primal males must have had to assimilate behaviorally to the powerful new complexly merged and timed relationships of females. The males, perhaps with persistent help of their mothers and sisters, must have deliberately entrained themselves to the central organizing principles of menstruation. Like menarche rites, the gestures and connections within men's parallel rites would have longevity and consistence over thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of years.

We can see possible evidence of this in contemporary rites that connect boys' and men's bleeding to women's blood rituals. In a geographical area in which people

continue to celebrate menarche, the theory would expect some remnants at least of the male rituals to also continue.

Metaformic theory holds that, because males do not menstruate, and because the relationships and cognitive elements of menstruation took ancestral females along a new path, the related males devised blood rituals that enabled them to entrain (synchronize, identify) with the lunar and subsequent other cycles. They had to do this through every metaformic evolutionary step, as otherwise, their sisters and mothers virtually would have belonged to a different species. *Blood, Bread and Roses* (44-50) uses a number of examples to illustrate the principle of parallel menstruation, including puberty initiations of boys on different continents. In each case the criteria for understanding the rite as “parallel menstruation” included some kind of bloodshed along with other ritual behavior that was similar to and/or timed with, ritual behavior of girls and women at menarche and its related rites.

Male Bleeding Rites of Kuttyottum, Cavady and Tukkam Garudan.

In 1996 I viewed some film footage Dianne Jenett had taken of *Kuttyotum*, a boys’ side-piercing initiation in Kerala about which very little has been written. This ritual was a major reason I chose Kerala for an application of metaformic theory. On my two trips to Kerala I observed parts of the rite. At Attukal Temple in 1997, a priest took us to witness a group of about eighty boys seated in a pavillion, and also lined up for their baths in the temple tank.

On the eve of the annual *Pongala* Festival, as part of *Kuttyotum* boys walk in procession accompanied by adult male relatives, who attend them solicitously. The procession, which lasts several hours, moves from Attukal Bhagavathi temple to the

Ayyappan temple several kilometers away. Dianne shot footage of this procession in 1997, and she and I together filmed it in 1998.

Kuttiyotum. This is a boy's ritual, age 8—12. A group of boys are taken by their families to stay in seclusion at the temple for seven days, where they are cared for by the priests. The tenderness of this care has a familial quality. The boys take special baths and follow particular rules and diet identical to those of their sisters in menarche. The rite culminates with dressing them in crowns and facial make-up, similar to the crowns and make up worn by the girls in *Thalipali*. The appearance of both groups is very distinctive, and striking in its similarity. The makeup includes black kohl (collyrium) around the eyes and sandalwood in lines of dots. Like their sisters, the boys carry plates with coconut halves, bananas, incense.

The boys bleed from their sides: Each boy is guided by male relatives in public procession to a site where they are pierced (by the priest) in one side by a thin metal wire. Dianne filmed close-up shots of two boys who had been pierced (and immediately stitched), on their right sides. She reported that "the blood was particularly important, I was told, 'the boys must bleed' for the ritual to be completed."

The boys must bleed in this part of the rite, and particular emphasis is put on making certain the bleeding happens correctly. A public display with elaborate decoration and feasting follows. In one night procession we witnessed in Thiruvananthapuram (in association with the annual mass women's rite of *Pongala*) beautiful flower kolams were drawn on the ground in long lines, along with umbrellas and lamps. The display was formal and very beautiful. The procession, which takes place the night before Attukal temple's women-only *Pongala* Festival, included floats, dancers,

costumed players enacting dramas, men embodying Bhadrakali and many other groups. Attukal *Amma*, the goddess, was brought out and mounted on an elephant for the procession.

In a different *Kuttyotum* filmed by Dianne in Mavilikkara in 1995, two initiated boys who had been in seclusion were instructed by older men each evening to dance, and sitting in a temporary thatched structure they watched the older men dance ceremonially for hours. In Dravidian temple practice, we were told by an Ilava woman, the boys become possessed by the goddess, and “get the power,” lurching from side to side, crowns awry, and needing to be supported lest they fall to the ground.

Kuttyotum rituals are described from the 1880’s, of Ilavan boys’ sides pierced with wire. This ritual was not named but similarities to *Kuttyotum* include the presence of the goddess. The boys prostrated themselves before an image of Kali, following which “the fleshy parts of their sides were pinched up, and some wires put through.” Members of their families then led them in formal procession around the temple. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. II, 405)

Piercing sides of youths: A piercing rite (*kuttyotum*) for older boys, fifteen or sixteen, was reported, done for goddess Bhadrakali, in the 19th century. As with the rite for younger boys cited above, this event for youths occurred within the Ilavan community, and probably others. The youths fasted for five days on plain rice and vegetable curry. “Dressed in handsome cloths and turbans, and adorned with gold bracelets and armlets, and garlands of flowers,” (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. II, 408) the participants went three times around the temple and then had an iron rod put through the flesh of their sides, and a small rattan cane inserted through the wounds. The ends of

the canes were held by four companions as they circumambulated the temple. "All go round in procession, with music and singing and clapping hands, five or seven times, according to their endurance, till quite exhausted." (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. II, 408). The *pujari*, dressed in red, then danced before the goddess. Cocks were sacrificed and the blood poured around the temple. Women cooked "boiled rice" in new pots for this occasion, the porridge being taken home for general distribution (ibid). This cooking of rice in new pots may indicate that *pongala*, the women's ritual for household passages including menarche, was cooked in association with boys' and youths' blood rites done for the goddess of the 19th century, just as happens now, in modern times, as we observed.

The side piercing of youths in 19th century practice is markedly similar in its details to a piercing ritual Dianne and I filmed in the village of Maranalloor about an hour by bus from the city of Thiruvananthapuram. The following is an account of that men's piercing rite:

Cavady Festival, 1997. The word *cavady* may broadly mean to carry something across the shoulders, as a pole with baskets of offerings for the deity at each end (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. III, 451). Ram (72) identifies "lifting pots of water for the goddess' bath", as *kavati*. Her full description of non-Sanskritic forms of worship matches most of my experience of the men's piercing and carrying rite: "blood sacrifice, liquor, ecstatic possession and dancing, various forms of bodily chastisement and self-inflicted tortures (of which the mildest form would be lifting pots of water, *kavati*, for the goddess' bath, and the cruelest would include self-mutilation of the mouth and parts of the body, hook-swinging, and fire-walking)..." (72) (My experience and close

observation of the piercing at a *cavadyottum* led me to think of this as “altered states” rather than “mutilation” or cruelty.)

Some of the participants carried heavy wooden *cavady* arches on their shoulders; others underwent a cheek-piercing rite whose name I could not determine. Dianne and I were invited to the village of Maranalloor by Satheesh Bose to film this men’s rite. He and his friend Vijayan served as guide and translator through the long intense day, which began at the Shiva temple. There, men who had prepared themselves for days with abstinence, and had bathed and were painted with sandalwood and red *cum-cum* would undertake the physically strenuous public rite of *cavady*. This task was to dance seven kilometers down the road to the Mariamma temple, after allowing the priest to pierce through both cheeks with a rod of metal which looked like stainless steel. The piercing was done near the *naga* shrine, and away from the women. But though of course the wounds bleed, the blood does not appear to be a focus of attention. However, while the participants were being pierced, one at time at the *naga* shrine, in other parts of the temple yard young men who were not participants playfully chased each other with red powder, smearing it on the other. Playfully, one of them smeared some on my face as well.

Meanwhile the priests attended each participant, made certain he was ready, and pierced through one cheek and then the other with the small rod. Men around him shouted or chanted loudly into his ear. The man’s cheeks were dusted with ash (*verbuti*) and two lemons slid onto the protruding ends of the inserted rod, to rest against his cheeks on each side. We witnessed close-up about six piercings, and the men appeared to be in trance.

Once the small bar—about ten inches long and the diameter of my little finger-- was through both cheeks, the priest then attached a much longer metal rod. One side of this ended in a trident (*trisol*). Thus pierced as though by a three-pronged spear, the men dance on the road as gracefully as they are able, which for some was quite gracefully indeed, balancing their long poles with their hands, and probably also their teeth. An alternative to the cheek piercing was to carry the “*cavady*,” a heavy wooden cross piece laden with flowers that lays across the devotee’s shoulders. Some also balanced on their heads pots whose mouths were closed with a coconut bud covered with red or white cloth by the priests. One heavy set and exhausted appearing young man (who may have been ill and doing the rite as a healing) had three burdens-- trident pole through his cheeks, *cavady* piece on his shoulders, and pot on his head. He was attended by enthusiastic friends who made great effort to keep him dancing and upright in his sojourn to the goddess Mariamma.

The most admired devotee of this event was a sturdy, balanced-looking dark man who, we were told, performed *cavady* this every year in behalf of the community. His metal rod was a much-discussed twenty-eight feet long, and his dancing was even and confident. The rods of the other men were shorter, though none looked to be less than fifteen feet long.

Measures seemed to be taken to modulate the intense *shakti* of the event. Besides the generous dustings of ash used on the cheeks and lemons placed on the rod next to the cheeks—for “cooling”--women on the dirt road leading from the temple to the main, paved road, handed out buckets of water that were poured on the *cavady* dancers, drenching their heads and red waist cloths—also to “cool” them. This cooling should

also be understood in terms of *shakti*, I think, and not only physical temperature. To invigorate as well as stabilize him, each participant was accompanied by a retinue of highly energized and exuberant friends who encouraged his spirits, sang and clapped to him, and held him up later when the spirit made his body lurch and toss this way and that. The companions held the initiate by the waist band, a gesture reminiscent of the 19th century description of companions holding the ends of the canes inserted through wounds in young men's sides. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. II, 408)

Women from the men's families stood at the entrance of the Shiva temple as the participants, about thirty men and two boys, lined up waiting for priests to signal the time to go out to the public road and begin the dance. As each man, his cheek piercing complete, stood in the line, the women delivered the *kuruva* sound that is typical of many menarche rites. Hours later, down the road at the Mariamma temple, the women made the sound again as each dancer lurched into the temple's inner yard. Crowds of people, tens of thousands, lined the seven kilometer road. When we arrived at the goddess temple, many women, relatives of the participants we were told, stood just outside the precinct, lined along a four-foot high stone fence. Dianne and I were inside the wall, filming the weaving, nearly falling men as they entered. Only one woman besides the two of us was inside the temple walls, and she was among the musicians sitting in an open pavilion leading to the temple entrance.

As the participants lurched through the entrance gates, we filmed them in their "possession". Their companions clutched their waistbands as they flailed this way and that in states of apparent exhaustion and probable altered-consciousness. They circumambulated the building housing the installation of Mariamma, whose fierce blue-

bodied presence, in the act of killing Darika, stood above us over the temple entrance with eyes distended and red tongue protruding. After the men ran around the temple, they stood one by one before the priests, who took over again and swiftly removed the men's tridents and cheek posts.

I closely observed the course of the man who had been first in line at the Shiva temple. He appeared to be about fifty, with a calm demeanor and a serious expression. Once the trident-pole was removed he walked out the gate of the Mariamma temple yard as casually as though he had just been on a stroll, and not seven hours of lurching, strenuous, pole-balancing, cheek-pierced dancing. Bose told us that participants reported their wounds healing "without a scar in about three days."

I came on no information connecting the trident to menarche. Goddess icons and posters depict her holding the trident, it is "her" weapon, and frequently she is holding it along with a sword or knife and the severed head of Darika. (Shiva has it in his depictions as well, and male writers say that a male god gave it to the goddess; women in Kerala said the trident belonged to the goddess first.) The trident, (*trisula*) I was told, is so sacred it is sometimes worshipped by itself; the trident can be the goddess, for example, Bhadrakali, at times (Induchudan, 219). In secular use in the first part of the twentieth century the trident was used by fishermen as a fish spear. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol I.)

The festival of cheek-piercing we witnessed was in February, a hot season month, and took place just a week before the Mariamma temple's annual women's rite of cooking pongala, as though the two are coordinated. Three temples, including the Mariamma temple, together sponsored the *cavady*.

Tukkam--Garudan. Hook-swinging. The contemporary festival of *cavadyotum* and the ritual of *kuttiyotum* both are male piercing rites, that, take place in connection with the goddess. Another festival, the men's ritual of *Garudan--* hook-swinging, is directly connected to the story of Bhadrakali killing the demon Darika. Performers who do this become the *Thookkakaran*, the person who does the *Thookkam*, (or *tukkam*) the hook-swinging.

In this ritual men have hooks inserted in the flesh of their backs—or did until recently. Nowadays a red cloth band is substituted for flesh-piercing. However, I had the impression that genuine hooking is still done at the *Garudan tukkam or thookkam*, which we were invited to attend at the Mariamman temple (and unfortunately could not). The men prepare by a vegetarian diet and sexual abstinence, as well as exercises in the care of a trainer. The training may be for forty-one days or even a year (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol II, 402)

In preparation for his role, the participant is dressed in red, white and black costume with artificial lips and wings in imitation of the “lunar kite”, Garuda, and his face is painted green. The hooks are placed by a priest, through back muscles that have been prepared for weeks, and have been specially oiled and shampooed on this day. (Whether these hooks are related to the “billhook”—a small metal all-purpose implement for thatching, etc-- that some goddess icons hold, I do not know, but this is a possibility as they look the same.)

Once firmly hooked, the practitioner is hoisted into the air and swings back and forth from the cross piece of a pole that may take him forty or more feet off the ground. The contraption supporting him is mounted on a car that is pulled around by men hauling

on ropes. A sword and shield may be handed up to him, which he wields clumsily in midair. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. II, 405) We were told that as a blessing mothers may hand small children up for the Garuda to hold while he swings. This could also be a *nercha*, a fulfillment of a promise to the deity: if you give me a child I will give it to you to swing. (Jenett, personal communication) Thurston and Rangachari also describe this, from a nineteenth century practice. (ibid) Three or four men may swing at one time.

The Darikavardham story connected to this festival is that during the men's hook swinging, the vehicle, or ghost Vetalam, on whom Bhadrakali rides to find the demon Darika, is actually drinking the Garuda bird's blood—an act she performs after the killing of Darika. In the battle between Bhadrakali and Darika, Vetalam's broad tongue *is* the battlefield, and her drinking is what prevents the demon's blood from falling onto the earth and reproducing itself a thousandfold. Darika's blood does not completely fill Vetalam's stomach and so she is given the privilege of drinking Garuda's blood from "his"—that is, the hook-swinger's—back. She drinks as much as she wants and needs to fill herself. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. II, 403).

A different and perhaps older version of the Darikavardham story is suggested by the fact that an icon of the goddess is seated on a winged figure covered with snakes in a temple near Thiruvananthapuram. (Mateer 92) This detail suggests that the goddess in past centuries may have been Garuda, at least in some parts of South India. In the Darikavardham as it is related now, her "vehicle", the ancestral ghost Vetalam, "rides on the Garuda" bird. Vetalam—as I said earlier—could easily be some earlier version of the goddess, as she is associated with Kali in Kerala, though in other parts of India Vetala is a male figure (Induchudan, 217). In Kerala religious poster art Vetalam holds

Bhadrakali's feet as though supporting the goddess' body, and her hair is positioned as though to represent "flow" from the vulva of the goddess. Her prominent breasts with erect nipples (sign of *shakti* energy), her flowing black hair, red skirt with pleated front piece indicating "red flow" down her vulva area, and her staring eyes and protruding tongue all replicate the *shakti*-empowering appearance of Bhadrakali herself. Or she could be a collective portrait of a maiden at menarche in a state of *shakti* empowerment. But what contemporary Kerala women say of her is that she is an "ancestral ghost".

Brahmin mythology says that Garuda is the vehicle of Vishnu, but hook-swinging and perhaps other rituals of the older communities of Kerala tell an older tale, identifying Garuda more directly with the goddess. In any case, the blood of the hook swinging men, is an offering to the goddess (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol II, 403).

Table 7. Practices of male blood rites compared to menarche practices.

Practice:	Male Blood Rites:	Menarche:
Seclusion	yes K	yes
Not go outside	yes K	yes
Not see the sun	yes K	yes
Vegetarian fast	yes K, C, T	yes
Abstain from sex	yes K, C, T	yes
No alcohol	yes K, T	yes (some)
Ritual bath	yes K, C, T	yes
Painted (cum-cum)	yes K, C, T	yes
Oil anointment	yes T	yes (some)
Head covering	yes K, C 19 th	yes
Procession	yes K, C, T	yes
Dressed in finery	yes K, C 19 th , T (bird)	yes
Gold bangles	yes K,C 19 th	yes
Flower Garland	yes K, C	yes
Kuruva by women	yes K, C 20 th	yes
Pujari in red	yes C 19 th	--
Pongala cooked	yes K, C	yes (some)
Feast	yes K, C 19 th	yes
Companions	yes C	yes

Explanation of Table 7: Some attributes of boys', youths' and men's blood rituals compared to the same attributes in menarche rites. The initial K indicates Kuttiyotum, C indicates Cavady and T indicates Tukkam. Where I have information only for 19th century Cavady I have used the mark C 19th. The menarche answers are for menarches in general, and are not specific to, say, the Ilavan community, which heavily supported the 19th century version of the *cavady* rite Dianne and I attended. However, many castes take part in at least some of these rites.

We should keep in mind that the "yes" answer in the column under menarche does not indicate yes for every community. For example, in some, alcohol in the form of *arrack* or *toddy* or other drink was mandated at menarche, and in others prohibited; in some, *pongala* was not cooked (though some kind of sweet porridge and sweets in general were apparently widespread in menarche practices).

Because I don't have information about male initiation rites directly connecting boys' rites with menarche, this is an inconclusive part of my study. Yet, the correlations in Table 7 suggest that blood rites were ancestrally at least, connected to menarche, especially in such details as the fact that in *kuttiyotum* boys go into states of possession, and the women's use of *kuruva*, which in Ilavan practice announces menarche, and also in the women's cooking of *pongala*, which is such a prominent part of certain menarche practices. The subject of hook-swinging will be taken up again in relation to goddess Bhadrakali's primary story about killing the demon Darika.

Menstrual Logic, Menstrual Law and Cultural Obversity

The quality of "merged identification" by which natural cycles were understood and interacted with as though they are cycles of women's bodies led to the extension of metaformic "courses" of (various) menarchal rites out into ever larger spheres of nature. Women's bodies, and especially cyclical functions surrounding the womb, were the patterns by which people as a whole comprehended and acted toward, nature. In so doing, they incorporated increasing numbers and complexities of cycles of nature into human culture—literally ritualizing nature.

For example, approaching the dry period and monsoon season as “earth’s menstruation” with attendant menstrual (and marital/fertilizing) rites develops and contains practices that eventually become “agriculture”. The supposition of metaformic theory is that application of the practices within (menstrual and related) seclusions developed human cultural evolution. Cycles and forms of nature that were/are conflated with the cycles and rites of women became certain forms of “the goddess”. If this supposition of the theory is valid, we could expect indication that natural forms became merged with human female, gradually being iconically represented as anthropomorphic (as Jayakar has described). Metaformic theory would also expect that menarche rites of “the maiden as goddess” held within households would gradually spill out into public spheres in which men embody the goddess. Temple practices too, would show this overlap, since rituals aren’t “made up,” but are built on what has gone before, as I have noted earlier.

Beneath the initial heading of “Menstrual Logic” eight subheads suggest themselves: The first two address Menstrual Logic as it pertains to goddess rituals in both physical and nonphysical (*shakti*) aspects that may have “spilled out” of women’s household practices to impact or construct society as a whole. I include a personal account of the experience of bleeding from the head or what in Christian practice is called “stigmata” following viewing film of Bharani Festival. Thirdly, some stories of various goddesses in Kerala give a hint of the range of characteristics associated with feminine power.

The category Menstrual Law asks the question to what extent—if any-- might we speculate that Kerala society was deeply *regulated* by menstruation’s mandates (prior to the twentieth century)? The metaformic term “Elaboration”—the continual unilateral

refinement of a metaformic pattern--can suggest the extent to which a metaformic social configuration refines and elaborates a single line of behavior to the point that a society becomes oppressive, stagnant and in some sectors at least virtually nonfunctional. This may relate to Kerala's extreme caste system, which had over 500 divisions by the 19th century, as I will discuss. These were vigorously dismantled during the twentieth century, and affirmative action in education, health care and jobs for previously untouchable groups was instituted. These groups remain named *dalit* (oppressed) or "scheduled castes", as a reference to affirmative action selection and quotas. However, my impression was that caste remains socially stifling and history of oppression retains its sting.

The seventh category, "Menstrual Logic and the Gender of Primary Deities" addresses an expectation of metaformic theory that goddess worship is so bound to menarchal celebration that female divinity (eventually) completely disappears in its absence. Finally, the subhead "Cultural Obversity" begins to describe the characteristic of metaformic rites to be mutually exclusive of each other, causing a dialectical tension from group to group and perhaps accounting for some institutional behavior.

Menstrual Logic

1. Menstrual Logic and Goddess Rituals.

Specific to this study is the question of goddess rites: can the general practices within rituals of goddesses in Kerala and nearby states be said to follow, possibly, from menarche rites of past or present in South India? From interviews and our observations, Dianne and I learned that frequently in Kerala households, deities gravitate outside to small installations and eventually temples grow up around them. The *Pongala* she

attended (and filmed) with Asha Thombe in 1997 took place in a field. The goddess “lives in the house of some carpenters,” Asha told her. But recently someone had seen a snake in the meadow and subsequently the carpenter realized/decided “the goddess wanted to move” to an outdoor temple permanently. Dianne entered the small thatched hut that had been built in the meadow to house the Devi during the *Pongala* Festival. Inside was a stool with a cloth draped over it, on which stood a small mirror—that was the goddess. Dianne also thought she saw horns in the hut but Asha said she did not see them. Whatever form the goddess (or god) takes in the household shrine, it is a tremendous and time-consuming responsibility to care for her. Lamps must be lit, she must be cared for and *pujas* can be lengthy; perhaps most disrupting to the demands of modern life, the demands of menstrual separation require helping hands within the households. When for various reasons families can no longer spare the time, the deity may be removed to a more public site or given to temple officials who take on responsibility to continue the rites. The family may continue to be part of the ensuing temple authority for generations.

In Malabar, the *Theyyam* festival we attended had been in the Tiyyan family for generations, taking place in a huge field and grove with a *sarpa cava* (*naga* installation) and small temple installation with pavilions and administrative building. In 1997, when we were there, the community had elected to take complete charge of the *Theyyam* ritual, removing it from Krishnan’s family. He had requested Dianne to video for him as a remembrance of the rite as it was under his family’s care. The altar which was on a raised platform in a small grove, contained a silver cobra, a picture of Shiva and Parvati, and a picture of Krishnan’s family ancestor.

At Attukal temple, we heard a similar story—of a small family installation in a shed gradually growing in size over years. The temple in 1952 was less than 30 feet long. Originally it had belonged to a single Nayar family. Today, in 1998, the temple occupies several acres, with five or six large buildings and plans for a hospital.

I include these examples to show the overlap between family deities (and practices) and temples. Not all temples grow up in this way but enough do that we can ask what the relation may be between women's (and men's) household *puja* rites and later, public, priest-overseen temple rites. Of course, a close study of this relation from inside the culture would answer the question best, but in the absence of such study I can do a rough, outsider's view comparison that will hopefully arouse some interest for further study.

Menarche practices and goddess rites. Metaformic theory assumes that specific features of household menarche rites would have developed increasingly complexly as goddess rites, beginning with the maiden's embodiment of her. These rites would have "spilled out" so to speak from household practices to more public rites connected to temples, *Theyyam* and so on. If so, then practices appearing in menarche rites would also appear in goddess rites.

List # A: Generalized practices appearing in menarche rites that are also present in goddess rites:

1. Processions in which goddess is carried—in a palanquin, or on an elephant. Nayar and other upper class menarchal maidens were carried in a palanquin or on a (female) elephant at the turn of the century (Caldwell, Chapter 5, 297).
2. Goddess is bathed and dressed by ritually designated attendants (usually male priests).
3. Goddess is coated in substances such as oil or sandalwood.
4. Temple held blood sacrifices following which temple is closed 7 days (or other specific number) and goddess is in seclusion, no rites are performed. (Attukal, in the

1950's, immediately following the cooking of pongala in the annual women's festival in February.)

5. *Saris* and other gifts such as *gingelly* oil, turmeric, *cum cum* are brought to goddess by devotees.

6. Anklet or bracelet (*kappu*) put on goddess icon. Nambutiri maidens received her anklet, bracelet, nose-ring and so on for the first time at menarche, I was told. I attended a 5 am Attukal event in which the goddess received a bracelet. This was attended by a close crush of --mostly--women.

7. Goddess "eats first"—when cooking for the goddess, you never taste the food to see if it is done, as the goddess should eat first, she receives the first bite. According to a young Nayar woman whose menarche was celebrated, it is crucial that the maiden "eats first" during seclusion, though in all other menstruations the women eat last. At the menarche of the goldsmith family in Thiruvananthapuram, the women ate first during the feast, and were served by the men, a reversal of usual Kerala practice at meals. It was or is usual for others including the husband, to cook for women in menstrual seclusion. At Kodungallor, Mariamma's two women attendants "eat first", a point that was clearly important for one of them, Saraswathiamma Thevaravattath to make in telling her family story.

8. Girl Companions: *Thalipali*, is a festival including a procession of women, teenage and pre-puberty age girls who are said to be "companions" of Devi. The annual four day *Talipali* rite at Kodungallur temple includes the placing of a vessel of red blood substitute (*garuti*) on a lotus (*yonis*) drawing on the ground in front of Vasurimala, a form of goddess Mariamma (Induchudan, 139). The imagery of this ritual offering is completely suggestive of menstruation, as are four days, which is a common length of menstrual seclusion for several of Kerala's communities. In Deva's menarche two beautifully dressed aunts came into the room in a processional line with round metal plates of fruit and flowers, and all the gifts brought by (women) guests were placed ceremonially on a plate in front of the maiden, before being piled up next to her. Likewise, in *Talipali* processions, ritually important objects such as lamps, arecanuts, coconuts, flowers, mirror and so on, varying from area to area, are arranged on metal plates and carried by the beautifully dressed women and girls. At Kodungallor's Sri Kurumba temple, Talipoli festival includes honoring of the cloth (*tirutata*) of the goddess (Induchudan, 241-4). When the portable icon of Devi at Chennganor is carried back from her ritual bath in the Pampa River, the road is lined with beautifully dressed women and girls offering plates in *Talipali* procession.

9. The cooking of *pongala* by women in relation to blood shedding rites, especially the sacrifice of chicken, goat or sheep, is repeatedly mentioned in association with accounts of both contemporary boys' *Kuttiyotum* and young men's piercing rites of the 19th century. Rice porridge or pudding cooking is a frequent part of menarche rituals in several communities.

10. Women's oracular possession. Ethnographer Iyer gave the example of maidens at menarche in Pulaya (Cheruman) community checked to make sure they do not have possession symptoms. The belief in susceptibility of virgins to *shakti* possession is well-documented.

11. Flower offerings—wearing jasmine in hair; wearing a *mala* around the neck; men blessing women with flower petals, as her uncle did Deva and as men do at Pongala

Festival when they shower the women with red and white petals as the priest leaves the temple to sprinkle each pot with rosewater.

Temple rites as menarche rites. Some temples appear to have taken a particular part of menarche and specialized in presenting it as an annual festival. 1. Attukal temple: pongala cooking by women, which has gone from 50 pots in the 1950's to 1.8 million (temple estimates) in 1997. 2. Rites of possession, especially by women, treated as a mental illness that in extreme cases calls for nailing of the spirit into a banyan tree. 3. Goddess Mookambika, for instance, has a daily procession in palanquin, and bringing of new saris by pilgrims; 4. Kodungallur *Talipoli* with offering of *garuti* to Mariamma; 5. elephant procession carrying Bhadrakali. 5. Many temples feature bathing rituals, not only Chennganor where Parvathi periodically menstruates. The annual festival at the temple is 28 days ending with a procession with five elephants to the Pampa River for (*arratu*) sacred bathing. 6. Many temples feature sacred dancing, including circle dances such as *Thiruvathirakali*, described as part of menarche rites. 7. The north side of Kerala houses is traditionally designated for menstrual seclusion; the north side of temples was designated for animal blood sacrifice. (Moore, 352)

2. Menstrual Logic and Shakti Power

Iyer has given a definition of Shakti that he took from the Devibhagavatham (early writings about the goddess): "She is neither man, woman, nor eunuch. At the time of the destruction of the world, she is perception, intelligence, firmness, remembrance, prosperity, faithfulness, pity, beauty, hunger, tranquility, idleness, old age, strength, and weakness. What is she not? What is there without her?" (Iyer, Vol. I, 314).

As I have said, *shakti* is “the power” that enfuses all life, and also can be chaotic and destructive. Shakti is also worshipped as a goddess, and worshipped in many different contexts, including as a husband-wife pairing with Shiva.

The question for this study is whether any of the powers understood as coming through or inherently belonging to the maiden at menarche fit also into definitions of shakti—or perhaps earlier concepts of women’s powers to affect others, such as the idea of *ananku*, from poetry, and of *naga* powers.

The following list is of some of the powers of the maiden at menarche:

List # B: Comparison of capacities of maidens at menarche and capacities of goddess

The maiden’s capacity to affect nonhuman beings.

- she can make plants wither by not staying in seclusion (and in all probability was understood to help them flourish if she did)
- she can affect the stars and sun
- she can mitigate negative astrological forces
- she can make river water lethal (Kadars—one drop of menstrual blood “pollutes” it)
- she can affect generations of karma (if menstrual pad is touched by snake ie)

Specific capacities of the goddess.

The power of her menstrual cloth at Chennganor, Orissa can cure barrenness and bring well-being and harmony to a household

- as Mother of all
- love, ecstasy
- shaking, altered state of transformation and healing
- poetry
- truth-speaking, oracular powers
- abundance, granting of boons, rewarding of vows (*vrati*)
- disease, as possible positive or negative event
- wellbeing of fields, plants and animals—and as their forms
- fire, flood, destruction of landscape
- as rain
- mental illness

Do maidens have these kinds of powers as well? Some of the research implies that they do, and, significantly, that the variety of definitions of *shakti* (and *ananku*) stem from collective menarche qualities.

The following is a personal account connecting the *shakti* present at a major goddess festival, Bharani Festival, and a blood experience called, in English, “stigmata”.

Personal account of receiving *shakti* through film and experience of stigmata:

Notebook log: April 20, 1997 (we returned from India April 16). Sunday. Have been sleeping day and night plus eating heavy amounts of red meat and lots of salad, asparagus and broccoli.—Sat afternoon Kris (my partner) and I went to Palo Alto for a barbecue and film watch and for DJ and I to tell stories for the tape recorder—all too tired to do this. Did anyhow. The film included Dianne’s Bharani shoot and the women in possession states looking right at the camera and hitting themselves with their vals—in the original, I went into an altered state at a very distinct moment—Later was extremely dizzy after return home—called Dianne who imagined her hand at my solar plexis and talked me down some. But the dizziness remained extreme. We decided to do a washing ritual. On the phone we decided how it should go. One of the ingredients was rosewater; Dianne went out at midnight to pick some rose petals from her garden and the next day drove the forty miles from her home to mine. Meantime I reserved an hour and a half of time at a nearby spa that featured private, outdoor hottubs with showers in the same space.

So Sun. at 4:30 DJ and I went to a hot tub room with ritual washing materials. She had read an account of the end of Bharani (which we’d missed) and said at 6:30 am they used

to sacrifice the most chickens—so blood ended it. We should end with blood too she said and I agreed.

We scuffled around in stuff in her car and came up with a safety pin and antibacterial ointment—a western addition.

We devised it thusly—

We undressed and immersed ourselves in the hot tub 3 times . After the first time we each pricked each other's finger (I went first to show her how and she did fine pricking mine) and put one drop of blood between the other's eyes. Then we wet down under the shower and used turmeric as a paste, we placed it over each other's wounded places—ie my eyebrow and forehead, etc—and both our hearts, her eczema ears—about 8 – 10 places on each. Our skins stained orange. We rinsed off and reimmersed. The only ritual words used were “Goddess I Adore You” on suitable occasions— the words we say whenever we are overflowing with love and awe—when the goddess is pouring through us....

Then we washed with two kinds of soap—first Neem—made from a plant special to the goddess—green and aromatic, we washed each other and the turmeric came out of the skin –so I especially soaped Dianne, whose skin had really absorbed it—Then we washed ourselves with sandalwood, which was cooling—almost chilling—and then we immersed in the hot water for the third time –came out and poured over each other—cold rose water—shivery, shocking and delicious—and then the better part of a gallon of milk (heated in the hot tub). Absolutely delightful and a great way to return to the mother/child state.

We rinsed under the shower and went to my house—feeling better, not good, just better—loving the rite.

Then—(I had hung India cloths all over the house) we went into (my partner) Kris' room to see her cloth and suddenly she noticed that Dianne and I had identical red spots on our lower right temples—on the uppermost jaw parallel to the ear—raised red bumps like cuts or deep scratches ready to spill blood—about 2/3 the size of my little fingernail. Dianne's felt slightly higher and rougher than mine—blood red—

There was no “earthly” reason for them being there—we had washed only an hour or so before (at 5:50) and they weren't there. Kris did not notice them earlier when we first came in. The time was about 7:25. We felt the blood bumps and saw them on each other and looked in the mirror and saw them on ourselves. By 7:35 when Dianne left mine had already begun to fade. By 9:30 Kris said you wouldn't know it was there.

Stigmata. My pendulum concurred they are a mark of the goddess, a signal to let us know she is with us. That in doing the bathing ritual we did the right thing. I walked Dianne to the door—“We're in it now,” I said and she said, “Oh I know.”

3. Menstrual Logic and Goddess Stories

Earlier in this study I've given details from several of goddess stories, such as that Bhagavati is immanent in the population and can appear as “any woman”—during Pongala Festival, when, according to one rural Nayar family, “she comes to cook with us”. Bhagavati can appear as an old woman dressed in red, or as a young girl—and this depiction is also in red.

In an oral, and lower class version (“Chandra's Vengeance”) of the story of Kannaki and her anklet, the name of the goddess who takes the form of a faithful wife is

Chandra, which means “moon”. (Parasarathy, 321-6) Hence the goddess/woman Chandra, tearing off her breast in outrage, and throwing it into the city of Madurai, which sets it afire—is the moon setting fire to the earth, a motif that may sound familiar to folklorists. The sun in some South Indian oral accounts is identified as a goddess, (in others a god). In the cooking of Pongala at the Festival of Attukal Temple, the moment that the masses of women light the fires under their cooking pots is the storied moment when Kannaki throws her breast down in rage and burns the city that betrayed her. As I have said, the cooking of *pongala* is connected to menarche and also to both the sun and the moon. The story, then, reflects elements present in rituals that probably greatly predate it even in its oral version.

Other stories that seem to contain metaformic elements are creation stories of two sisters, one of whom gives birth to the snake and one to the bird—when we realize that the snake is red and the bird probably the “lunar” kite. This story was related to Dianne and me in a village north Malabar by a traditional *theyyam* actor who embodies the goddess in oracular trance, as a red cobra with *dharmstra* fangs and a huge red *mudi* or headpiece. This *theyyam* festival contained storied enactments with deeply female content: a Brahmin priest was being chased by a *yakshi* because he had interrupted her during her bath. Another *theyyam* enacted the goddess with a headpiece flaming with a circle of solar flames, was on her way for a yearly visit with her sister who has gone to live in a nearby mosque in the form of a lamp. A third story enacted the creation of “death”. The goddess, Chamundi (a fierce goddess) was globular shaped and torpid from having created so much life she could no longer move. Seeing the problem Shiva created a man who provided “death” which was dramatized as a wide tub of blood substitute

(*garuti*) floating with flower petals. When the tub was emptied, the goddess, accompanied by a red, white and black bird-*theyyam*, began once again, to dance—implying the great round of creation, death and renewal as a reciprocal relation between the genders—the goddess creates, and Shiva watches and acts to restore a balance.

In the next example, “menstrual law” itself is clearly in the balance of forces of life and death in human decisions.

Menstrual Law and the Mahabharata. A pan-India example of the drastic consequences of breaking menstrual “law”—the behavioral rules surrounding menstrual seclusion-- is illustrated in a version of the epic, the Mahabharata. This epic is of course well known in Kerala; in addition to the sanscrit poetry, which is perhaps the world’s longest epic poem, oral, theatrical and film versions make it also one of the world’s best known stories. For English readers, the traditional story has been summarized as a tale of enslavement and revenge for personal insult, and it is worth going through this in some detail to show the differences when the story is presented as a breach of menstrual law. In most English language versions, the central character, Draupadi (also a South Indian goddess, Thirapadi) “Daughter of Drupada king of Panchal, ... was a woman of great beauty and of a fierce spirit. Indeed she was the Helen of the Indian epic, and more than that, for whereas Helen was passively taken by Paris, and then taken back by Menelaus, Draupadi actively interfered in the war which was started for her sake, and incited her men to take revenge....Draupadi was married to the five Pandava brothers in one ceremony, each husband spending two successive nights with her in rotation.” (Knappert, 94-6) She was in love with one, Arjuna, and had chosen him as husband but followed the polyandrous custom of marrying all the brothers of a family, at her mother-in-law’s

instigation. Disaster struck when the eldest brother gambled against their powerful and rival cousins, the Kauravas. He lost everything, and the Pandava brothers all, along with Draupadi, became slaves. One of the Kauravas, Dusasana, grabbed Draupadi by the hair, and attempted to tear off her clothing. She screamed to her husbands for revenge. This incident involving her led to their thirteen year exile at the end of which the great war of the Mahabharata began.

Savithri De Turreil, who we will recall is a Nayar scholar, while visiting Dianne in Palo Alto in spring of 1998, told us emphatically that Draupadi was in seclusion for her *menses*, and when the impatient Duhsasana broke in and grabbed her in her disheveled, unkempt condition, and dragged her out by the hair he thus broke the menstrual law. Savithri said, “it was the woman’s menstrual seclusion that was violated, and this started the war and produced the horrible destruction. They all died.”

The Sanscrit text, initially gathered into the lengthy epic during the centuries from 400 bce to 400 ce, has recently been translated more faithfully to the original, for English readers by J.A.B van Buitenen. Three volumes and over (two thousand pages in length) the complexity of the stories of battles and betrayals hang on the outcome of a single confrontation between two sets of cousins, in which one of the Pandava brothers gambles away himself, his brothers and their wife, Draupadi. She happens to be enclosed in the women’s quarters in her menstrual seclusion, and when the winning cousin Dhusasana forces her out, she protests vehemently and repeatedly that he is breaking even the law of his own people, and that her husbands, in doing nothing, are breaking their own law, are committing “this dread Unlaw” (van Buitenen, 142). The poetry is completely explicit about the menstrual content of the story: The fiercest of her husbands, warrior Bhima,

“watched how she/was dragged in her courses, with upper cloth drooping...”(van Buitenen, 142); “And as she was dragged, she bent her body/And whispered softly, ‘It is now my month!/This is my sole garment, man of slow wit,/You cannot take me to the hall, you churl!’”(ibid). She brings in some of the seclusion rules being broken such as the prohibition against women being outside because they must be separated from the sun: “I whom neither wind nor sun have seen before in my house” (ie her seclusion). And again, “I whom the Pandavas did not suffer to be touched by the wind in my house before, they now allowed to be touched by this miscreant” (148). Draupadi’s single cloth is “besmirched with blood” (165) and this cloth now becomes the source of a miracle, and “a terrible roar went up from all the kings” on witnessing this “greatest wonder on earth”, (146) because when Dhusasana, contemptuous and triumphant, pulls her skirt to expose her nakedness, the cloth refuses to cooperate. Every time he pulls one cloth from her body, another appears, until a stack of twenty or thirty cloths of all colors is on the ground between them, and the man Dhusasana, not the woman Draupadi, is shamed. (146) The menstrual cloth, infused with the power of her blood, exerts its own will; and while other versions attribute this intentionality to the god Krishna, the literal translation does not. But the cloth’s faithfulness cannot stop the violence to come, and the five Pandava brothers and Draupadi are sentenced to thirteen years of exile, and she is led out of the hall, still “disheveled and weeping in her courses/her cloth wet and besmirched with blood..” (165) Draupadi says that the men who put her in this situation, “thirteen years from now their wives will have their husbands dead, their sons dead, their kinsmen and friends dead! Their bodies smeared with the blood of their relatives, their hair loosened and themselves in their courses, the women shall offer up the water to their

dead...” (166). Thus her vengeful “curse” can be read also as a prediction, that the same impending tragedy of warfare due to broken menstrual law that has happened to her, will happen to other women as well.

Today in the state neighboring Kerala village theatrical dramas, *tukku*, which are similar to *theyyam* in Kerala, and performed by the same traditional community, the palayans. These theatre rituals dramatize oral versions of the Mahabharata, and goddess Thiraupadi (Draupadi). The *tukku* dramas are enacted by the men of the washer castes, whose wives traditionally washed the menstrual cloths of local women. This suggests that in centuries past, the plot of the epic story itself grew from the rituals of a caste invested with the handling of the powers inherent in menstrual blood and the possible consequences of keeping or breaking of menstrual laws. Now, however, the oral village version appears to have evolved, and *karpu*, or women’s chastity, (Frasca, 166) is the power at issue—and not the breaking of menstrual seclusion as was the theme in 400 ce and probably well into later centuries. In the written epic, the threat of violent bloodshed that Draupadi predicts begins immediately, as the great, fierce and cruel warrior Bhima, a Pandava brother married to Draupadi, vowed to “drink the blood” of Dhusasana. As Savathri expressed it, this is a story of the price of breaking menstrual law—ghastly murder and war—violent bloodshed without end and death to all participants. The breaking of menstrual law version of the “reason” for the long war makes sense when understood as a moral lesson of the terrible consequences of disregarding regulations long imposed by women’s blood rituals—regulations, the story implies, that keep peace and order intact within society.

Another story with powerful themes of a goddess who successfully tames violence, is the following.

Darikavadham, the myth of the goddess fighting the demon Darika:

Darikavadham, is the story of a “demon” named Darika, who began as a very pious man. He was so pious that the gods (Vedic male gods Vishnu, Brahma, Shiva et al) granted him a boon of whatever he wished. He chose immortality, though spurning the offer to be immune to feminine as well as masculine powers. Induchudan, using the spelling “Daruka,” tells us that Daruka worshipped Brahman in order to attain invincibility and then the god could not control him. Daruka is the tail end of the *asura* line, which has been nearly wiped out in the war with the *devas*—he is the son of king Darika; and his mother is Darumati (one of two sisters) “At last Brahma appeared before the asura and bestowed upon him the quality of immortality and invincibility. Brahman told him that he may rest assured that he would not be killed by ‘man, stone or iron, or by weapons, during night or day.’ Fully satisfied, Daruka was turning back to go home when Brahman reminded him that he had not attained invincibility against women at which Daruka laughed and said that he did not require any special quality to fight the weak sex.” A second version tells that Goddess Kartayayini met Daruka and offered him her blessing which Daruka refused, “at which she was furious and told him that she would take vengeance on him some day.” (Induchudan, 3- 4)

Soon, as with all absolute power, Darika became violently corrupt. His murdering mayhem and rape were so destructive the gods decided to move against him and found themselves helpless to his immortality. Finally, Shiva recalled his vulnerability to the feminine, and the gods sought goddesses who could defeat him. When Darika/Daruka

had become thoroughly demonic the alarmed gods, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Subramanya, Yama (god of death) and Indra each created a goddess, a “heavenly lady or *devastri*” (Induchudan, 10) Each of these, plus Chamundi (a fierce goddess) probably constitute the *saptamatrikas*, the seven mothers, who are installed in a row within Kodungallor temple. Each god gave each mother particular weapons and a particular vehicle. For example, Vaishnavi had the conch and wheel as weapons and rode upon the Garuda bird as vehicle. Maheswari carried the trident and battle-axe and was riding on a bull, and so on. Each fought the demon by turn, and when in the second round of skirmishes Maheswari struck Daruka in the chest with her trident, his blood fell to the ground. From each drop, a thousand more Darukas were born. (Induchudan, 11) Seeing this, the *saptamatrikas* fled in horror from the field of engagement. In another variant, goddess Ambika imposed silence as a method of defeating Darika, and this too was unsuccessful. She is called Mookambika, the one who kills with silence, and has a major pilgrimage shrine in Karnatika and also one in Kerala. Following these failures yet still understanding the feminine as the pivotal place of effectiveness, Shiva struck his hair against the ground and created Bhadrakali, a goddess whose sole reason for existence is the killing of the demon Darika.

The vehicle Bhadrakali was given is another powerful female, Vetala; Kali rode on a rat-goblin to reach a forest called Ambametala. There on a battlefield she found Vetala, huge and ferocious, with teeth like battle axes, limbs like huge snakes and elephants for ear rings. She wore a garland and blouse of wild elephants and laughed in Kali’s face over Kali’s ability to kill Darika. But when the goddess offered that Vetala could feast on his flesh and blood, the wild female warrior agreed to be her vehicle.

(Induchudan, 12) In a Vetala temple a tall stone—understood as phallic by Induchudan—represents her, along with a small stone bull. Both are painted red, and a main Vetala temple in Western India contains fifty stones placed around a main stone, all of which are painted red. (Induchudan, 13).

Vetala is depicted in a poster icon of Bhadrakali of Attukal temple; she has the loose black hair, erect round breasts, bulged eyes, and protruding tongue associated with shakti possession; and she wears a red waist cloth whose folds give a “streaming” effect. She is holding the goddess’ feet as though supporting her. People in Kerala refer to her as a “ghost”. Vetala’s tongue is the battlefield over which Darika and Kali fight; her job is to drink his blood before it touches the ground. Her protruding tongue as well as Kali’s protruding tongue is described as “the whole earth”.

After the Seven Mothers failed in their attempts to stop the demon, Shiva made another attempt. He created a new goddess, the fierce Bhadrakali, by hitting his hair against the earth. At this time her brother, a *bhuta* (a kind of animal spirit) was also created from Shiva’s ears. To accomplish Her designated task, Bhadrakali had *dharmstra*, fangs of ferocity, and protruding eyes of shakti power and rage. Shiva then told Bhadrakali that what kept Darika in his immortal power was actually a mantra spoken continuously by the demon’s wife, Manodari. Shiva instructed Bhadrakali to go first to Manodari and acquire the mantra, as only then would She be able to kill Darika.

There are many variants of their relationship, and the ensuing “battle” (essentially one of wit and complex emotions) that took place between these two powerful females, seems to have a gendered perspective. Male versions emphasize antipathy between the two, and the total destruction of Manodari by fierce Kali. But at Kodungallor temple, if

not also elsewhere, the part of Darika's wife, Queen Manodari, is understood as played by another goddess, Mariamma. At Kodungallor temple an installation of goddess Mariamma, who is also called Vasurimala, is tended by women belonging to two families who have this as an inherited office. One of them, Saraswathiama Thevaravattath, in a March 1, 1998 interview, gave us a detailed version of the story, and especially of the relationship—including compassion-- between the two goddesses, Bhadrakali and Manodari (Mariamma/Vasurimala). Perhaps because it is told from a woman's point of view, perhaps because she is an attendant of Mariamma, or for other reasons, her rendition varies significantly from the version told in Induchan, which is given in an endnote, and also from versions told to researcher Sara Caldwell by traditional actors in Mudi yettu troupes. I include it (Appendix C) in its entirety because it is a striking example of cooperation between two goddesses, and because it differs in this regard from versions told in other writings.

Bhadrakali's most commonly told and depicted story in Kerala is about her successfully destroying the demon Darika, a king of one of the last lines of the Asura people. Unlike more generalized goddesses, it was expressly the purpose of killing Darika that she was created-- from Shiva's hair. Everywhere in Kerala, on poster art and in wood carvings and plaster sculpture, Bhadrakali is colorfully depicted with a cup of blood or sword in one hand and Darika's severed head, streaming blood, in the other. While her other sets of arms may be holding the "weapons of the gods" in the form of trident, noose, *val*, snake, palmyra leaves and so on, her foremost arms nearly always contain the Darika story in graphic detail. The killing of Darika, we could say, is Bhadrakali's singular function.

While the story of Darikavadham does not connect the goddess directly to menstruation, it does show her direct connect to blood and its rituals. This is, it seems to me, a peace-keeping connection since the reason the goddess is depicted with Her tongue out, as we were told repeatedly by Keralites, is so she can “drink the blood” before it touches the earth (and produces more Darikas). Her tongue is the battlefield on which she fights Darika, and her tongue covers the earth, or is the size of the whole earth. As I stated above, men’s rituals of hook-swinging and piercing are overtly understood as “feeding the Goddess,” who may appear in the older form of Vetala to drink the hook-swinger’s blood.

The “menstrual logic” that I see in Bhadrakali’s imagery and story is the correlation of the beheading of Darika with the particular sword called Chandra Hassan, “Crescent moon”—which equates his blood with “her” collective menstrual blood, and the dark of the moon. The typical menarche seclusion is 3 days—and so is the period of the dark moon. As we shall see, at Kodungallor Bhadrakali is put into seclusion beginning with the day she beheads Darika, the Brahmin priests stay away and she is attended by women temple servants of Mariamma for 3 days; hence the blood spilling is correlated with the moon’s dark “period” and the goddess is treated as though menstruating. She is said to be in seclusion, “resting” and “fasting” for 7 days altogether. (Gentes, 304). I will discuss this further in the next section, about Bharani Festival.

4. Menstrual Logic and Seasonal Rituals

Goddess as earth. As stated earlier, the earth is goddess, called *Bhumi devi* in Kerala, and less than a hundred years ago in Kerala, the celebration of her menstrual cycle was a yearly occasion crucial to the agricultural economy. The goddess is still

understood as earth in a birthing rite in which a Kanniker woman sits on flat stone while in labor. Village goddess Mariamma is portrayed as the earth goddess when the craftsmen make a clay image of her head and set it on the earth, her body. She is earth when she is worshipped as a stone, or when a goddess is identified in a stone struck by the sickle of an agricultural worker, a Pulaya woman, and the stone begins to bleed.

But yearly rites for Bhumi Devi are barely remembered even in the literature. Perhaps something of the connectedness, the interweaving of human world with natural world, remains in some of Kerala's festivals. One of those is Bharani Festival.

Bharani Festival. Bharani Festival is a spectacle, we had been told: "The *velichapods*, and the tribals, come down from the hills to dance and cut their foreheads with their swords." Others said, "Old men sing obscene songs to the goddess, and mobs of drunken men drive all the women of Kodungallor off the streets." The guidebooks described it as "the cock festival," a reference to the now illegal practice of sacrificing tens of thousands of chickens during the huge gathering.

As I have said, Bharani Festival has as its current story an enactment of the killing of Darika by the fierce goddess Bhadrakali. The story of the killing of Darika is physically enacted in a number of Kerala community festivals besides Bharani. The best known of these is *Mudiyettu*, a dance drama done by troupes of traditional Kali actors. In this rite, the actor who embodies Bhadrakali makes a kolam drawing of her in multicolored powders, and while erasing it, becomes "possessed" by the goddess. This sometimes fierce and impassioned dance drama goes on through the night, and includes a symbolic beheading of the actor who embodies the demon, Darika. (Caldwell 1995) One version of the enactment involves the building of a scaffolding that enables the dramatic

action to take place at treetop level, among coconut palms in rural areas, such as at Villanod in Travancore. The goddess triumphs when she is able to get the demon down to the ground. (Jenett 1999, 406)

A very different kind of enactment of the story is Bharani Festival, which takes place at Kodungallur temple for forty-one days during the months of Khombum and Meenam (March-April). In this enactment of the killing of Darika by the Goddess, her oracular shamans, the *velichapods*, arrive from every part of the state including members of the hill tribes of the Western Ghats. In states of ecstatic and oracular trance, the *velichapods* cut their heads, dance, and sing songs of devotion to Bhadrakali. Though their actions are correlated with the story of the goddess killing the demon, another, older set of correlations is also present, as I attempt to show with an account of this festival and its timings. I end with a table (Table 12) correlating Bharani Festival's elements with those of menarche rites.

The temple with its “secret chamber”.

Life-sized white roosters grace the two columns flanking the north gate at Kodungallor Sree Kurumba Bhagavathy temple at Ernakulum. Said to be the most important of Bhagavathi's temples, and situated on a near island bounded by sea and the rivers Chetvai and Azhikode twenty five miles from the central coastal city of Cochin, Kodungallor temple sits on seven to ten acres of land with a dozen enormous banyan and peepul trees. The main installed deities are fierce Bhadrakali, facing north, and Siva facing east. The *Saptamatrukas*—the Seven Mothers-- stand in a line in one of the halls in the main building. Goddess Pattini with her willowy body a contrast to stalwart Bhagavathi, is also installed. Also in the same building is a mysterious “secret chamber,”

an underground room with no windows that has been extended to a perhaps thirty or forty yard long tunnel, to guess from Induchudan's drawing (1969, 305). The tunnel has an east-west axis, and its exit is currently sealed. Inside the temple, the chamber's opening is covered with a red cloth. Bhadrakali is installed nearby. No one may look behind the cloth into the chamber on pain of serious repercussions, and the example given is of a carpenter who went blind. Services, the details of which are kept secret, were conducted in the tunnel formerly; it was sealed in recent decades for safety reasons. (Induchudan, 119)

Induchudan discussed the underground chamber, as showing "striking similarity to the main features of South Indian megaliths," (58) of which there are many in Kerala, especially in the region west of Kodungallor. Scholars have attempted to date them, to 1000 bce (69) or older, with comparison of symbols in megaliths to symbols in Indus Valley sites.

The building housing Bhadrakali is not large and is built over the chamber; an outer square encloses an area about thirty feet by thirty feet and about twelve feet high, broken up into small rooms or verandas and with two porticoes, one opening to the west and the other to the north. A tall (at least 25 foot) lamp stands just outside the portico of the northern entrance. Most of the temple structure is of granite with a graceful copper plate roof. The tallest part of the temple is a tower room (*sikhara*), in the northeast sector. This structure, at least thirty feet high, has slatted walls and a tall peaked roof; its opening faces to the east and is "hung at times with a red banner resembling a tongue" (Gentes 1992, 298). A tall, slender, light-colored iron "sickle" (Induchudan, plate 15) stands inside, an object of worship. A long hall facing north houses the black stone seven

mothers (Saptamattrukas) and a hut of stone holds a *shivalinga*. The icon of Bhadrakali, carved of wood, is six feet—“fully decked with gold ornaments, including the head-wear and the mask. There are six lamps, the Malayali type which is called *nilavilakku*, in front of the idol, out of which two are of solid gold.” (Induchudan, 295) In addition to these which stand on the floor, four lamps are hung before Devi, of the type called *tukkuvilakku*. “A close look reveals that the head-wear is very much like the *kirita* which is used by actors in Kathakali....The ornament which is tightly round the neck may be what Malayali ladies call the *addhika* and the others may be *pavan-mala*, which is a garland with gold discs woven on it. Below the waist, the idol wears a crimson cloth, invariably silk.” (Induchudan, 296)

Non-Hindus are not allowed in to this, Kerala’s oldest and most quintessential Bhagavathi temple, and so we visit Goddess Mariamma in her outdoor installation. “In the western yard there is a small hut, built out of laterite stone. This is where the deity called Vasurimala (Mariamma) is housed.” (Induchudan, 3) Women of two families attend her by hereditary right. We interviewed one of them nearly a year after our experience of Bharani Festival.

Valichepods, vals and ritual pollution: We arrived at the festival on Aswathi day, and on the east pavilion we watch a group of old men singing “obscene” explicitly sexual songs to Devi. Subramanian explained: The purpose of singing obscene (sexually explicit) songs to the Devi is to arouse her, to raise her shakti energy. “But she doesn’t then have sex—she is a virgin—so the energy that has been aroused remains for use of the people.”

Also singing on the west pavilion are groups of *velichapads*, presenting to the goddess by dancing, shaking their *pallival* swords, and singing devotional *bajans* to Devi. According to researcher Gentes, “One of their primary objectives in making the pilgrimage to the Sri Kurumba Kavu is to have the power of their ritual swords recharged by the goddess.” (Gentes, 307) The *velichapads* are breathtaking in appearance and action. The oracular shaman-warriors of the goddess, they are wrapped in red cloth many yards long; around their waists are thick impressive belts hung with heavy bell-metal bells, beautifully cast. Their ever-dancing feet are encased in large hollow brass and silver anklets with protective padding underneath the metal. Some anklets appear to have a serpent shape. Their hair is long, shining black and tangled, and their eyes glow with shakti.

Induchudan identified the *velichapods* closely with the washerpeople (Mannan) (1969, 105) though we were told at the festival that “anyone could be called by the goddess” to go to Bharani as a *valichepod*. The washer castes, Mannans and Velans are described in an early twentieth century ethnography (Iyer) as among the groups most supportive of Bharani Festival. They are/were also associated with black magic, sorcery and divination, and as I said earlier their close association with menstrual cloths of other communities may account for their affinity for occult arts. Other castes supportive of Bharani are the traditional agriculturalists, groups such as the Cheruman, the Panans who were umbrella makers and Kammalans, the artisans. Members of the goldsmith and carpenter castes have important ritual functions at Bharani, as does the ritual chief of the Araya fishing people and the Palakkal Velan, a “desecrating priest” of the washer people

(Gentes 1992). Nayars and Ilavans, both very large communities, also support this festival. Brahmins did not go near it, and men far outnumber women as attendees.

One *velichapattu* was dancing in her red dress and heavy belt, black hair loosened and arms swinging. She was part of a group dancing and singing under a huge *pala* tree, surrounded by hundreds of people who were sitting and standing, watching them, chatting. Spotting me, she turned, still dancing, and vigorously aimed her swinging arms and her tremendous energy toward me, I could feel it wash over me. In response, I lowered my camera and laughed appreciation with her, while people around her watched and smiled. I felt confirmed and supported by gestures such as these, and we had many of them from both women and men. The approval did not appear to be about “western women”—we were sometimes taken for north Indians. I think it was “women with cameras” and women of privilege—who had come to appreciate Bharani, the “lowercaste” Festival.

Actually, from a position above dancing *velichapods* who were presenting their *pallivals* to their non-Brahmin priests our close filming showed that they cut the tops of their heads, not their foreheads; they strike the crowns of their heads repeatedly with the crescent edge of the *val*. Some had several gashes. The blood streams down their faces and into their hair. During the presentation of the *vals*, large amounts of turmeric is pasted onto their cut heads by the non-Brahmin priests attending them, who also contain and “cool” their restless and sometimes aggressive energy. More than half the *velichapods* we saw were women, occasionally an entire group of six or seven were women. Though most were older, a few young women had participated as well. Even in groups that included men, older women appeared to lead the singing and dancing. That

the containment of violent or chaotic energy was essential was vividly displayed during the presentation of *vals* to the priests. One woman, in a state of possession, as all of them were, suddenly struck at the priest with her sword. Immediately he ran at her, yelling, took her *val* and then held her quietly close for a few moments until she was calm—as though to absorb her wild shakti with his own cool body.

On Asvathi day, the demon is killed by goddess Bhadrakali. On this day of the festival, in 1997, Dianne and I and a third American scholar (Patricia Swart) were accompanied to Bharani by Subramanian. I stood among pilgrims before the tower room with its crescent-shaped deity in the slatted room. Along with the others I threw “ritually polluting” objects—coins, in my case. As Induchudan also reported, the offerings thrown over the wall by pilgrims are these: chickens, coconuts, bags of turmeric, handfuls of money, and black pepper. That these items are “ritually polluting” is of particular interest to metaformic theory: are all these items old traditional metaforms? What else would make them “ritually polluting”? They are thrown at an object of worship placed high overhead, which closely resembles, with its concave side or “horns” pointing south, the sliver of waning crescent moon cast in iron and said to tremble at times—an indication of the presence of the goddess.

Personal account: Journal notes, 1998: *The purpose of Bharani is to ritually pollute the temple which increases the power of the goddess (this from Subramanian). Castes and tribes with Valichapods come from all over, as far away as Tamil Nadu –They bring all energy states and express them – in a socially approved and contained context – It is a poor people’s festival -- & something as simple as spilling a few grains of puffed rice on the ground was instantly noticeable as a wasting of food—*

So I only did it once. Drunk or otherwise altered states men are expected to sing “obscene” (ie explicitly sexual) songs and make lewd comments to women (upper caste women avoid this festival). Until recently women kept off the streets of Kodungallur as well but now it is illegal to harass them. Nevertheless when we followed some filmmakers to a hotel for tea (they were interested in Dianne I think—Note she later told me they wanted to sell us film footage—the head guy was a cynic--) we found everyone drunk and walking back had to move fast as the men were aggressive and there were no women— (further and much later –fall 1998--notes on this section: even the men running the restaurant were drunk. After forty minutes we hadn’t gotten tea, I don’t know that we ever did...The men on the street weren’t the filmmakers; we were instantly approached by a small crowd of shouting and pushing men who may or may not have been drinking— what struck me, besides my fear at the time, was that this was ritual behavior, and part of the worship of the goddess).

In retrospect, my spilling grain on the ground drew attention for a different reason, besides the wasting of food: I was sick and nervous and scared to eat the salted rice that a woman had given me. I had no pockets and did not want to put the food grains into my camera case lest the salt scratch the lens. So I did a very impious act: I spilled the rice grains onto the ground. A man dressed in a single small piece of cloth, ears pierced and shaped, dark, tall, intensely serious and evidently attempting to instruct me by looking first down at the rice intently, and then intently at me, then rice, then me. A dozen, two dozen times he did this while I hung frozen in my dilemma—no place to put the spilled rice—no way because of my fear, to eat it.....

The rice *is* the goddess; one never spills it on the ground and especially not during a ritual or at a temple. The event continues to haunt me.

Lunar numbers and circling. *Darikavadham*, “the killing of Darika” is the primary story of goddess Bhadrakali, who is currently the main installed deity of Kodungallor temple. Buddhists are thought to have occupied this temple earlier than 800 ce, when their influence waned and Hinduism revived, but earlier still the “secret chamber” may have been the focus of worship. Achuda Menon speculates the “secret chamber” may have been the original seat of power at Sri Kurumba temple, as Kali’s seats originated as groves, or crude pits (Induchudan, 25). Other scholars think Kali may not have been the deity worshipped in the second century of the Christian era, from examination of Sangam era literature. (42-3, 47). The underground cist and tunnel structure, I suggest, would have had a function differing from the current ritual surrounding goddess Bhadrakali, and much more likely along lines of seasonal rites of Bhumi Devi, the earth goddess.

According to Induchudan the action of Bharani appears to revolve around the underground tunnel and an east-west axis that predates the orientation (north) of the installed Devi. The north and south gates are closed, and an east-west focus seems emphasized. The tunnel has a red cloth over the mouth, which no one is allowed to look into, lest harm befall him—as though it is or once was a “menstruating vulva” of the earth goddess.

According to Induchudan, the Festival is opened by the goldsmith ritually polluting it by touch (*kavu tintal*, ritual pollution of the temple). He circumambulates the srikovil three times while ringing a bell. The carpenter raises the flag, which

Saraswathiamma told us through Subramanian's translation, signifies that Bhadrakali has chosen to fight Darika on that day. The first day is Bharani, the day she wins is Asvati, the first asterism. Asvati, Bharani, then 27 more asterisms and back to Asvati—a 28 day sequence. The day the goddess wins is also called "asura day." As Subramanian said, "That is the day on which he has been killed. You see that day a lot of people running around, and all the warriors along with Devi they create a happy mood, they make sounds and all sorts of things, that is the day the demon is killed."

When the flag is lowered "all the gods come" Saraswathiamma said, meaning the old Dravidian gods (De Turreil, personal communication). The next day offerings are made of sandalwood powder to cool smallpox, from 3 *martams* (Brahmin dwelling places). By 12 at night 3 people mix tender coconut water and turmeric, or sandalwood powder. On Asvati flowers are given.

Attendant Saraswathiamma Tevaravattath told us that during the forty-one days of Bharani Festival the attendants at Mariamma installation cease doing their daily *garuti* offering. Nor are any offerings or processions held in the city of Kodungallor during this period, according to both Subramanian and Induchudan. Saraswathiamma described the lunar timing of the Festival as integrated with Darikavahdam. (Bharani is the darkest day of the dark moon). "For 41 days," she said, "we do no *garuti*— Asvati day is the day he (Darika) has been killed, and the first day of the cycle. After Bharani (second day of cycle) and Kartika (third day of cycle) she (Devi) is bathed and we (two women of the attending families) bathe her. All the other days Brahmins do it. Devi is "*ashutam*" meaning she has lost her ritual purity— so Brahmins cannot touch Devi at this time."

Following her ritual bath the women attendants dress Bhagavathi and a *puja* is done by the Attikals. (Dravidian priests) The three day sequence when Devi is in “untouchable-to Brahmins) seclusion is part of a seven day sequence which in turn is part of the 41 day sequence of this Festival. Forty-one breaks into two numbers, 28 and 13, that have a confluence of lunar and solar timing in that 13 moon cycles occur within a solar year. Twenty-eight is a common counting for the moon’s presence, as is twenty-seven, depending on whether the dark moon nights are counted as two or three.

So, if I understood Saraswathiamma correctly, following the bloodshed of cutting off Darika’s head, Devi has lost her ritual purity for three days; during this three day period only the two women attendants of Mariamma care for the secluded icon of Bhadrakali. They bathe and dress her, and the Attikal, not a Brahmin, does the *puja*. She is fed a sweet dark pudding. Metaformically speaking, Aswathi is the equivalent of the first day of three days of the “dark moon” period—Bharani is the second day and Kartika the third day. The goddess continues “resting” and “fasting” (Gentes 1992, 304) four more days.

According to Induchudan, Bharani festival begins on the second day of the 28 day cycle of lunar asterisms: Bharani day, of Khombum month (February-March). When Aswathi, the first day of the next month, Meenam, rolls around, that is the day that Bhadrakali, having been fighting Darika all month, succeeds in killing him. That is the day we filmed at the festival, the day the *velichapads*, dressed in red, shaking their crescent *pallivals* high overhead as the energies moved them, the crowns of their heads streaming with blood, yelling loudly, bells jingling. They run in a blood red stream around the temple.

The visual impression of this event is a sea of hundreds of thousands of people crowded within the walls of the seven-acre temple compound, and a stream of red pouring through them in a circular line of running *velichapods*, clockwise around the temple. The tens of thousands of attending people, including me, were screaming, as were the *velichapods*, in deafening excitement.

An overview—a bird’s eye view—of the actions of Bharani Festival on Aswathi day, the picture is this: a sacred tunnel chamber closed by a red cloth; two round stones over which the blood of ten thousand chickens (was) poured; a tower room enclosing a crescent-moon-shaped iron piece similar to the *vals* the *velichapods* hold and use to make their heads bleed; several hundred *velichapods* dressed in red, with streaming hair, bleeding from the tops of their heads and holding crescent swords aloft, who run in a narrow “stream” around the building housing the secret chamber. Their circumambulating is signaled by the appearance in the sky of the circling Garuda bird, a “lunar” kite; which in turn signals the Maharajah (who arrived that morning carried in a palanquin) to raise a green (or red) umbrella aloft under the *pala* tree. It is as though the goddess is the earth, with a chamber marked in red (in former times, blood or red powder or even red pepper?) enclosed by a “hut” (temple). The whole ritual appears to be a metaformic dialogue with the forces of nature—the tree, the Garuda bird, the lunar timing, the sacred, bleeding, shakti-stricken humans, and the rain that “inevitably, *always*,” according to the local people, follows “within three days.”

My notebook Account of Bharani Festival:

We were waiting for the umbrella signal in the intense heat, seated among about a hundred women under a Banyan tree. There were at least a hundred thousand people

in the temple compound, which is seven acres. Subramanian had said that the raising of the umbrella by the maharaja signaled the velichapods to begin yelling and running around the temple. "Then it gets very wild," he said. "You can't tell what the people will do."

Hours passed while we waited. Many people came up to talk to us, to try out their English, to ask about our camera, our country, our interest in Bharani. A self-designated tormentor, or tester of women, came to pester Dianne. For about an hour he asked her to come with him, he flirted, he demanded, he asked suggestive questions. Finally one of the women behind us told him that enough is enough and he left. I kept my camera at the ready, though fearing it would melt entirely in the sun. Then, the signal came, but it had nothing to do with the maharaja's umbrella. Rather, people began pointing to the sky and urging us to look up. People were yelling, so I began yelling as well. From across the courtyard, Subramanian too, waved a signal for us to look at the sky. Camera lurching, I strained to see something....a bird, a crow maybe. I kept thinking, they must mean the sun, Bharani must be about the sun, in some way. I brought my camera down in time to see that the umbrella was now raised, a red spot in a sea of screaming people. The velichapads, a moving stream of red, were yelling and running, their crescent swords above their heads, their hair streaming behind them. One of them held a coconut high in the air. Everyone was yelling, a bedlam of noise, and the velichapads ran in a line of twos and threes, enhancing the visual of a red stream racing around the temple. Then people began leaving; this part of the Festival was over for the day.

Later, Subramanian explained. "The bird is Garuda bird, and that is the signal. Garuda bird always comes to Bharani on this particular day, in the afternoon. Even

though Bharani is on a different day every year (because it is set by a lunar calendar) Garuda bird has never failed to show up.” The kite appears in the late afternoon and circles two parts of the temple three times. “Then, it rains,” Subramanian continued. “Tonight, or the next day or the next—within three days, it will rain.”

“Are you saying that Bharani Festival causes the rain?” I asked.

“No,” he said emphatically, “not *cause*. It rains.” He explained that the rain washes away the bad (inauspicious) part of the ritual pollution done by the devotees of Bharani, leaving only the good (auspicious). This he said greatly increased the power of the goddess without ill effect.

So the rain is her “bath”. It is as though the temple walls and the temple grounds are the body of the goddess, situated among the sacred *pala* and banyan trees with her underground tunnel covered with red cloth as her red menstrual vulva. A second representation of her may be the two white, disk-shaped stones draped with red cloth to replace what formerly was the blood of chickens. The installation of Devi in her human form is in seclusion within the temple, and bathed after three days by the women attendants of goddess Mariamma. The rain from the sky bathes the larger goddess, the temple, and the goddess as earth.

We left the temple grounds and drove to our hotel, bathed and changed clothes for dinner. Looking out the floor-length second story hotel window of the restaurant, I could see the busloads of devotees coming from Bharani. The tops of the busses were filled with men. Spotting me, they stood up, shouting and waving, don't ask me why. Bus upon bus did this. When we returned to our hotel room it was about ten. “Listen,” I said. Rain poured down outside. Dianne and I just looked at each other in awe.

Bharani as Menstrual Logic:

In the following chart I am comparing elements of Bharani Festival with the same elements in menarche and menstruation, and the aspects of the moon. By “lunar cycle” I mean dark or light aspects of the moon. “Chandra” means moon and is a folk name for goddess Pattini, connected to Kodungallor Kurumba temple.

Table 8. Elements of Bharani Festival compared to menses and lunar cycle

Bharani	menarche/menses	lunar elements
Goddess in seclusion	maiden/woman in seclusion	moon dark
2 women care for her	yes	
timed with the dark moon	--	times festival
Seclusion is 3 days	yes	dark moon 3 days
Heads coated in turmeric	body coated in turmeric	
Bath and new dress	yes	rain in 3 days period
--on 4 th day	yes	
cycle ending in blood is 28 days	yes, by some counts	moon light
Val or Chandra Hassan present	yes (Parayan)	crescent moon
State of ritual “impurity”	yes	
Fed <i>ariri prasadam</i>	yes (one group)	
Bells, belt of bells	--	
Anklet	yes	Goddess “Chandra”
Red cloth	yes	
Cocks sacrificed	yes (one group)	
Sexual songs sung	yes	
Men drink alcohol	some groups	
Connected to rain	--	
Connected to Garuda bird	menstrual cloth	“lunar” kite
Sexual abstinence	yes	
Food restrictions	yes	
Circumambulation	circling, circle dance	Full moon shape

Explanation of **Table 8**. Three days of seclusion with emergence and a ritual public bath is typical of menarche rites of a large number of Kerala’s diverse communities, and is consistent with three days recognized as the “dark” of the moon—Aswati, Bharani, Kartika. Followed, at Bharani Festival, by rain. The Kurumba temple is closed 7 days following Bhadrakali’s killing of Darika; the Bharani Festival lasts 41 days, which is also the specified length of seclusion for Nambudiri menarche, according to Caldwell (Chapter 5, 298).

The list that follows is a continuation of comparisons of elements in this Festival that appear to display a menstrual logic that may have been used by its originators:

List # C: Bharani Festival as a “menstrual course” and as “menstruation of the year”.

- takes place in April before monsoon, during the hottest season.
- “oracles of the goddess”—*velichapods*-- dress in red, carry crescent swords, and bleed from heads
- huge blood sacrifice of chickens (currently replaced by red cloths spread on stones)
- connection to shakti (pollution and possession—shaking, oracular speaking)
- connection to rain (to wash the temple of inauspicious elements)
- connection to sexual songs
- wounds coated in turmeric
- abstinence prior to attending similar to menstrual restrictions
- women to stay off the streets
- Devi in ritually “impure” state for 3 days

For the most part my study has not attempted to separate particular possible contributions from specific communities, to specific goddess rites. Table 9, however, is a comparison of elements of Bharani Festival with the same elements in ethnographically recorded menarche rites of the Cheruman/Pulayan community, whose history is strongly tied to Kodungallor Kurumba Bhagavathi Temple. I have included a second category “Menarches in general” meaning the same elements present in other than Cheruman/Pulayan menarche rites (and possibly also pertaining to theirs).

Table 9. Elements of Bharani Festival compared to Cheruman/Pulayan and other menarches

Bharani Elements:	Cheruman/Pulayan Menarche	Other Menarches
Bloodshed—cocks, heads	Menarche blood	Menarche blood
Disheveled hair	--	Yes
Wearing red cloth	--	Yes
Holding val	yes	--
Shaking	yes	--
Wearing bells	--	--
Singing sexual songs	--	yes
Jaggery <i>prasad</i> offered	yes	yes
3 days “pollution”/4 th day bath)	no	yes—Velans/Mannans, Nayars, Mukkuvans
7 days seclusion	yes	yes—Ervallens, Pullovans

Festival is 41 days	--	yes, Nambudiri
2 women do bath and dress	--	yes
Bath and dress	yes	yes
Community brings gifts	yes	yes
<i>Puja</i> done	yes	yes
Umbrella raised	--	yes Maharani

Explanation of Table 9. Some of the correlations suggest that Bharani Festival may have absorbed the menarche practices of more than one community.

5. Menstrual Logic and Gender of Primary Deities

The theory expects a correlation between celebration of menarche and worship of some form of the goddess within the same community. Conversely, we expect a negative correlation of menarche celebration within communities that have no goddess.

Communities, their primary deity/ies, and menarche celebrations. In this section I have examined ethnographic material on Kerala's different religious communities for whether or not they hold or held (during this century) public menarche celebrations. The purpose of this comparison is to see if a positive correlation exists between celebration of menarche and goddess worship.

Communities vary in whether or not they celebrate/d menarche: "Celebration" is defined as at least having a feast following the maiden's emergence and ritual bath. A traditional feast in Kerala consists of the following specific dishes: rice, curried lentils (*dahl*), tomato, chili and onion sauce (*sambhar*), two or three kinds of pickles, especially mango pickles, a curried vegetable dish such as gourd, a sweet rice pudding (*paisam*) and small yellow plantains. These are served on a plantain leaf. Plantain leaves have become expensive and are increasingly reserved for celebrations rather than everyday use.

Even the poorest groups gave celebrations for their maidens. The Cheruman/Pulayan people, who in the centuries of the caste system became agricultural

slaves living in tiny huts furnished with a pot or two, required that guests bring some food and toddy to help pay for the menarchal feast (Iyer, Vol. 1, 99) thus enabling each family to bear the cost of the feast.

Table 10. Gender of primary deities in relation to celebration of menarche

Name:	Menarche Seclusion:	Celebration	Deities/Kali
Ezhuvan /Ilavan	18-15 days	yes	general Hindu/ Shakti K
Thattan	16 days	yes	general Hindu/K
Kammalans	15 days	yes	general Hindu/K
Odden	15 days	no	Vishnu,Shiva/ndg
Katalarayans	11 days	yes	generalHindu/K
Nayar (Thombe)	9 days	yes	general Hindu/K
Kadar	7 days	yes	animism/K
Eravallens	7 days	yes	animism. 7 maids/K
Pulayans/Cherumans	7 days	yes	animism/K
Pullovars	7 days	yes	snake/K
Variyars	5 days	yes	Shiva/ndg
Velans/Mannans	4 days	yes	animism/K
Nayars	4 days	yes	general Hindu/K
Kaniyans/Pannikans	4 days	yes	Shiva/Shakti. K
Valans	4 days	yes	general Hindu/K
Kadupattens	4 days	yes	general Hindu/K
Mukkuvars	4 days	yes	general Hindu/Shakti K
Chaliyans	4 days	yes	general Hindu/K
Nambuthiris	4 days	yes	general Hindu/K
Tamil Brahmins	4 days	yes	general Hindu/K
Jewish	4 days	no	God
(Roman Catholic)	no	no	God
(Muslim)	no (but varies)	no	Allah
Syrian Christian	no (hide menstruation)	no	God
(Protestant)	no (hide menstruation)	no	God

Explanation of Table 10: This table should be understood as quite tentative, and based primarily on a single source (Iyer) with some additions from Thurston and Rangachari, De Turreil and my own contemporary research. Answers can also vary within groups; Shashi (1995, 176-7) reported the Eravallens seclude maidens for fifteen days and do not have a celebration. Iyer reported seven days, and that it was a “day of festivity” (Vol. 1, 45). Roman Catholics, Muslims and recent Protestant converts do not constitute “castes”, and I set them off with parenthetical marks. The Hindu groups were “castes” in earlier ethnographies; the Jews and Syrian Christians were also classified as castes and have their own entries in Iyer’s ethnography. The name Odden refers to a small group, called “nonindigenous” by Iyer, who entered Kerala as soldiers. The letters “ndg” mean “no data given”. K. is abbreviation for Kali.

I have organized the list with a single criteria of beginning with the longest seclusions reported and proceeding to the shortest, the absence of seclusion.

The Jews, who have reportedly mostly left Kerala, lived in the region of Cochin, which still has a synagogue; they practice seclusion but no celebration, according to Iyer. This is confirmed by a contemporary anthropologist, Barbara Johnson, having listened to elderly Israeli women who emigrated from Cochin; she reported “menarche marked the point at which they could no longer be downstairs in the synagogue with the men.” (personal communication)

As appears to be the case with at least one Islamic group of South India, the Dudekulas, who celebrate menarche (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol II, 201) practices may assimilate to local Hindu custom. Sources in Kerala agree that most Islamic groups keep first menses a secret, and celebrate the male blood rite, circumcision of sons. The puberty rite for Syrian Christians during the late nineteenth century into early in the twentieth century is as follows:

Among the Romo-Syrians when a girl comes of age or when a woman is in her menses, she conducts herself, in such a way that nobody knows anything about it. She bathes on the third or the fourth day. She is not under seclusion and observes no pollution for the supposed impurity. (Iyer, Vol. 3, 450)

For some and perhaps all communities, practices vary, and this seems to be a factor of influence from neighboring groups and adaptation to change. Karin Kapadia describes Roman Catholic Paraiyars of Arurloor in South India who celebrate menarche as an accommodation to the powerful Hindu tradition around them. (Kapadia, 111) “Hindu” in my table means a generalized pantheon including Bhadrakali and Ganapathi, Shiva, Ayyappa and so on. The abbreviation *anim* for animism includes female, male and nongendered deities that appear as stones, trees, creatures, spirits and carved or painted figures. Goddess may appear as a stone, tree, pot, snake etc, and in this list is

named in her various aspects Kali, Kannimar, Bhadrakali and Shakti. The initial B. stands for Bhadrakali. The goddess is worshipped in Kerala also as Parvathi (especially as the wife of Shiva), and Mariamma, and Saraswathi (goddess of poetry, art and music and others. The Ervallens, among other groups, worship a group of goddesses known as the “seven maidens”.

Though many traditional occupations continue, some have virtually disappeared. The traditional washer occupation (Velans and Mannans) is today carried out only among poorer, and less urbanized people. Washers and barbers are called in for their neighbors’ menarche rituals; barbers may serve as *pujaris*. The family we met whose caste was Mannan have a son whose occupation is “mosquito eradicator”—a government position. Some of the poorest and most oppressed castes have converted during this century to either Christianity or Islam.

6. Menstrual Logic and Cultural Behavior.

Impact of Menstrual Emanations and “Menstrual Law”.

Regulation of society by menstrual restrictions: as I pointed out in Chapter One, “regula,” the root of “regulation,” also meant “menstruation” and is an example of the major contributions of menstrual rules to social behavior. The majority of the people in Kerala through the 19th century celebrated menstruation, and kept its restrictions and separations, and given how those rites appear to have been projected outward, the theory would expect that menstruation regulated much of Kerala life prior to changes during the twentieth century.

Menstrual Law and restrictions in daily life. Iyer’s chapter on Kaniyans—a caste of astrologers-- contains some thoughts on the power of menstruation to impact village life. In a paragraph on what he calls “savage tribes”-- that could be directly from Frazer, who

he quotes directly elsewhere--Iyer describes world wide beliefs about "a woman in menses" causing a hunter's death or at least ineffectiveness of his hunting arrows by stepping over them. "The father or husband of a woman in menses would never think of going hunting himself, nor would other hunters allow him to accompany them." (Iyer, Vol. 1, 201). He continues with an example from "among the Hindus"—"no man can set out on a journey nor can any ceremony be performed in his house, when his wife is in menses." To this potential to cause calamity he attributes the rules of the woman's periodic seclusion. (202).

From the standpoint of metaformic theory the rites of seclusion both preceded and led to the practices of the hunt and also the performing of ceremonies in a house. So the point of bringing this material to bear here is to show how thoroughly menses regulated travel not only of women in Kerala, but also of men, into the first quarter of the twentieth century, at least. (Though we should notice that Iyer is broadly attributing this to all Hindu people in Kerala.)

Women were highly regulated directly because of menstrual prohibitions. In general, when menstruating they were not to go near plants or look at the heavenly bodies, and they were to stay off public pathways. (Iyer, Vol. 1, 202-3) In some communities they went in and out a back entrance as an everyday practice, so as not to accidentally "pollute" household males. In many communities a woman in general could not travel any distance unless accompanied by a washerwoman, who alone was allowed to wash her menstrual cloth. This menstrual function was so important that the lowercaste Mannans occasionally asserted their power against the upper castes in "mattu revolts"

(Puthenkalam, 65).¹ Brahmin women went about in soaking wet *saris* to ensure their clothing was free from any possible menstrual influence, among other sources of contamination, such as death pollution.

Women were (and still are) not to go in temples during menstruation; women were not to do temple rites, or rites to household deities at home. Women attending pongala festival must not be menstruating. Even from these relatively sparse examples we can see that menstrual regulations affected the behavior of everyone in society, not only women, and not only during the time when a woman was menstruating.

Obverse menstrual practices. “When I see a pile of cow manure in the street the first thing I want to do is get a shovel and remove it,” the reform-minded American sociologist said by way of affirming her progressiveness. “But,” Dianne replied, “in this country cow manure is one of the most sacred substances—so what are you really saying?”

Mutually exclusive menstrual practices horrify and offend people about each other. Ethnographers Thurston and Rangachari noted that temple sheep sacrifice was considered holy by some classes and a defilement by others (Vol 3, 147). Karin Kapadia has discussed this sense of mutual horror, using an example of the washing of menstrual clothes, and the disgust one group felt toward the other for not wanting to wash the cloth themselves. She also discussed how the household deity was “offended” by menstrual influences—especially those influences carried by women from outside the family. (101)

This suggests that some of the mandatory practices held in menarche rites are mutually exclusive between groups, and may explain various separation tactics such as not eating together or intermarrying. They may also explain tensions that build to

¹ Thanks to Dianne Jenett for bringing this important example to my attention.

explosive points between all kinds of groups, including those who have not celebrated menarche for many generations.

Table 11. Obverse menarchal practices

Practice:	Part of Menarche	Excluded from Menarche
1. blood	chick sac. Kaniyans	many groups
2. fish	goldsmith example	many groups
3. oil	Tamil Brahmin	others say no oil
4. alcohol	yes, toddy tappers	several groups
5. high bed	Pullover, Ezhuva/Ilava	several groups
6. washing own cloth	one group (Kapadia)	group horrified
7. mirror	Nayar, Namb.	Pullover, Cheruman
8. sap	sits jaktree	goldsmith no sap

Explanation of Table 11. Table 11 compares a few oppositional differences within the tradition of celebrating menstruation. I have used only elements that have strongly positive and strongly negative value to the groups that mandate either inclusion or exclusion of them from menarche. While a Tamil Brahmin maiden may receive a menarchal bath of *gingelly* oil, a Nambutiri family may be prohibited from touching the oil under any circumstances. Likewise the presence of blood, fish, milk, alcohol or meat may be completely prohibited, but not by all groups. For some these are “strong food” and preferred—but only some of them. Kapadia noted the offended outrage of one group of Tamil women, over the practice of another group who refused to wash their own menstrual cloths. (101). The category “sap” is constructed from a strong prohibition stated by Deva’s grandmother and aunts that she must not eat “anything with sap” or “she will be stinking”; in contrast, other groups call for the maiden to sit under the jak tree, which has sap, and to eat from sap trees.

The table does not reflect the even more extreme oppositions brought to bear by the influence of the secular (Christian) western education and by urbanization. For example, a young modern Nambutiri woman was horrified by her relatives seating her on cow manure during menarche. Dianne expressed complete disbelief when a woman said she had washed not only the whole house but also her daughter with a solution of water and cow manure. My own (momentary) inner recoil occurred at the placing of a glistening ball of cow manure on the altar for the *puja* at Deva’s menarche. These are all examples of reactions to a substance considered sacred by many of Kerala’s communities.

Household deities offended. According to Karin Kapadia, household deities are understood to be “offended” by the menstrual emanations of women, especially women of a different community. This continues in contemporary Kerala; one translator could not come with us to film the menarche at the goldsmith’s house because she had to go to Shivaratri, a temple function, with her own family. She could not be “ritually impure”... “girls don’t go to these things,” she explained, which we understood to mean that young women in particular avoid menarche rituals across widely diverse community lines). Consequently, the translator who accompanied us to Deva’s menarche ritual was a Christian woman.

Intriguingly, this suggests a basis in menstrual practices for the meticulous social separations that continue today, and suggests that even the caste system may have been constructed in part based in relationships to certain kinds of blood, and to religious beliefs about “offenses” from mixing powerful emanations, especially of menstruating women. For example, standing at a prescribed distance, not touching someone of higher caste with one’s shadow or one’s breath were all part of the pollution rules of caste. They occur in menarche’s proscribed behaviors as well. For example, the Kudumi people whose traditional occupations include the making of fireworks, a major feature of Bhagavati and other temples, had the menarchal rule that the maiden stand seven feet apart from others, cover her mouth with her palms as her breath could “have a contaminating effect” and was not to let her shadow fall on any one. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol VI, 109) Such overlaps with caste rules occurred not only at some menarche rites, but perhaps even more during menses at other times.

According to Iyer, “It is believed by all the Hindus that, on the very day on which a woman’s menstrual course begins, she assumes the character of a *chandalini* (a woman who is outcasted or a low caste woman); on the second day she becomes a sinful woman, on the third day her impurity amounts to that of a corrupted woman, and on the fourth day she becomes an anchorite, and becomes pure when she has performed her ablutions.” (Iyer, Vol. 1, 202). This suggests a possible connection between caste (as well as other) separations and the powerful emanations associated specifically with menstruation. Chandala is a generic term, meaning one who pollutes, for many low castes, according to Thurston and Rangachari (Vol 2, 15). Manu decreed that their place was to be out of town. Their dishes had to be broken pots and their ornaments rusty iron, and no one was to have interchange with them or touch them. (ibid)

Earlier I included a description of a Nayar menarchal practice: the exorcism of the evil goddess Chettathi from the body of the maiden, through dressing as Kali and discarding the costume, and through the songs of the Velans. Chettathi could also attach to a low-caste person in a ritual for family prosperity. Rubbish such as sweepings and old cinders were gathered and given to the servant, while the members of the house “hurl abuses at the person and cry out, ‘Chettati, go! Go!’” (Puthenkalam 1977, 181).

The following table, Table 12, makes the correlation between caste and menstrual practices.

Table 12. Caste restrictions compared to menarche/menstrual restrictions

Lowest Caste Demarcations	Menstrual Demarcations
--untouchable	--untouchable
--undineable	--undineable, eats with own bowl
--breath polluting	--breath polluting
--shadow must not touch others	--shadow must not touch others

--cooked food cannot be accepted from hand	--cannot touch cooking
--cannot enter kitchen of higher caste	--cannot enter kitchen
--must eat from broken pot	-- eating pot broken after menarche
--must carry iron piece	--must carry iron piece
--cannot drink from wells of other castes	--no touching water, has own cup
--cannot go to temple	--separated from house deity/temple
--must stand certain distance from	--must stand outside temple a distance
--cannot touch hose or rope w/Brahmin	--separated from "conductive" items
--unseeability	--not to be seen
--eyes cast down	--eyes cast down
--cannot be on same path (killed)	--not to be on same path
--unkempt, unwashed	--unkempt, unwashed
--comes out only at night	--comes out only at night
--house must be crude	--sometimes in rude hut
no plastering, no roof except thatch	
--cannot dress above waist	--must wear simple cloth
--cannot "look back"	--cannot "look back"
--susceptible to possession	--susceptible to possession
--takes on negative Chettati qualities	--takes on negative Chettati qualities

Explanation of Table 12. It should be noted that these are practices drawn across *different* communities, and not necessarily all applicable to any one community's practices or restrictions. It should be further noted that *menstrual* practices seem to be much less honoring of menstruation than are *menarche* practices. The connection between "looking back" and menstruation is a reference to the story "Burning Illams" (contained in Appendix B) which connects menstruation and its regulations with caste and its regulations—in the context of Devi's protective stance of social justice.

Menstrual Logic and Occupations

Certain occupations appear to have been dependent on menarche celebrations and related rites (and are now disappearing). These include occupations directly associated with menstrual practices, such as the roles of the washer people, and also the local astrologers, and singers.

Certain primary occupational activities seem related to menstrual powers because of blood rites connected to them, such as the smearing of blood on fishing nets after the first catch. The crafts in particular were hedged around with sacrificial blood rites. Spirits inhabiting trees felled by carpenters require an offering to Bhadrakali of an animal sacrifice at the completion of a building. (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol 3, 138). Animals

used might be a sheep, ram or fowl (ibid, 113, 135). Blood of goats was placed at the four corners of a finished house (ibid, 127), among other practices calling for blood in carpenter's trade. The craft groups were called Kammalan, though having specific caste occupational names, such as *Asari* (carpenters) and *Thattan* (goldsmith). The implements of each craft were constructed as the goddess and worshipped, as the bellows of blacksmiths, the anvil stones of metal workers, and so on (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. 3, 147). Among a weaver group, cloth is specially treated during menarche:

“On the third evening (of the maiden's seclusion) the washerman (Peruvannan) brings some newly washed cloths (mattu). He is presented with some rice and paddy, which he ties up in a leaf, and does puja. He then places the cloths on a plank, which he puts on his head. After repeating some songs or verses, he sets it down on the floor. Some of the girl's female relations take a lighted lamp, a pot of water, a measure of rice, and go three times around the plank.” (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. 2, 13)

Some craftsmen continue to separate their work from menstruating women and prepare themselves ritually for their occupations. While all the Kammalan groups were untouchable to the higher castes of Nayars and Brahmins, the leather workers who worked with freshly killed hides containing blood were untouchable to other crafts groups (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol III, 134).

Though these are only the sketchiest of notes on occupations, these and numerous other examples suggest that caste may have been deeply entangled with blood, and with menstrual imagery and processes that underlay both agricultural and craft sectors of the economy. What this further suggests is that at least some of the occupations themselves grew from menstrual logic and its ritual relation to nature.

This concludes the application portion of this study. In this chapter I have provided examples connecting male blood rites with some of the practices in menarche. I have discussed at length the principle of “menstrual logic” and the possible evidence that Kerala groups used the patterns of menstrual/lunar connection to both create as a persona and engage with mother earth and other forces of nature. Bharani Festival I particularly concentrated on, with its powerful blood imagery, its lunar timings, its oracular shamans of the goddess, and its connections to both the circling kite Garuda and the occurrence of rain within three days. Two tables, 8 and 9, summarize this information.

Following this, I compared the gender of primary deities in relation to the celebration of menarche (Table 10) showing a preliminary correlation between goddess worship and the practice of menarche celebration. The remainder of the chapter attempts to show some relations between menarche practices and the “offense” that household gods are believed to hold toward menstrual emanations, and relation of restrictions designed to mitigate against emanations, and the caste restrictions reported from earlier this century. The design of all these correlations is to show the impact of menstrual practices, and hence women’s central ritual formations, her “underground river” of processes and powers, on the formations and structures of culture in general.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion of the Application

Are Goddesses Metaformic Constructs?

Metaformic theory claims that humans connect to the earth and its beings differently than other animals do because we have metaformic minds, consciousness formed through our blood rituals, beginning with and most centrally menstruation and its capacity for entrainment with the lunar cycle. My theory posits that ancestral females noticed the synchrony between their own cycles and those of the moon, and used this adaptively, producing an externalized culture of timed seclusions and signals with blood as earliest paint. The resulting cultural “containers of knowledge” I call *metaforms*, forms stemming from menstrual synchronies. Males, in turn, entrained themselves to both women’s and lunar cycles, using their own abilities to bleed or cause bleeding.

Through the use of what I call “menstrual logic,” the extension of metaformic comparisons to aspects and beings of nature, ancestors appear to have merged the identification between human females and the earth, trees and other nonhuman beings, producing both religion and science. By religion I mean constructs of spirit and divine purpose with whom people dialogue, and by science I mean processes that manipulate the world toward human purpose.

Was the study successful?

If my postulation of metaformic theory is demonstrable, then application of the theory to Kerala’s rich cultural matrices of both goddess worship and honoring of menarche should either support the theory or reveal its shortcomings. Both seem to be

outcomes of the study, though overwhelmingly I see the theory as supported by Kerala's practices, and the central question of whether the goddess is a metaformic construct, in the sense that she is deeply connected to menarche rites, is confirmed. I will present the supportive material, and aspects of the theory—such as the “spirit” portion of metaform—that were not as holistic prior to its application in a South Indian context. I will discuss what I have learned and how the theory is advanced through its interaction with Kerala. The study was successful enough to enable twelve correlational tables in Chapters Four and Five, which apply the theory.

In addition to the specific research questions of metaformic theory listed in Chapter Two, my study has raised a number of questions that came up along the way. Is the goddess really bloodthirsty and demonic? Given how Keralites so revere family life, why is the goddess in Kerala almost always a maiden, and not a biological mother? Why did ancestral peoples, especially in Dravidian communities, choose to concentrate so much attention on menarche, such that the processions of the maiden to her bath, and the feast afterward, become so public that whole villages participated? And, to return to the question raised in Chapter One with respect to archeological findings of neolithic and paleolithic female figures, what *is* a goddess and how do we know when we encounter one?

Some aspects of my theory were advanced by the research, especially my understanding of deity as a form of dialogue between human and nonhuman being, of the probable ritual origins of occupations, of a role of menstrual regulations in caste and therefore class and “race” designations, and in a dynamic of mutually exclusive group differences, which I call “cultural obversity”. I will discuss these, briefly.

Some of my questions were answered more strongly than others, and clearly much more research is called for, especially by people familiar with the idioms and stories of Kerala's diverse communities. My research at least partially answered the question of why public and private honoring of menarche has been absent in my own, Christian family. I came to understand that hiding menstruation *is* the Christian puberty rite.

The hypothesis of this study:

The hypothesis of this study is that goddesses may be metaformic in their "construction," perhaps as collective expressions of menarche rituals. Six questions derived from the application of the theory address the hypothesis in detail. The first two questions are the most obvious and direct, concerning how, if at all, the rites and imagery of menarche and goddess rituals correlate. Most simply, the research asks whether the maiden at any community's menarche has characteristics associated directly with any form of goddess, and secondly, in what ways do characteristics of any form of goddess seem similar to a maiden's at menarche of any community. Similar inquiry is addressed to the ritual practices of both menarche and the goddess.

On a deeper level, metaformic theory seeks patterns suggesting ways that culture itself has been constructed in large measure through menarche rites, even though this impact may have been consciously understood only long ago, even hundreds or even thousands of years ago. Men's entrainment to blood cycles is briefly explored in Question 3, Parallel Menstruation. Three additional questions address the part of the hypothesis concerned with the greater development of culture, stated as use of "menstrual logic" to engage cycles of nature, as "creation of the cosmos" within menarche rites, and as

“crossover” patterns of change that imply a braided form of evolution, made of women’s and men’s rites.

Addressing the Questions

Questions One and Two: Do the maiden and the goddess have similarities? Is the maiden a goddess and is the goddess a maiden? Are rituals of the maiden and of the goddess similar? These questions seem answered in the affirmative by the research. The maiden in a range of communities embodied or was otherwise conflated or deeply connected with the goddess, in her auspicious aspect as Bhagavati, with Theyyam goddesses, and with the inauspicious Chettati.

Stories of the Goddess related to blood and menstruation.

A number of stories that I was told or read about the goddess in Kerala relate her to blood, and to menstruation. To repeat some of these, most obvious is the menstruating goddess who resides at Chengannor, described in the introduction. Her installation is in the form of an icon dressed as a human female. An older tradition is of Bhumi Devi, the earth goddess whose yearly menses was observed publicly as the *uccaral*. A washerpeople’s song describes the goddess as a river, earth, and perhaps the banyan tree, all of whom menstruate. A common story, told to me several times, is of a Cherumi, agricultural woman, who “cuts” a stone with her *arival*, agricultural “rice-sickle”. Caldwell (1995) reported visiting a temple whose goddess was in the form of a black stone with a vulval slit painted with vermilion in a graphic portrayal of the earth as a menstruant. A family in Kodungallor told me a story of the goddess appearing in the human form of a hungry old Pulayan (Cherumi) and being reluctantly turned away because the only person home at the time was a menstruating woman who could not go

into the kitchen. This story is in Appendix B. In the Mahabharata's lesson that with the breaking of menstrual law, comes destructive warfare, the goddess—as Draupadi is considered in village rituals—and culture heroine is associated with menstruation's pivotal role in social order and chaos. With magical power (attributed to Krishna) Draupadi's cloth refuses to leave her naked and bleeding, out of her seclusion.

Repeatedly, the correlation of the goddess is with maidens, with young women who have gone through menarche and have not yet born a child, “virgins”. The articulation of the maiden as the goddess is an old one, and appears in Sangam literature. Since, with metaformic theory, I am trying to “read” the poetic minds of ancestral people, let me return to the stunning portrait of the maiden as a goddess in the epic from the age of the Chera kings, the *Cilappatikaram*: In a sequence of short poems, called “The Song and Dance of the Hunters” (Canto 12, 119-29) the goddess is repeatedly described as a maiden, belonging to different people (Eyinans, Kurruva). She has many names: red Aiyai, Samkari, Antari, Nili, Kumari, Amari, Durga, Laksmi and Sarasvati. She wears a necklace of tiger's teeth, a boar's tusk rides in her hair as a crescent moon, she is wrapped in an elephant's hide, and a tiger pelt “motley with spots and bars” rides around her loins as *ananku*. “The girl with a mound of love/Like a hooded cobra who stands/Adorned with Aiyai's bright ornaments”. (ibid, 123) She is bedecked by women with all kinds of cosmetikos, and associated with plants and flowers, such as “red petals from the boughs of the silk-cotton” held sacred by, for instance, the Cheruman. The poems, dated from the opening centuries of the Christian era, seem to describe the sacred substances, adornments, plants and creatures of various peoples, valued as attributes of the goddess. These cosmetikos, if the poems reflect real behavior, were conferred by

crowds of women onto the maiden in procession, and in her embodiment of the goddess in human form.

In a very different story, a menstrual hut is the scene of a South Indian matricide and the re-constructing of deity. Parasurama is the culture hero who, according to the myth, created Kerala by throwing his ax into the sea. His mother, Mariatale (a name similar in meaning to Mariamma), was married to an ascetic, Jamadagni. Mariatale ruled the elements of nature but could do so only so long as her heart was free of lust for other men. She characteristically gathered water from a pool by forming some into a ball that balanced on her head all the way home without benefit of a pot. One day she saw male gods sporting nakedly and desire entered her. Immediately she lost her power with the water, which merged back into the pool. Enraged at the meaning of this, her husband ordered their son to kill her. Parasurama chased and beheaded her, but in the melee he beheaded an outcaste, Cakkilicci, woman, as well. Then, aghast, he re-assembled the bodies, and mixed the head of one with the body of the other. (Doniger, 204-208) While this reconstruction can be seen as “The opposition between the upper and lower-caste woman, as between the chaste and the erotic woman,” (Doniger, 208) it can also be seen as the tension of assimilation between patrilineal and matrilineal imperatives, expressed as deities. Both women become deities, worshiped with different practices, by Brahmins and Dravidian people, respectively. Metaformically, the matricidal beheading takes place *within a menstrual hut* belonging to the Cakkilicci, who had just come into puberty. In the dark interior, the story says, Parasurama couldn’t see and made his mistake. Hence the re-configuration of female deity, with a new Brahminical head on the older Dravidian body (and vice-versa) as the interface of two systems, is set in the menarchal seclusion

site. This is the site where—in my view—deity has repeatedly been constructed, and—in this story of a historic change—re-constructed.

Blood and the goddess:

As is obviously true from the bidding that goes on to buy the menstrual cloth of the goddess at Cennganor *because it brings auspiciousness to the household*, menstrual blood has been considered a highly prized, powerful and peace-keeping substance. This—if my correlations are accurate—is the blood that serves as the model for the blood imagery that swirls around the goddess in her multiple forms. As I have said, De Turreil found a reference to an old tantric text claiming that menstrual blood itself was offered as food for the gods.

Some Indian writers (Induchudan for example) have downplayed the connection between the goddess and blood, and temple officials in some cases are sensitive to the subject because they do not want their religion characterized as one of the “blood sacrifice” that has now been made illegal (though in rural areas animals continue to be sacrificed to her). However, the moment our subject is menstruation, blood, and not sacrifice, becomes the central subject. Even in contemporary times with much pressure to omit all connections between the sacred and blood, the goddess of Kerala remains intricately bound to blood imagery. Substances used in goddess rites resemble menstrual blood—or *are* blood, or are understood as a “blood substitute”. However, such offerings from plant products as *cumcum* (red powder), *gingelly* (red oil), *variri* (dark red viscous syrup with rice “clots”) and *ixora* (red flowers) are also extremely sanguine in appearance and use. When blood-resembling plant products are used in connection with

the vulva of the goddess, such as a slit in a sacred stone, or the vulva of a Sheila-na-gig type carving, or the center of a lotus drawing, I have to conclude that these substances are, in and of themselves, metaformic, and not substitutes for animal blood sacrifice. This is confirmed by Jayakar's listing of a goddess Garudi, who is the blood of the goddess in the sap of plants, (181) recalling that bowls of red liquid used in ritual are "garuti".

Animal blood used in Dravidian village goddess rites in the recent past is from chickens, buffaloes, goats and sheep. In her stories, goddess Mariamma (and probably others as well) takes the form of bison and sheep. Table 1 lists creatures associated with blood, the moon, the goddess, and menstruation. While more research is needed to determine whether all of these creatures are storied as the moon in South India, poetry of the *Cilappatikaram* shows clearly that tusks and crescent horns are "the moon" and Jayakar, for instance, associates the horns of the buffalo with the moon.

Though the village goddess has repeatedly been described as "blood-thirsty" which in English implies violent, I think she is not so much blood thirsty as that she is blood based. Even in complete absence of animal sacrifice, as in most contemporary temple rites, the imagery of the goddess resembles blood. She has been constructed with a language of blood and blood metaforms, beginning with the creative, peaceful, positive blood of menstruation, family ties, reproduction and its metaforms of *bijam*/blood-seed, red flowers, red drinks, red jackfruit, red powders, red pepper, red gold, red coconut, red betel, red oil, red alcohol, red molasses, red rice and all the various bloodsheds of sacrifice, the piercings and hookings, and the bleeding of metaformic animals. If, as I believe, all the forms of "her blood" and her need for "blood offerings" are metaformic, then while some of the offerings may represent substitutes for earlier blood sacrifice,

such as the red cloths stacked on the sacrificial stones at Kodungallor's Sri Kurumba temple during Bharani Festival, most of the red offerings are not substitutes, they are old metaforms in and of themselves. That is to say, the red cloth did not recently acquire the power equal to the blood of chickens, the red cloth was metaformic with its own menstrually-based power to begin with, and may have been metaformic for a long time before chickens were brought into rituals of the goddess.

A simplistic description of Kali as "bloodthirsty" can be, like "queen of the demons," reductive in that the epithet sounds as though she is the biggest demon of them all; but the expression also means queen who *controls* the demons. (A. Sreedhara Menon) Metaformically interpreted this means that the goddess, as a collectivity of consciousness, created new methods of detection, prediction and awareness of harmful forces, and is responsible for our knowing that conditions, such as illness, may have *cause*. And therefore human behavior may affect these forces toward positive end, or at least for emotional solace. The goddess can be the cause and also the recipient of the illness. She also contains the wisdom and practice to control or heal the bad effects of these forces—hence vows, prayers, pongala offerings and other healing methods are associated with rites of Bhagavati and local village goddesses. To further complicate understanding, the goddess is sometimes understood to take smallpox or other disaster upon herself in order to protect her devotees; but she may also be credited with having given it, and the eruptions of smallpox may be seen as her mark, her "eyes". (Ram, 87) Then, as an even deeper layer of her paradoxical character, the smallpox may be experienced as a disaster, or as a boon leading to a major positive change in life. (Jenett, 1999)

While other deities can also affect healing, village goddesses are likely to be the first source of healing for rural people. Repeatedly goddesses such as Bhagavati and Mariamma are titled “smallpox goddesses” for this reason; in fact, a reason frequently given for women attending the mass offering of rice porridge (*pongala*) was the belief that the smoke from the fires will mitigate against the disease and confer a protection from it. (Jenett, 1999)

In this regard the red spots of smallpox seem an important metaformic sign; in fact spots and drops recurred thematically in the research. Spots (*cunanku*) are a signal for the onset of puberty, according to one source (Frasca), and in Sangam era poetry, spots are a feature of the tiger (Bhaga) skin that is wrapped around the maiden/goddess’ waist and confers *ananku*, “the power”. Spots and rows of dots are painted on the faces of girls for *Thalipoli*, boys for *kuttyotum*, and the faces of *Theyyam* actors who embody the goddess in various aspects. Row of dots form the basis for some *kolams*, especially those directly related to the goddess, and drops of bath water are thrown into the sky to become stars during the creation of the washer people whose task is to mitigate the power inherent in menstrual blood. The reading of drops of menstrual blood was a widespread method of divination that I think may be an original source of astrology and augury.

The goddess and menarchal practices.

In several senses many attributes of the goddess appear to derive directly from menarche. First indication of this, as I have said, is that maidens of different communities at menarche currently or historically embody the goddess. Then, aspects of menarchal rites appear in goddess rites (Table 5). Conversely, the goddess is depicted in ways

suggestive of menarchal maidens, and aspects of goddess rituals also appear in menarche rites of various communities.

Metaforms from the crafts are highly present in goddess rituals, as Table # 6 presents with the material forms lamp, mirror, crescent-shaped iron *val*, the red earthenware pot, and the *mattu* cloth that appear in menarche rites and are all worshipped as the goddess. In menarche rites, it is as though the maidens sit in front of, on and surrounded by, all kinds of forms that, in other contexts if not that specific one, are the goddess.

Conversely, in temples the goddess installation sits in a seclusion (*srikovil*) with a lamp before her, just as the maiden does. Practices of menarche rites such as the bath, dressing, offering flowers, three day or seven day seclusions, processions, and lines of women carrying plates of sacred objects all seem quite present as the substance of many goddess rites: Table 5 summarizes these correlations.

Besides anthropomorphic, other metaformic forms goddesses take include snake, various trees, bleeding stone, and menstruating earth. Table 1 shows the interconnections with blood, moon and goddess. Of animal forms, Jayakar has suggested that first the goddess is the creature, and then over time it becomes her vehicle. So while in the countryside or in former times, goddess Mariamma may have been understood as being the sheep, then represented iconically as having the face of a sheep, the contemporary stone installation at Kodungallor temple is a human figure with a sheep across her shoulders. I understand from Jayakar's progression that goddesses that now hold cobras earlier *were* cobras, and that the Garuda kite, storied as vehicle for Vetala and assistant to Bhadrakali, in an earlier time was the goddess herself. However, a caution about

“progression” in theories of evolution: some contemporary Indians continue to experience cobras, sheep and kite as contemporary forms of the goddess, in addition to having depictions and installations in which these creatures accompany her in her human female form. Nor is there contradiction in this multifoliate sense of her—she is a kaleidoscope of constantly changing story and meaning. Her *shakti/ananku* power flows into many forms. However, the primary forms seem to be metaforms, as so many of her theriomorphic forms are related to blood; they all “bleed” in one way or another. Whether she is anthropomorphic or animistic, storied or present in a ritual with a buffalo head, whether she is the maiden herself or simply the mirror, the goddess is metaformic.

Why the goddess is a maiden: Speculation on a metaformic “construction” of goddess as potential power:

The puzzle of why the goddess is so frequently and thoroughly understood as a maiden, rather than what might seem more obvious, as a pregnant, nursing or birth-giving maternal figure is answered for me in this study. I believe I know why ancestral minds would have constructed the primal female deity as a menarchal maiden. They undertook direct dialogue with the deity, constructed as a female at the height of potential creative/decreative power; and they used the rituals of menarche as methods of speaking to and even directing, the powers of the cosmos.

The metaformic construction between the menarchal maiden and goddess appears to be: First, menstruation because of its timed connection to the nonhuman being of the moon, is already a dialogue between human and nonhuman being—a visible, continuing, continually changing and renewing relationship that over the eons became one of a multitude of such relationships. Secondly, the onset of menstruation brings to a woman’s

body an openness to *shakti*, life energy that is comprehended as intentional (therefore deity), and perhaps earlier named as *ananku*, powerful allure in vulva and breasts that can also be harmful if it is not controlled. This power when contained creates an orderly, functional and joyous world; or when out of control it can burn the world down. The life energy of the sacred feminine may be called other words that have been translated as *shakti*—all power—and also *pollution, emanations, influences, “possession”* and *“getting the power”*. The practices of menarche appear to have brought this power into living, physical definition, by literally capturing it in metaforms that became the language of meaning, ordering of energies, and prayer—in the form of bath, face paint, special dressing, *kuruva*, and other body gestures. With the addition of the craftsmen, the goddess is embodied as lamp, mirror, crescent sword and so on; these forms gradually become mundane culture.

The dialogue between devotees and the goddess can be seen as an intercession timed for the moment of greatest possible potential affect of the outcome—the moment in the life of the maiden/goddess when she has full (menstrual) power to create and has not yet done so. I suggest that the construction of the goddess (Devi) as a virgin maiden captures for human use the power of deity thusly: 1. She is frequently depicted as a woman at the moment of her life when the full creative power of menarche, the beginning of her menstrual cycle, has engaged her and *has not yet produced a specific form*. She is at the exact moment of all-potential. 2. This moment is projected out and intersected with related powers in nonhuman beings, as the cosmic creation principle, goddess, *Shakti*—intentional, completely potent and interactive-- the force in the universe that is creative of all forms, including those that have not yet occurred, and including those that

are destructive. 3. *Engaging this moment of all-potential in the goddess' life cycle contains within it the possibility of influencing the outcome of the formation of reality.* 4. The dialogue of intercession is done with offerings that derive from menarche and its connections of blood, moon, flowers, waters, pots, cooking, etc. and so speak directly to the "greater menarche potency" of the goddess as a life force permeating nature, including human beings.

If this is an accurate picture, that by and large the dialogue between human and deity is metaformic in the details of its structuring in imagery, timing, and the kinds of offerings that are made, then surely these ritual acts, primary, generative, infinitely repetitious, brilliantly conceptual and poetic, have both created and enabled the evolutionary elaborations of consciousness, science, religion, and cultural forms.

Question Three: Are parallel rites practiced and are they associated with either menarche or goddess rituals?

Both men and women witness and in limited ways participate in rites whose essentials are gender-separate. Though males are in particular separated from the maiden at menarche, men and boys participate in their family's rites: Men in several if not most communities cook for and serve the women at the feast of menarche, and the men eat last, a reversal of everyday procedure. A brother, in one community at least, may lead the procession to the sister's public bath; he carries a crescent-shaped sword (*val*), and when they reach the tank, he ceremonially 'cuts the water'. (Obeyeskere, 31, 42; Thurston and Rangachari) Frequently, male relatives, especially the father or uncle, built the hut for the maiden's seclusion; they brought presents to her feast. The maternal uncle frequently paid for the festivities. Boys were sometimes asked to deliver food to a secluded female

relative. On two different occasions, Nayar men in their fifties or older described to me with obvious pleasure the honor they felt as boys in being chosen to deliver food to the seclusion place of a female relative.

The mother's brother frequently paid for the feast, and entered the female- only space to bless the maiden by sprinkling flowers on her. The songs of the washer people (Velans), including men, helped regulate the *shakti/ananku* energies swirling through the maiden. Both women and men of the Velans became oracles and sorcerers; and men in particular developed and participate in *Theyyam* drama festivals. In these public dramas, men in particular (though not exclusively) embody the goddess in both her auspicious and inauspicious, fierce, death-dealing and death-defying aspects. The first embodied goddess I experienced in Kerala (and in my life) was contained by a man. He was a traditional oral poet and a *Theyyam* participant. After being painted for hours, about two in the morning he was dressed as Bhadrakali in her form as a huge red swaying cobra. She then served for hours as oracle to the individuals of the community, and was surrounded well into the morning by a large crowd of women and children eager to receive her spoken wisdom.

As Table 7: Practices of Male Blood Rites Compared to Menarche Practices indicates, both men and boys practice blood rites that are related to the goddess, and also related to women's rites, especially the women's cooking of *pongala* in coordination with *Kuttyotum*, the boys' piercing described in Chapter Five. The piercing of boys and youths in the side seems particularly suggestive of an initiation that ritualizes their blood (as a tandem to the blood of their female relatives) and allows them to be vulnerable to "the power" of possession in a carefully controlled context. This applies to boys of the "lower

castes,” that is to say, the people who continue to use possession as a part of their devotion. We were told that boys in *Kuttyotum* held near the Akkulum Colony, whose occupants are Dravidian and poor, “got the power” and were likely to fall into trance or the lurching characteristic of the altered state. Boys at the *Kuttyotum* held at more sanscritized and wealthier Attikal Temple, in contrast, did not “get the power”. In both cases, women did outdoor *pongala* cooking that was timed with the boys’ blood-shedding rite.

The ritual of *cavady* that we filmed at one Mariamma Temple had only one participant who was a boy, about eight; the others were young men. They ended a long dance on the road by circumambulating the *srikovil* of the temple. In his description of the rite of *Kuttyotum*, Sathesh Bose said that it was “running around the temple with pierced body”. *Cavadyatum* he described as “Playing around the temple with *cavady* on the shoulder of head”. “Playing” is a term for spirit possession, or having “the power”. Recalling that *kavati* is lifting water pots for the bath of the goddess, the interrelated rites include bleeding, the bath of the goddess, fasting, and the related rite, done by women, of making the *kuruva* sound, and of cooking sweet rice porridge offering. Altogether these rites, participated in by male devotees, replicate the essentials of menarche and further indicate the construction of the bleeding maiden as the goddess, but because of the way she is constructed males also have access to possession, and especially through ritualized bleeding. If the goddess installations, the icons and other images were constructed as a woman giving birth or as a bride, men could not so easily enter into the creative cosmology that is held in place through her rituals and festivals—just as women cannot when God is solely imaged and storied as “the father”. When the goddess is a maiden,

situated in a lunar-menstrual construct of lunar timings, menarchal practices, and blood imagery, men can enter in. Men can bleed and bring about various metaformic “bleedings” with flowers, oils and so on; men can, especially when they fast and prepare, become possessed by forces of *shakti/ananku*, and become vessels of oracular possession. Men as well as women can learn to be vessels for the energetic mind of the cosmos. They do so in Kerala in context of the varied forms of the goddess.

While in Kerala both women and men embody the goddess as the active principle, the men are more public; women also, though less obviously, embody gods; for example Ammachi embodies Krishna, and the culture heroine Draupadi is infused with Krishna. Moreover, the divine pairing of Shiva-Shakti is a fundamental one. Shiva, the observing principle, and Shakti, the active forceful principle, maintain a balance that appears to move beyond the simple gendering of male *lingam* and female *yonis*. Shiva-Shakti—as principles of observer and actor, of cool energy and hot energy—are both necessary for the appropriate alchemical processes of cultural life.

Repeatedly in our travels in Kerala, Dianne and I witnessed how the genders trade these two positions back and forth. Women at Pongala Festival, heated by the fires and smoke, are cooled by husbands and sons who arrive with cups of cold buttermilk and lemonwater. Conversely, the men we saw at *Theyyam* in Kannore, possessed by Kali, were accompanied in their hours of face painting by a group of silent, observant, ‘cool’ women. Brahmin men embodying Kali on the block where we lived, were cooled at each house by women who poured water on their heads. At Bharani Festival, a woman *velichapatti* who in a state of trance attacked the Dravidian priest with her *val* was held close by him until she had cooled down from the heated power pouring through her.

These examples speak to a reciprocity between the genders in the construction of deity from menstrual imagery and bleeding. Reciprocity is a useful term from the dissertation of Margaret Grove, who used metaformic theory as one lens for her important study of Australian aboriginal rock art and related mythological and ritual themes (Grove, 1998).

Question Four: Do either menarche or goddess rituals “create the cosmos”?

This question takes us back to Chapter One and a subject raised by the critics of archeomythologist Marija Gimbutas—just what is a goddess, and how do we know when we are looking at one? Certainly, without knowing the stories and connections, the western positivist-trained mind struggles in vain to detect the multitude of forms and functions of the goddess in South India until the people, especially the women, explain the intricacies of her presence. Metaformic theory uses the term “merged identification” to explain the relation between women’s *cosmetikos* and the powers of nonhuman beings. When these two are united, a cosmogonic idea is expressed in the relationship. An icon uniting the female body with a specific creature or plant combines and imparts a complex of ideas about the structure of reality, and implies a dialogue between humans and nonhuman being. If this is not deity, what else could it be? In ritual, as Bharani Festival events clarified, this dialogue is manifest. The *velichapods* shed real blood and enter real states of trance. The Garuda who participates is a real kite, as the rain that follows is real rain, as I experienced. If we believe the testimony of devotees that these relationships with nature “always” happen at Bharani Festival, then if this is not dialogue between human and nonhuman being, what else could it be?

Following this thought, connections between menarche or menstruation and cosmic events implies that powers of deity are or were at one time subscribed to the maiden or the act of menstruating. The menarche rites of South India, taken as a whole, describe both merged identification and dialogue in the sense of impact, between the maiden and nonhuman beings. Merged identification between the female body and nonhuman beings exists in stories of goddess Mariamma taking the form of a bird, becoming a bison giving birth to a male bison, taking the forms of snake, sheep and so on. Iconographic representations showing the goddess with *dharmstra* tiger teeth, Durga standing on a lion or *yakshi* temple guardians depicted with cobras pouring out of their vaginas all illustrate merged identification between the female body and specific nonhuman beings. “Dialogue” of relationship, in the sense of impact, between the maiden and nonhuman beings is illustrated through such beliefs as harm that can be visited upon a family should a cobra slide its body across a woman’s discarded menstrual cloth, or the *dosha* of negative influence of stars at the time of first bleeding.

Nonhuman beings of influential relationship with menstruation include, in addition to celestial bodies such as stars and planets, cobras, kites, certain trees, certain flowers, rivers, and unseen forces of *shakti* or “gods” in both earth and sky. In addition the maiden’s emanating impact can affect raw and cooked foods, certain materials such as cloth, wood or metal, and probably many other objects. Several forms in menarchal rites seem deeply connected to cosmic elements. For example, the red earthen pots made for *pongala* cooking have wide perfectly round mouths, and can be seen as metaforms for the female body (and the womb, and the earth or even entire cosmos) with the shape of sun or full moon at the top, looking down on the pot from above. *Pongala* cooking is

frequently timed with both the sun or the full moon, and dye is used to make the foam yellow or orange at times as though to enhance this effect. The alchemical elements of fire, water, earth and the importance attached to the “rising” (*rasa*) of the foam which may be serve as an augur depending on which direction it spills, (in Dravidian practice) or may be watched to make certain it does not spill over at all... (in Brahmin practice) all testify to ritual and cosmogonic roots of cooking as a process. (Jenett, 1999)

While I came upon no direct connection between menarche and powers to control weather, and would expect this to be in the lore of rural people more than the urban people with whom I spoke, goddess rituals are closely connected to rain. If the sequence is correct that in the past maidens at menarche in general embodied the goddess, and did this in a ritual and physically interactive and affective sense, not just a narrative, storied sense, then powers currently attributed to goddesses in all probability were formerly or in current rural areas, attributed to women at menarche and perhaps other menstrual occasions as well.

Bharani festival includes expectation of rain “within three days” and in my experience “creates” a connected cosmos in real time with the presence of a living kite, called “Garuda bird”, who arrives to circle the temple; this triggers the running around the temple (circumambulation) by the *velichapods*. East-west orientation and various menstrual-lunar constructs as described in Tables 12 and 13 connect this complex festival to both cosmic creation and a dramatic use of menstrual analogy, so that I consider it a clear example of menstrual logic.

Writing about the rituals of *Theyyam*, the powerful, dramatic, embodiments of the goddess and related deities by certain communities in Malabar on the north coast of

Kerala, J.J. Pallath has drawn attention to the sacred figure of the mandala. The dancing motions of the *Theyyam* actors (157), the circular head piece (*mudi*) of certain *Theyyams* (155) and the writing on the foreheads and bodies of certain *Theyyams* (154) all correlate to the squaring of a circle that is the mandala form. Pallath sees a further correlation between these forms and the initiation rites of maidens in the Pulayan (Cheruman) community, whose members are among the chief contributors to *Theyyam* rituals. After her emergence from six days of seclusion, the maiden and six virgin companions, circumambulate a sacred tree branch planted as “the center” of a figure whose parameters are the courtyard. The maiden goes three times around the tree branch and then makes an offering to a lamp placed under it. “An aerial view of the lay-out of the offerings appears very similar to the picture of a ‘perfect mandala’” (160) In the mostly though not exclusively male tradition of *Theyyam*, of this same community, the actors faces are painted with turmeric (as is true of the menarchal maidens) along with certain marks identified by the men as “writing”. These marks may be of creatures closely associated with the goddess, including buffalo horns, an owl or serpent, or the spotted “writing” marks on a tiger’s body (Pallath, 94). From this we can see that the ritually prepared men, embodying the goddess, wear on their faces orientation “maps” and meaningful “writing” from menarche customs that were possibly the origin of the mandala form. See Table 3, “Narrative Forms Compared to Menarche and Goddess Rites”.

Another indication that menarche in Kerala contains principles of orientation is in the expression “the fifth house” to mean the place of menstrual seclusion (Panniker, oral communication). The first four houses are the four directions, which places “the fifth house” schematically in the center of reality, the midpoint of the square earth. When the

maiden is in “the fifth house” she is, cosmogonically speaking, in the center of the cosmos, just as she is when she circumambulates the sacred branch in the family courtyard of the Cheruman. The maiden at menarche is connected to direction in other practices as well; for example she is required to gesture to the four directions among the Kallan people of South India (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. III, 80) As I said earlier, frequently in Kerala, north is the space within a house given to menstrual seclusion, and in temples to (former) blood sacrifice of animals.

That menstruation contains powers of fulfillment is indicated in the practice of women performing rites for what they most want, on a particular day of their periods. At the home of the *Tantri* of the temple at Cennaganor, I was told that women use special rites and prayers on the third day of their periods which is considered the most effective time for the goddess to answer their wishes. The third day of a menstrual period is correlational to the opening of the new moon in the lunar “period”. In astrology, even in the system used in North America, “About 12 to 24 hours following the dark of the New Moon is a particularly excellent time for writing down our intentions, goals, hopes and dreams,” according to Nancy McMoneagle, a professional astrologer.

As Table 4, astrological divination at menarche, illustrates, the examining of the blood drops of the maiden at menarche, in order to make meaningful connections and predictions, is a possible root source of divination. This art, a form of augury, the art of “reading” menstrual drops, uses such incidentals as in the color of dress of the person who first saw the drops, her relation to the menstruant, and the shape and number of the drops. This kind of divination orders reality and makes connections. But what constructs the cosmos is drawing a parallel between the timing of the first drops and the position of

moon, sun and constellations. That relationship, perhaps the root of complex astrological systems, has capacity to have drawn—long ago—human social worlds into intimate connection with the patterns in the starry sky, and to have “created” the sky as a scene of teleology, the stars as a timed script—“drops”—to be read for content that was understood to impact far into the future of family lineages. The fact that women today continue to read menarchal blood drops opens to a pressing need for further research, cross-culturally, before this information slides out of view as women’s rites disappear, about the role of menarche practices related to cognitive systems of comprehending the sky.

In Kerala, contemporarily, an inauspicious pattern of stars located over one’s head either at birth or menarche endow negative influences known as *dosha*. Mitigating rites are prescribed to modify the negativity (for example a young woman might undertake to light small lamps for a number of days in a row). *Dosha* impact marriage seriously, and a balance may be sought in examining the astrological charts of both the maiden and any would-be husbands.

Though Western science has done very little work in areas of *Shakti*, psychism or the influence of the stars on human events, one recent study, or set of studies by California physicists has bearing on the subject of stars and psychic capacity, a factor of *shakti*. Researcher James Spottiswoode took data from his colleague, Edwin C. May, who has devised objective, double blind tests for psychics for thirty years (Spottiswoode, 1997). Spottiswoode looked at the timing of positive and negative test results, and detected a pattern related to Local Sidereal Time. A positive spike of 300% increase in psychic accuracy occurs during a period of about an hour and a half each day (regularly

different each day because of the precession of the earth). Likewise, a similar period produces a daily negative spike for decreased psychic accuracy. This pattern correlates to the movement of earth's horizon relative to the number of stars visible above it, in the bulky mass of the milky way. Earth is placed in a thin arm of this spinning spiral, hence sometimes leaning away from the middle on its axial whirl, then leaning toward the mass. When fewer star bodies are present, psychic capacity of tested individuals dramatically increases, and vice versa. Implications are that the physical bodies of the stars interrupt the low frequency radio waves emitted from deep in outer space, the "sound" of space itself. This research suggests that stars can have negative, blocking influence on psychism, or forms of *shakti*—conscious, intentional energy—and furthers my understanding that some practices contained within menarche rituals mediated, or regulated, forces, while other practices, such as recognizing the four directions or circling a sacred tree branch, constitute basic forms of cosmology.

From family and village rituals alone, even without a verbal or textual telling, unifying creation principles are enacted. That is, the *underview* of ritual practices creates the cosmos, and probably did so among villagers long before storied creation myths, the overviews, were told or written down.

Question Five: Can we see operations of menstrual logic?

Menstrual logic is the term I use to describe how the processes contained in the rites of menarche spill out in ever-expanding circles of influence, as human technology has developed. By extension, rituals surrounding menarche and other blood rites became living compound, cooking, hunting, horticulture, farming, craft. The depiction is drop-shaped or ripples rather than linear.

Agricultural rites of menstruation of the earth. From her extensive research in Orissa, anthropologist Frederique Marglin (1985a) has revealed such an extension of menstruation as a central metaphor of agriculture, with the earth honored and treated as a menstruating female during the hot season of the year at Orissa on the northeast coast of India. A four day festival, Raja Parba, celebrates the menstruation of the earth at a temple of goddess Haracandi, who during the festival is called Draupadi. Red liquid is joyfully drunk by the devotees, and the festival is modeled after that of human females, who also rest and must be tended by the men during this time. Marglin sees deep connections with embedded ecology in protection of the land and forest, in the keeping of these rituals of generation and re-generation, of fertility and its cycles of activity and rest, of preparing the earth, sowing and harvesting as acts honoring feminine contribution. Marglin uses the term “embodied cognition” perhaps similarly to what I mean by “menstrual logic”. Kerala too until recently honored the menses of the earth goddess, Bhumi Devi, in agricultural rites of *uccaral*, held at the opening of the hot season. Rivers and trees also menstruated.

Bharani Festival, which is examined thoroughly through a metaformic lens in Chapter Five, is the clearest example of menstrual logic that I have witnessed. This festival, held annually during the hottest season, at Sri Kurumba Bhagavati Temple in Kodungallor, features the high drama of red-clad, long-haired, heavy ankleted *velichapods* who cut open the crowns of their heads, make oracular pronouncements, dance for hours, and sing sexual songs to the installation of the goddess. Tens of thousands of chickens were formerly sacrificed, their blood pouring over two white disk stones on the north side of the temple. Blood sacrifices, and the story of the goddess

killing the demon by beheading him, are timed with the dark days of the lunar cycle. On *Aswati* day, devotees make offerings of “cool” foods such as turmeric and coconuts to a tower which contains an iron sickle shaped like a new moon. The *velichapods* offer their crescent swords to their indigenous priests, who coat their bleeding heads with a thick layer of turmeric paste. Sometime in the afternoon, the sacred bird, the lunar kite Garuda, appears overhead, circling. This signals the *velichapods* to run three times in a counterclockwise circle around the temple, beneath which is a tunnel called “the secret chamber,” closed with a red cloth and believed to be a megalith of great antiquity by Kerala scholars. Within three days, rain falls on the temple, washing away the “polluting” effects of the craft and fishing castes who deliberately “pollute” the temple walls by touching them, and of the bloody actions of the *velichapods*, whose shamanic office is associated with the role of the washerpeople. The bathing rain leaves only the auspicious *shakti* power with the goddess installation, for the benefit of the people. *Velichapods* are “recharging their swords” by participating in this festival. Thus, the mediation of energies, the regulation of greater *shakti/ananku* forces of earth and sky is happening at Bharani Festival, using similar rites and imagery of menarche. The blood sacrifices in this explanation seem more likely to have been for cooling (bleeding is cooling in this system; the pre-menstrual state is dangerously heated) the over-heated energies of the goddess. In a number of ways the great rites mediate and regulate giant forces—raising the sexual energy of the goddess with sexual songs, cooling her with offerings of turmeric and coconuts; recharging the swords of *velichapods*, cooling their bleeding heads with turmeric, and so on. For me, the most moving events were the appearance of the lunar kite circling overhead, and the rain that fell late that evening, as they signify a

dialogue in which forces within nature participate; the dialogue is that—a two-way conversation.

Occupation and caste. An area for further research is that of village occupations and their possible relation to menstrual rites, and/or other blood rites connected to the *grama devata*. Such a study would tell us much about the development of culture. My research, though preliminary, suggests powerful connections between ways menstruation was constructed, and ways occupational, and therefore, caste, differences were constructed. Brahmin thought seems to have made this explicit: (Ram, 76). Brahmins “liken the menstruous woman to four types of untouchables, each corresponding to a day of menstruation,” by which is meant regular monthly menstruation, not menarche. First day: Paracci, fisherwoman; second day Cakkili, (woman) shoe-maker; third day, Canatti, (woman) toddy tapper; fourth day, Vannatti, washerwoman. (Ram,76, from Baker-Reynolds, 1978, 101-102). This example, as I read it metaformically, describes four kinds of “blood-handling” occupations each processing a particular *source* of volatile, powerful blood, including toddy, the “blood” or *bijam*, of the palm. These four sources of blood are 1. fish; 2. animal; 3. plant; and 4. menstrual cloths. Each of these occupational groups, or castes, were untouchable because of their capacity to “pollute,” through atmospheric emanations. Pollution rules of caste, like those of menarche and menstruation, were designed to mediate emanations.

Occupations as they were retained in South India seem particularly metaformic to me, though of course much more study of this is needed; that they all developed from menstruation remains a question for a lifetime of research. Certainly the material forms of the crafts appear in various menarche rites and are also forms of the goddess, and used in

temple rituals, as Table 6 “Material Forms in Menarche Rites Compared to Goddess Rite and Goddess Identity” displays. Potters worked with earth’s female “flesh” that menstruated every year, as we know from the fact that the menses of Bhumi Devi was celebrated yearly as the *uccural*. Carpentry, even if it doesn’t (and it may) derive directly from the construction of seclusion huts, certainly has a close ritual connection to blood, blood sacrifice, snakes, temples and trees configured as (female) deities who—according to the washermen’s song, menstruated. The occupation of astrology seems thoroughly metaformic if A. Sreedhara Menon and others are correct to credit it indigenously to Kerala, and if the art which “old women” of several or perhaps most communities knew how to do, of “reading” the first drops of the menarchal maiden’s blood, became vested as an occupation in the Kanniyan community. The development of crafts, horticulture and agriculture as the ritualized handling of earth’s (female) flesh and blood would explain both the place these arts play in menarche rites and also the place that rituals associated with menstruation play in the development of crafts and manipulation of plants as crops.

Each of the occupational groups of craftsmen contributed their own unique gifts (metaforms) to the complex icon that would eventually become a temple goddess. “Five classes of artisans—the carpenters, the goldsmiths, the blacksmiths, the brass-smiths, and masons—regarded themselves as the original creators of form and...insisted on their right to enact the sacred rituals.” (Jayakar, 30-1) One group built a hut, in this the potter placed a clay image of the goddess, another group brought the *puja* materials, another sang the requisite songs, and so on. The implements of each craft group are worshiped as the goddess (Thurston and Rangachari, Vol. III, 147). From these deep, old cooperations

and contributions, a complex composite cosmic creator emerged—a creator interactive with her peoples, and with their livelihoods and social structures, with the processes of their technologies and the *shakti/ananku* of their science cosmology. The more goddess worship focused people’s attention, gave them an external dialogue with nature, and calmed their fears of disaster and chaos, the more the material forms of her icons both village women and craftsmen would have created, and the more firmly in place material culture would have become.

She appears to have been a composite art work of the occupational metaforms of each group, derived as I have suggested from their menarche rites, and therefore a reflective portrait in merged identification with the maiden. She is always in combination with powers in nature with whom she had long been identified. As an icon she is put into the public place by the males, especially the artisans. “In village societies, the craftsman was the officiating magician-priest at the shrine of the goddess.” (Jayakar, 31.) And with such occupations as the washerpeople and the astrologers, the massive energies of *shakti-ananku*, and of the *bhuta*, of unseen snatching gods and great forces capable of great good and great disaster, were regulated.

The layers of this process persist, continuing a dialogue between humans and nature that probably was focused into materiality by the artisans long before priests with written texts arrived on the scene. Painting red stripes on stones or red “skirts” on trees associates them with human blood. Jayakar (1990, 164) describes the shift from aniconic to anthropomorphic icon, when the artisan paints human eyes on the stone to awaken the *shakti*, which is carried in the eyes—and especially at menarche. Likewise, eyes are painted on the crescent sword (*val*) to awaken its *shakti*. Conflating human, especially

female identity with certain trees, the goddess speaks through them. The woodcarver shapes the top of the tree to resemble the goddess as a human female and the carving by her “shaking” lets the devotees “know she wants to come down”. The rituals the artisans use are the rituals of menarche, in its treatment of *shakti* forces. By insulating, protecting, separating, making the body a proper vessel for the power, mitigating against chaotic forces, all efforts are made to distinguish benevolent from malevolent powers and both protect from and enable use of. the life forces of the cosmos.

Question Six: Can We Detect Crossover Processes?

This remains a question. A beginning definition in *Blood, Bread and Roses* of what I at that time called the principle of “Crossing” is this: Crossing marks the great shifts of power between women’s *r’itu* and men’s parallel rites. Crossing takes advantage of the fact that the genders have different relationships to the central menstrual entrainment and therefore can trade leadership back and forth—like a shuttle on a loom.” (Grahn, p. 275)

The reason crossover is crucial is because of the pattern of metaformic elaboration to refine itself along a single line of development, to a point of crisis. Metaformic elaborations can eventually lead a society into a state of social coagulation, with no social “flow”—or into other stagnation, social oppression, environmental crisis and the like. A possible example of this dynamic that I witnessed in contemporary Kerala: the conversion of poor and socially oppressed people to Christianity and Islam to escape the suffocating constrictions of caste and class oppression.

When metaformic elaborations reach points of stasis, becoming so negatively loaded that social or ecological or other stagnation results, the crisis is sometimes solved

through a “crossover” from female principle to male. But long before a crisis, there are “crossover” points in culture, places at which the knowledge constructed in the rites of one sex pass over to the rites of the other sex. (In some cultures/eras a third or fourth gender is socially constructed to affect this—as is true in the US today where we see lesbian ministers, priests and rabbis re-forming toward more feminine imagery liturgies and rituals that have been strictly patriarchal in the past.)

In the goddess tradition of South India it is clear that the *velichepods* and *Theyyam* actors have served this kind of crossover purpose, by embodying the goddess in public theatrical rites witnessed by their communities. At Bharani I saw the both male and female oracular shamans of the goddess bleed from the crowns of their heads and use two shapes of light—the crescent and the circle, and connect with Garuda bird circling overhead.

Again referring to men of the Pulayan/Cheruman community who (among others) perform *Theyyam*, embodiments of various forms of the goddess, the specifics of their ritual preparations are similar to details of maidens at menarche. Once the *Theyyam* actors’ faces are painted with turmeric they have a gigantic red and white headpiece, a *mudi*, mounted onto their shoulders, and gaze into the traditional mirror, the *valkannadi*. They then become possessed by the *shakti* power of the goddess, enabling them to perform supernormal feats with handling of fire, all night shaking, and oracular pronouncements and predictions. Implications are that maidens may once have performed some of these feats, though perhaps on a more local or familial scale—or perhaps just as publicly and dramatically. Another aspect of *Theyyam* enactments and a similar ritual theatre in villages of Tamil Nadu, *tukku* (village theatre of the *Mahabharata*) is that the

men who embody the goddess are likely to be husbands of the washerwomen. The washerwomen ritually clean menstrual garments, and frequently also serve as midwives. Both men and women of this occupation are credited with arts and crafts of sorcery, witchcraft, shamanism and occult arts. The connection to the erratic powers of *shakti* and *bhuti* alike contained in collective menstrual blood, and the special arts needed to express and contain these cross-purpose forces, is unmistakable. Obviously more research would be a fruitful endeavor in these areas.

Conversion to escape the caste system

People in Kerala seem to agree that the conversion of lower caste groups to Christianity and Islam is for the purpose of social advancement in an otherwise stifling and restrictive social climate of village life. Writers agree with what I was told orally. According to Pallath, “Pulayas...got a bargaining power because of their being Christians (Pallath, 38) and the Mukkuvar fishing people escaped the burdens of caste pollution by becoming Christian (Ram, 77).

The remarkable story (Appendix B) of the outcasting of a Nambutiri family, which I have arbitrarily titled “Burning Illams,” illustrates powerful connections linking menstrual law, caste, the goddess, and social justice. Key elements in the story are menstrual separation principles, especially cooking, and the deep injustice and cruelty of unthinking Nambutiri practices toward untouchable people. The Pulayan woman is understood in the story as the goddess, “looking for a seat,” and the row of forty unjust Nambutiri households burn down when she decides to maintain connection with the woman who understood that pollution of caste and pollution of menstruation are related, and therefore just social mechanism, not moral structures. The first outcome of the story

is that, through the young woman's kindness toward the untouchable woman, the Nambutiri family lost caste status and there was no one to marry her; but then, the second outcome is that she married a successful Tamil Brahmin, and her family, the only line of the forty-one *illams* to still live in Kodungallor, remains tied to the Sri Kurumba temple.

The illustration of Table 12, *Caste Restrictions Compared to Menarche Restrictions* shows a remarkable pattern of correlation between the two forms of regulating emanations. From a metaformic perspective, it seems possible that the same "logic" (menstrual logic) that ruled menstruation within families became applied to social groups during feudal agricultural development over the centuries and millennia. Just how this happened and what that means are unanswered questions. Is caste oppression a consequence of elaboration—a form traveling for long enough in a single direction and eventually choking the very societal relations it served to construct? Or is caste oppression a consequence of matrilineal peoples being squeezed between two developing patrilinealities—the Brahmins, and the Christian/Muslim world influences? If group distinctions, including "caste" grew from occupations and food cosmetikos associated with menstrual logic, might we not be able to understand class and race distinctions as deriving from similar rituals as well?

Whatever the case, people in Kerala today continue to convert to Christianity and Islam; reasons given for this by everyone we spoke to, are to escape the social restrictions of the past, and to gain economic advantage. From a metaformic point of view, these moves are crossovers—evolutionary braiding. The direction of movement appears to be from honoring the blood of women to honoring the blood of males. This may have manifested in Brahmin ideas of vegetarian purity and male seed, on top of a social system

that increasingly honored blood of male warriors and therefore placed Nayers high in a vertical social scale; and more recently with the growing influence of both Islam and Christianity, in honoring the blood of male circumcision and the blood of Christ, respectively. In Kerala, I should add, these apparent dichotomies are today much more on a continuum than in rigid categories. The indigenous village rituals and festivals centering on the goddess in her variety and with her associated gods, has also adapted to changing times and shows continuing resilience and plasticity. Reform movements have continued to infuse the temples and rural rituals with renewed life—from the *bhakti* democratic devotional movement of the 12th century to today's democratic moves such as Attukal Temple's emphasis on Pongala Festival, the world's largest annual gathering of women of all castes and religions. This Festival presents itself as virtually international, as well as pan-religious in its attraction. Working women who find it difficult to continue the old seclusion rituals now attend monthly rites timed with the Full Moon, in devotion to the goddess. (Jenett, 1999)

Furthering Metaformic Theory

The creation myth of evolution, especially of human evolution from ancestral primates is in a general way supportive of metaformic theory, but several specifics are contradicted by my theory. These contradictions are clarified by my research in Kerala. The idea that men, and not women, created culture can be replaced by an inquiry into just how the two genders intersect with rituals that elaborate into cultural forms. Female deity, like the decorated female body, presents a holistic, highly intelligent script. Women's rituals seem to have provided deified templates, connected to processes, complex ideas and embodied language that men "read" and elaborate. What Darwin saw

as an “aesthetic” of “beauty” stemming from sexual selection, I understand as a complex *cosmetikos*, an ordering of the body that also orders the world, expressing both cosmogonic and social language. While sexuality is one of its components, there are many others. And while patterns of random selection are no doubt present, the notion of randomness doesn’t address the concept occupations and therefore economies may be metaformic, following a focused, conscious *logos* I call “menstrual logic”. The role of religions, or more exactly of spirituality and its dialogue with the mind of the cosmos is much more clear to me, and seems central to the evolutionary processes of culture. While neo-Darwinists continue their argument with the patriarchal god who intercedes from “on high”—in a metaphor of an interceding “sky-hook” for instance (Dennett, 1995)—the Indian contributions of both *shakti* and *ananku*, of oracular speech and messages from plants and creatures, all address deity as a life force infusing everything, and interactive within all life forms.

That this deity has been with us for at least 40,000 years is indicated in the work of Marija Gimbutas and her findings of goddess icons in the area she called “Old Europe”. My study strongly supports several aspects of her theory, more than I had expected.

Confirmation of Gimbutas:

To refresh readers’ memories from Chapter One, archeomythologist Marija Gimbutas postulated a single “goddess religion” for neolithic farming peoples of ancient Europe. Working in the geographic area she defined as “Old Europe” on materials dated between 40,000—1500 bce, Gimbutas identified as goddesses, numerous small clay and stone figures that stress vulva, breasts, eyes and the color red. These are also prominent

attributes of many forms of Kerala's goddesses, and are also qualities that are currently connected to *shakti* and shamanic power, altered states of trance, and supernormal capacities. Gimbutas also postulated that goddess traditions of Old Europe were a reflection of women's ownership of land and placement as the heads of their extended families, in matrifocal social systems (1991, x-xi). This is supported by Kerala's widespread matrilineal tradition, which went through changes of modernization, including changing to patrilineal nuclear family structure, less than a hundred years ago.

Gimbutas particularly described the merging in iconic form of the female body and the form of snake; and also the merging of the female body with bird features. Snake features included not only that the female statues held snakes in their arms or hands or had them in their hair, but also that their faces, necks and legs were formed as though snake. Similar forms occur in Kerala iconography today. The *nagas* are stone carvings of cobras, and frequently have breasts. Powerful female images with serpentine lower body, snake hair, snakes pouring out of vulvas, and held in arms, wrapped around waists and so on are very common in Kerala temple art. Snake and bird motifs occur in both collected written stories and oral folk stories. Gimbutas' statues of what she called "bird goddesses" included the merging of the female body with bird features such as beaked nose, elongated neck, outspread truncated arms, enlarged buttocks and mask of bird face. Bird goddesses in Kerala are not as obvious as snake presence, but are nevertheless present. Female body with wings is an icon in south Kerala, and the stories of Bhadrakali's killing of Darika contain connections between female deity or *bhuti* (specifically Vetala) and the living kite named Garuda. In addition, male embodiment of

goddesses at Theyyam and also the practice of hook swinging features costumes of snake and bird that are powerful in and of themselves evoke *shakti* energy.

Both snake and bird, in their living forms, have powerful negative (that is, separated) relation to menstrual blood in that both creatures must be kept separate from a woman's menstrual cloth. The snake must not touch and the bird must not fly over the cloth. The consequences of such a breach can continue for generations, in the case of the snake at least, and special *pujas* must be done to offset the danger. These connections echo mythologies and rock art imagery of aboriginal peoples of Australia that tie snake to women's vulvas and to both menstruation and the creation of landscape. Perhaps this all testifies to the antiquity of snake, bird, menstruation and creation stories. Certainly, the continuing, living traditions in Kerala confirm the connections that Gimbutas made of a single goddess tradition involving multiple forms and functions, which are different yet united in the Sacred Feminine—a river that may run under all humanity, as the oldest known identified religion/cosmogony.

Cultural obversity:

Leela Gulati, with her usual wit and irony, and her experience of having lived and taught in the US, and of hosting many visitors from that country and also Europe, was genuinely asking a serious question. “Why is it that people come here from the West, from the US or other places, and go out of their minds? This happens to so many...why do you think that is? India drives people mad...” We had been discussing an unfortunate couple who never made it out of Kovalum Beach, a tourist area and kind of cultural entry point forty miles east of Thiruvananthapuram. Amiable and calm at first, within a few days they were screaming over the telephone in a frenzy to get back to their own country.

I think of my own difficulties, though I was considered unusually adaptable. But during the first week Dianne and I were living on Valiachalai Street I had extreme paranoia over finding a plate of salt and green chilies on our doorstep. I became convinced that neighbors had “hexed” our house. In heightened fear, exacerbated by a quinine medicine known to trigger mental problems, I imagined that they had determined I am a lesbian...and wanted us to leave. I quit taking the quinine, and we continued our attempts to connect with our neighbors.

Later, back in California, I realized some of the accommodations our good Brahmin neighbors had to make toward us. I read (in A. Sreedhara Menon) that a plate of salt and green chilis will be used as circling to protect from the evil eye. The “evil eye,” I was told by Hema, is envy, and can shoot through a person unwittingly. Older women in particular are believed to convey it to children, especially when praising them. Obversely, Dianne and I, raised in Christian customs, had been taught to praise children as a way of reassuring their parents of our goodwill, and as a way of connecting with the people. We praised the children constantly, even after Hema tried to explain about the “evil eye” to us. The more anxious we felt about our surroundings, the more we tried to fit in by praising the children. And the more we praised the children, the more uneasy the mothers must have become until someone finally circled the front of our house to protect them from our inability to understand emanations. Fortunately something we did must have assured them, as we eventually got along well with nearly everyone we met on the block.

A cultural obversity comes about when a practice is considered an excellent approach in one group and an offense in another. Both groups are motivated by goodwill, but the more they attempt to assert their goodness, the more at odds their practices are.

Obversities stem from *cosmetikos*, ways we are taught to order the cosmos through our bodies. While they seem trivial, they may be at the root of people's fears and judgments of each other, especially if we are constructed metaformically, that is to say, ritually. Recalling Kapadia, the household god is "offended" by menstrual emanations, especially those from another group. The menstrual constructs of groups are mutually interactive, and also mutually offensive, leading to obversities. When the obverse elements converge in conflict around basics such as food, sexuality, cleanliness, health, death customs and right relation with the gods, obversities become serious and mutually exclusive separations of occupation, caste, economic class and—as is happening in South India now and continues in the US as a major social problem—race discriminations based in color.

I had difficulty eating from a wet plate in Kerala homes, until Hema explained that it is considered auspicious to put drops of water on plates before serving food. In my mother's house the opposite was true; she would snatch your plate out of your hand to wipe it twice with a dish towel to make certain not a drop of water was on it—for health reasons, she said. Health is the usual reason women give for the multitude of small motions that go into perfect *cosmetikos*. Dianne and I had many discussions about this, as learning to think with metaformic theory helped us assimilate obverse customs. We especially found ourselves strengthened and stabilized by using the idea of cultural obversity as a stance from which to comprehend our own highly emotional responses to really simple actions. The idea of cultural obversity may develop into a useful psychosocial approach to common differences that lead people to seriously misjudge and condemn each other, or just unaccountably "go mad" in each others' presence.

I have given an example of obversity in terms of the “evil eye” and of cross-cultural concepts of spots and spotlessness. Another major cultural obversity consists of groups’ very oppositional approaches to the subject of blood. Historically, the Brahmin concept of purity and impurity, and of strict vegetarianism, helped stratify the caste system with people who eat and handle blood designated as outcaste or untouchable, and sliding to the bottom of the hierarchy.

In Christian culture, only male blood is sacred; naturally flowing female blood, especially menstruation, is hidden. Table 10, *Gender of Primary Deities in Relation to Celebration of Menarche*, displays a correlation between goddess worship and celebration of menarche. Conversely, people who worship only a monotheistic male god, do not celebrate menarche. While this is just a preliminary study, the pattern seems remarkably clear, and helped illuminate my own Christian culture and the shame attached to menstruation when I myself reached puberty. A crossover seems to be happening in the US, Canada, Australia and Europe, with a renewed interest in goddess worship. There is much discussion about the work of Marija Gimbutas and her philosophic followers, such as Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade*. Grassroots movements have established goddess worship, and women travel to sites considered both sacred and ancient. Not coincidentally, there is also a renewed interest in the honoring of menstruation and the celebration of menarche, as I said earlier.

The roles of both divinity and ritual practices leap into view in Kerala. They are in contradistinction to the mainstream US and European Darwinian origin story resting on sexual selection and supposed male development of culture from hunting and “superior intelligence”—that non sequitur. Metaformic theory, following this study, now

posits more confidently that menstrual practices are the wellspring of human culture, bubbling up from Jayakar's river of female wisdom. Male practices, including agricultural, horticultural and craft processes, have been deeply entrained to women's rites. Menstrual rites and the sacred feminine have also been the conduit for powerful radiant emanations that, shaped and named within women's rites, appear to have become living metaforms of both beneficial deity and destructive forces, *bhuta*, of both positive and negative affective forces, of both Bhagavati and Chettati. The paradoxical character of the goddess is also the paradoxical character of humans and of life. Relationships between women and nature have always been cultural. Human generative processes and cycles are at the center of culture and cognition; ritual, stemming from menstrual cultural processes, is embodied literacy, taking many forms.

Liberatory Evolution

Years ago, Sri Aurobindo's life and soul partner Mira Richard reached out of a video and opened my heart *chakra*, drawing me inexorably to South India and the application of metaformic theory to a living goddess tradition. From what I learned in doing my study I can say that the addition of spirit, *shakti/ananku*, infinitely furthers my theory, and opens the necessity of material, cartesian science to enter a dialogue with the mind of nature. I know now that the goddess tradition is always with us, as its fundamental relationships are in our bodies and the cycles that intersect with the greater cycles of the cosmos. I see that while we can get lost from her because our attention is distracted, even for many generations, we can never lose her; she is completely embedded in who we are and how we are.

I feel a renewed optimism with this theory because of the addition of spirit, and South Indian practices and concepts of both *shakti* and the older *ananku*; I hope to develop “cultural obversity” as a method of helping internal balance between peoples, or lineages, whose cosmetikos conflict. I see too that we have never “seized” our own evolution at some particular moment, but rather as humans we always dance with it, we always have some amount of input. When we do the rituals properly, we also have direct dialogue with both the cosmos and evolutionary forces. When we open to more than one religious viewpoint, more than one origin story, we become more capable of directing our own dangerous and oppressive, insightful and intelligent, bountiful and magnificent, courses.

I learned not to use correlation in the sense of “first cause”. In considering the experience of Bharani Festival especially I concluded that cause and effect is a very linear approach, and one that attempts to assign individual, single moment causation. Perhaps this is a measure of how steeped western science is in the mythos of paternity and the arrival of the “first sperm” as the sole “cause” of potency. In any case, in the course of this study in India I came to think of “correlations” as “co-relations” and my theory as co-relational—not necessarily causational. The dialogue continues and evolves; the dance is a living, twisting motion, an entrainment between intelligent rhythms.

As Dianne and I talked to a family on the subjects of both Pongala Festival and menstruation, a man in the family argued that the women should not tell us anything as we would put it into a book and then that would become “it”—the only story. But the

women ignored him and continued talking to us. As one said later, why is the men's interpretation the one that cannot go unchallenged?

I learned a great deal from doing this study; if someone else learns something from it, well and good. I venture this interpretation of reality out into the world, as a storied overview—knowing that underview, the way cosmogonical myths are acted out in lives, thrives in the multitude of stories, and in our unique experiences with nonhuman beings.

I don't want to gloss over the identical blood marks that appeared on our right temples, after Dianne and I returned to the US following our experience of extreme Shakti at Bharani Festival. "Stigmata" is the only word in English for this, and it means "mark of the demon". The "stigmata" of blood of identical size and placement on both our faces that appeared following our ritual bath seemed to us to be a direct connection with the goddess, with her speaking to us. We understood ourselves as touched by her fingers, from inside our own bodies, and as though she was writing upon our faces with her particular, sacred, numinous, eerie mark.

In the words of the head administrator at Thozuvancode Shakta Temple, "Snake rules the world; you must accept that."

APPENDICES:

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APPENDIX A: ACCOUNT OF AN EXAMPLE OF THE FOUNDING OF A KERALA VILLAGE TEMPLE

From Satheesh Bose, 1998 (personal correspondence)

History of Mannadikonam Temple Muthumariamman Temple

Muthumariamman Temple is situated at Mannadikonam. This place originally belonged to a person named Chempakaraman Pillai who resided at Chanpari in Koovalassery ward of Maranalloor village centuries ago.

At that time, when Chempakaraman Pillai decided to renew his old family temple, he required some wood for that purpose, and engaged a wood cutter to cut a tree from his land at Mannadikonam. While the woodcutter was cutting the tree, Sri Chempakarampillai who was at the bottom of the tree fell unconscious. The wood cutter stopping cutting and came down to get some water to his boss. He got water from a nearby house which he sprinkled on him and he suddenly woke up. Chempakarampillai, being a religious minded man decided to stop cutting the tree. He invited an astrologer and a few "*kara pramanis*" (local landlords) and a *devapranam* (a religiously done fortune telling) was made. In the *devapranam* it was revealed that in this place there is the presence of the goddess Muthumariamman (Dravidian mother goddess) and that only after constructing a temple for the goddess that they can cut the tree any further. Sri Chempakarampillai engaged a "moothesari" (carpenter cum architect--a traditional worker) to decide the exact place of the temple and requirements of temple construction. Then it became a question of how the offering to the goddess was to be done. The astrologer was brought in and *Devaprasnam* (astrological consultation for deity) was made. It was then revealed that people belonging to the "Panaram" (a caste name) alone should do religious ceremonies and offerings to the goddess. First day song offering to the goddess, and second and third day *syayana pradishinam* (rolling around the temple with body stretched), *kuthiyottam* (running around the temple with pierced body), *Thalapoly* (receiving goddess with plate of flowers) and *Kavadiyattam* (playing around the temple with *kavadi* on the shoulder or head) should be offered. Accordingly, a Panaram family was brought in from some 50 km away. They were given land and money to settle near the temple.

The temple offering had been going on for some centuries smoothly. Some years before a quarrel arose between Pandaram priest family and people. When Pandaram family encroached temple land and pond, subsequently the temple remained closed for nearly ten years. However the temple was reopened. From then onward offerings and temple festivals have been going on smoothly and with fanfare.

The end

APPENDIX B BURNING ILLAMS: A FAMILY STORY OF CASTE, MENSTRUATION AND DEVI

The following story connects menstruation and its regulations with caste and its regulations—in the context of Devi’s protection of social justice. In March of 1998 we had gone a third time to Kodungallor Kurumba Bhagavathi Temple, accompanied by Subramanian. He took us to a nearby household with old connections to the Bhagavathi temple, where the year before Dianne and I had filmed Bharani Festival. Both the husband and wife of this household told us the story with its variations. Subramanian later translated it for us. The story connects two kinds of untouchability and separation from cooking; the goddess and issues of social justice; and—“not looking back” which appears in a menarchal practice in which mother and daughter carry her mat that she and she alone sat on, and bled on during her first menses. On the morning of the seventh day of her seclusion, they take it to a three way crossroads and set it afire. After bathing in the river, the maiden returns home and is not allowed to “look back” lest evil spirits (*pey*) should possess her. (Kapadia 100-1). The theme of not looking back is in the Greek story of Orpheus and Eurydice, and also the biblical tale of Lot’s wife, who turned into a pillar or salt. The theme also appears in a South American (Indian) story of the moon (a person) not allowed to “look back”. The maiden is not be allowed to look back during the menarche celebration (*Kinaalda*) among Navajo people, in her sun run as well. The enactment of light meant displaying the steady course that is characteristic of both major lights—they travel from east to west inexorably and never “look back” or zig zag.

Both the husband and wife of this household told us the story with its variations. Subramanian later translated it for us.

STORY OF THE BURNING ILLAMS (Subramanian tells it)

“There were forty-one houses, we call Nambutiri houses *illams*, that is what the Nambutiri house is called, *illam*, so there were forty one *illams* in Kodungallur, that was long back, a long time ago. So one day what has happened is one old Pulaya woman, (lowcaste woman, they were called Pulaya then). So one day she came, suffering, a very old woman. Some people say the test has been made by Devi herself, other people say, ‘No it was a natural story.’ There are two versions of it.”

NOTE: the versions given were 1. She was just an old Pulaya woman 2. She was Devi and she was “dancing in a frenzy” meaning in a state of *shakti* possession by the goddess. 3. She was Devi and this is recognizable in the story because she was asking for “a place to sit”.)

Subramanian then gives us background to the story, that the Nambutiris were misusing their position as priests at a time when the populace at large were excluded from entering temple grounds and very dependent on the priesthood. “These Nambutiris they are the only people who were allowed to go into the temple and make prayers and all others used to come to their houses and ask for favors. And they would say, ‘Okay, Devi has said, “No, not to give it to you...””

“Devi had made the lady come to test these people; they were harassing people, so Devi sent the old lady to test them.

“So anyhow the old lady came one night to one of these houses, the first house, so she came to one house first, (that is the house where we are listening to this story), the first house, she went there first.

“She said, ‘I’m sorry—I’m hungry. I want food,’ so she said.

“There was only one girl there. She was the age about twenty, twenty-one, an unmarried girl. She came to the door and said, “There is nobody in the house now. And I am ‘out of doors’, (that means, ‘I am on my period’) so I cannot give you food. Otherwise I would give you food. And, our custom does not allow you to come inside and take food. So I am in a fix now, because I don’t know how to give you food. However, definitely in the next house they will give you some, and if there is no other way, if you go to all the others and they don’t give you food at any of these houses, you come back. Because sooner or later my mother or other people of my family will be coming home, and they will give you the food.’

“So these are consoling words which have been used by this young girl to that old lady.

“So the old lady went to the next house. And in the next house what has happened? But they said, ‘No. No, we don’t give food to the lowercaste people, so get out of the house!’

So like that she went to house after house and nobody would feed her. And at the last house, the forty-first house, they were so rude and cruel. The lady of that house, she wanted to make fun of this poor old woman.”

He explains a point about going to temples at night. “After ten o’clock, nobody enters inside the temple compound, they say it is the time of evil spirits. Everybody says it is the time, after midnight, until three o’clock in the morning is the time that the evil spirits wander around the temple, and whoever enters that place after midnight, it is their right to eat them. The spirits eat them to satisfy their passion or whatever you call it. Even now there are people who believe that, though nowadays no one gives much value to it. Now there is always light there (in the temple compounds), but in earlier periods it was very dark and like that.” (Note also that as a Pulayan, she wasn’t allowed inside temple compounds in the first place.)

“So this lady in the forty first *illam* told the old woman to go to the house next door, and did not tell her that the ‘house next door’ was a temple. ‘You go there,’ she said, ‘and call for the “*altima*”...which means “inside”, you call for “the lady inside the house,” so you go there and she will definitely feed you, you will never be hungry again!’

“So the old lady went out in the dark to the temple, and the lady inside the last *illam* was laughing, thinking that ‘feeding’ meant, ‘she will be eating this lady’ so she was wanting to enjoy that!

“But the Palaya woman went without fear. So the evil spirits could not touch her because she was moving without fear! If you have fear, only people having a fear, you eat them, no problem! So that is how it was, because before that a curse had been given to the evil spirits by the god saying that only those who are moving with fear you eat them, if they are moving without fear you cannot eat them. It goes against the natural law, so the old lady went into the temple (compound) and she was moving without fear.”

Subramanian leaned toward us to make his next points.

“She called ‘*Altima!*’ and who is ‘*Altima?*’-- who is ‘the lady inside?’-- *it is the Goddess!*

“So the Goddess came out and said ‘For what you have called me,’ and she said, ‘I want some food, I want never to have any more hunger in my life.’

He explained this further, “‘I will never have any more hunger in my life,’ that means she will be dying, she will not be anymore in this world. But the Goddess said, ‘Okay, come.’ And gave her food and said, ‘You will not feel any hunger, don’t worry, now go back along the course you just followed. But whoever has not given food to you, you don’t talk to. And don’t look back also, just move forward without looking back.’

“So she started moving, and first house she moved, second house she moved, like that she went to the forty-first house. So, when you go backward, the first one she had entered, she reached it. She was about to pass on when she thought about this lady who lived there, ‘She did not say no to me, first house lady did not say no to me, she said, “I cannot feed you because,” she said, “I am untouchable”. Because she could not enter the house, that is the reason, so I should at least tell her. ‘You were kind to me, I should come another day and get my food if I feel hunger.’ The old woman is thinking like that, she wants to say some word to the woman who was kind to her.

“So she stood there and looked back. And as soon as she did, she found all the forty houses are burning.

And after awhile when the houses had burned down to ashes, she became afraid. So she went to the one remaining house to speak to the young woman there. She said ‘You are the only ones who would help me,’ and other things, and then she began to leave. But before she could go the girl says, ‘Nobody is home in this house. You are untouchable and I am also untouchable at this time.’” (Subramanian holds out two fingers to illustrate two kinds of untouchability). “‘Why don’t you sleep on the veranda’ (at that time ladies were allowed to sleep in the veranada) ‘and in the morning you can go.’

“So the old woman did this. In the morning the other people found that a Pulaya lady was there sleeping in the house of a ---Brahmin.

“So they outcasted the family, and said “Nobody is to marry this girl, like that.--”

“It was during this time of difficulty that a Tamil Brahmin family arrived in Kodungallur,” (and Subramanian now makes this his own family story by saying, “this is supposed to be my family, that is what they say, I don’t know”).

“They came here for business,” he says. “A man of the family was selling clothes, good silk clothes. He went to see the Maharajah. ‘These silk clothes are very good clothes, why don’t you buy these for decorating the Devi temple. The Devi will wear them and she will be beautiful.’

“But the Maharajah said, ‘Why don’t you get out of this house, I don’t want any.’ And so the Tamil Brahmin was wandering, finally he came to this family, and like them he is also a strong devotee of Devi.”

To paraphrase this next section: The male head of the outcasted family agreed to buy cloth from the Tamil man and told him to settle down in Kodungallur, giving him a piece of land, and asking him to stay. Some of his silk cloth was sent to the Devi temple for decorating the goddess. Encouraged, the cloth merchant took more cloth to the Maharaja to decorate Devi’s house. But the Maharajah took the cloth and sold it. Then, he told the Tamil Brahmin to bring the papers of the properties to the maharaja’s place, whereupon he took the papers and refused to give them back. With his land seized, the Brahmin was on the road without anything.

“But what has happened is that the Maharaja next day onwards is starting to get some symptoms of something wrong. So he called the astrologer and asked him to find out. The astrologer told him, that because you did like this, you have taken the properties of so and so, so this has happened, and you must give everything back to him. But meantime he has given it out to so many people, there was nothing left, only a small piece of land, five or six acres, and even after giving that small portion the symptoms were still there, the bad omens are still happening. So they give another astrology reading, and this time the Bhagavathi says, (the Bhagavati, that is the Devi) says, ‘This family will be fed by me. I will take responsibility to feed them, so you give them forty one measures of rice, and five rupees from my collection, every month until the last member of that family (has died).’ And even now they are still getting this, though now they are no longer getting rice, only some money, and that is how this family is keeping on .

“And this Tamil man he settled there, we are supposed to be brothers and sisters` actually—that is our family, because that girl, nobody—that nobody was willing to marry her, so this man offered himself that, ‘I will marry her,’ at that time, ‘if you don’t mind I will marry and she will get the property, but I will have my own family that I will have to feed. So that is how the family developed. Other people have outcasted them so they are not Nambutris, so they are not Brahmans, not Nayars. Nobody can say to what caste they belong, but the word for their house is still *illam*, the family name is still *Patrimmunum*, the next Kerala generation is still going on this way, and the Devi said, ‘We are to feed this family until the last member.’”

APPENDIX C: VASURIMALA, AN ORAL ACCOUNT OF A CONFRONTATION BETWEEN TWO GODDESSES IN DARIKAVADHAM

Bhadrakali's most commonly told and depicted story in Kerala is about her creation from Shiva's hair for the purpose of destroying the demon (Asura) named Darika. While this story does not connect the goddess directly to menstruation, it does show her direct connect to blood and its rituals.

Stories vary greatly depending on who is doing the telling. This appendix includes two variants of Darikavadham, one related in *The Secret Chamber* by a Kerala scholar, (V.T. Induchudan) and the other told to me by Saraswathiamma Thevaravattath, the caretaker of the installation of goddess Mariamma at Kodungallor Kurumba Bhagavati Temple. I begin with hers, an account that was re-translated on March 1, 1998 in Palo Alto, California, by Savithri De Turreil:

VASURIMALA---A STORY OF TWO GODDESSES IN COOPERATION

When Dianne and I visited Kodungallur temple in 1998 (with our friend V. Subramanian acting as guide and translator) we interviewed an attendant, a Dravidian "priestess of sorts" who serves a small installation on the (west) side of the temple. Behind a small iron grate stands a peculiar-looking stone sculpture, a head and trunk, with no facial features, and worn-away looking breasts. She looks like a stone sculpture that has been mutilated some time in the past. She is covered with her primary offering, turmeric. (Black pepper and red *cumcum* is also offered to her). We were interested in her because priestesses are rare, and being in an outdoor altar, they were very accessible.

Saraswathiamma Thevaravattath spoke very directly to us. She is a compact perhaps fifty year old woman in glasses, sandalwood bars on forehead, dark blouse with plain white cloth of her traditional *mundu* draped squarely over left shoulder; teeth missing in front of mouth; she continues talking to us even after Subramanian leaves and even though we do not speak her language. She is confident and direct. Gray shows in her black hair. She wears small gold earrings; gold ring on her left hand. Savithiri De Turreil would tell us later that she thought the priestess was dressed as a widow, and that these are matrilineal people.

The usual sounds of Bhagavati temples break in on us—sharp firecrackers in background occasionally; a blaring traffic horn. It's about noon with white hot light pouring down on us. Devotees stroll across the broad precinct; the south entry to the temple is in back of her as we film. We are sitting on the wall surrounding a big peepul or banyan tree in the Kodungallur temple yard. On the other side of the entry portico with its stately white columns, I see the black tiered lamp where my camera's eye rested occasionally during the intensity of filming the *velichapods* last year at Bharani Festival. As we recall, the first attempt to kill Darika was when the Seven Mothers made their attempt. Following their failure, both Bhadrakali and a male correlative (her *bhuta* "brother") were created from the act of Shiva hitting his hair on the ground.

Saraswathiamma talks at length and Subramanian asks a few questions.

The attendant-priestess immediately began telling us the story of the relationship between her goddess, Vasurimala, and goddess Bhagavathi, who resides in the main part

of the temple (and is not accessible to Westerners). Initially Vasurimala was called Manodari, and she was Darika's wife.

Saraswathiamma tells the story in the present tense: Bhadrakali is going to fight Darika. He schemes by telling his wife, don't eat or bathe, just repeat this mantra. So the 7 mothers try to kill Darika but they cannot because of this mantra. Shiva tells Bhadrakali, "Darika's wife is reciting the mantra, you must get hold of this mantra."

So Devi disguises herself by shaving her head as a Brahmin widow—and goes to the house, tells the servant, "Go tell your mistress I am an orphan, with no sons, no family, I have no one, go and tell her. Tell Manodari that I would like to see her." So Manodari looks out and sees her, and she says, "That poor old woman, let her come," so she went in there. Then Bhadrakali sees the Queen and says, "Oh, you look so pitiable, you haven't bathed. Go (I am telling you as your mother) go bathe and then eat...."

"No, I can't. I must recite..."

"Oh well, you tell me your mantra and I will recite it while you eat." So Manodari does this and Devi learns the mantra. Then, as soon as Manodari leaves the room so does Devi, and gets away with the mantra.

The Queen comes back and sees she was deceived.

Then Bhadrakali goes and calls Darika (reciting the mantra) and says 'Come and fight with me.'

So he knows; and goes to see his wife. They both know Devi has tricked them. Darika says to Manodari, "I am going to die in any case, so you kill Bhadrakali after she has killed me."

After that Kali kills Darika and when this happens his wife weeps and beats her breasts.

Bhadrakali says to her, "Don't cry".

Manodari is so angry she piles up the smallpox seeds, in the form of black pepper, and throws them at Bhadrakali, so then both of them get the disease.

So Bhadrakali goes to Shiva for help and then both goddesses (Subramanian says 'women') go to him to get cured. The brother—a *bhuta*, or spirit-- who was created with Bhadrakali was named Virabhadra (and also Ghantakarna). Shiva tells him to lick the goddess all over. (He had a kind of animal form). But being her brother he could not lick either her face or her *yoni*, so he does what he can, he licks her all over her body. This is the reason why when women get smallpox, the marks will heal on every part of the body except the face and the *yoni*—on these places they will have scars.

After this the brother tries to lick Manodari, but he loses control and claws her and does serious damage, so she has no nose and no breasts.

In despair she prays, "I have no one. You have to help me." Manodari says to Bhadrakali "you are my only refuge," and calls her '*ama*'—the title of respect meaning: mother.

Bhadrakali says, "All right. We will be together. You sit 18 feet away from where I sit, and whatever comes to me you take it; people first must go to you before coming to me. Devotees first go and worship you and take *prasadam* and put it on their head and then come inside and then only I will look at them."

Suddenly Devi began burning all over (from her smallpox), and then Manodari saw a sheep and dunked the animal in a river and put it across Devi's shoulders (as a

coolant). (Note: initially Subramanian said “goat” but it soon became clear he meant a grown sheep).

So then she’s coming like this—they are walking a long distance.

“Someone must take care of Shiva and Bhadrakali,” they said—the two installed deities in the main temple-- – so they brought two women with them—

“How can we eat, the second woman said,” and Bhadrakali said, ‘I will eat only after you.’ Both of these women were past 60—. These women only marry Brahmans and two lineages came about from this—these two lineages who can intermarry (so the attendant telling the story is one of these—Ambilivasis caste—and a descendant of the original two women who accompanied the three deities to Kodungallur.)

We had to do all the work for Devi, sweep, arrange the flowers, pound the rice. We do all this, as soon as they prepare the rice offering – in a mold –(*appoms*) we are fed first –and it is still like that—they take our portion aside and then feed the Devi. Our hereditary right is to sweep in the temple. Plapily is the name of the second lineage. They scrub the vessels.

The name of Manodari Devi in Malayalam is Vasurimala, meaning a garland for smallpox. (The “garland” is the wet sheep, which still rides over Vasurimala’s shoulders.)

For 41 days we offer no *garuti*—after Bharani (second day of cycle) and Kartika (third day of cycle) she is bathed and we bathe her. All the other days Brahmans do it. Devi is “*ashutam*” meaning she has lost her ritual purity— so Brahmans cannot touch Devi at this time.

After Her bath we dress her and a puja is done by the Attikals (Dravidian priests).

This ends Saraswathiana Thevaravattath’s account.

This version differs markedly from the one written by Induchudan, and quoted below. Perhaps men and women see differently and have a different relationship to the subject of blood. For the men the fierceness of the goddess is the relevant subject, and the fight between the two goddesses is told with emphasis. For the priestess, the repeated theme of the story (as I read it) is compassion between two females despite the violent battle they find themselves in. Manodari’s throwing of the smallpox “seed” infects both of them. After the “brother” mutilates her she throws herself on Bhadrakali’s mercy, calling her “mother” and the goddess responds with graciousness: you shall eat first, before me. This is acted out in temple practice, with the priestesses of Vasurimala eating before the goddess, a direct inversion of most Kerala practice. The goddess always eats first, and this blesses the food. Then, this arrangement made, Vasurimala gains her name by taking up the sheep and dipping it in the river to cool Devi from her burning fever. Thus both goddesses in turn express rage, compassion, forgiveness, mercy and cooperation. The initial deceit of Bhadrakali, which turns on Manodari’s sympathy for an unfortunate widow, becomes genuine in the outcome.

VASURIMALA, from *The Secret Chamber*. Induchudan 9-10.

“Vasurimala...is a crude and vague figure, placed in a shed equally crude. The word means ‘the garland of small-pox’, a disease which is very prevalent in Kerala especially in the summer. But, according to legends, she is not the embodiment of the

disease. We have only one story about her, so far as we know. This occurs in a dramatic ritual called *Tiyyattu*. The main theme is the killing of Daruka. In the fight between Kali and Daruka, the former was on the point of defeat, when Manodari, the wife of the Asura, went to Kailasa and worshipped Siva to save the life of her husband. However, Siva did not appear before her, but Parvati, the wife of Siva, taking pity on her, gave her a few drops of the perspiration of Siva. Parvati asked her to utilize these in the best possible manner. Manodari returned to the scene of fight with these drops, but on arrival she found that she was too late and Daruka had already been killed. Manodari found that Kali was already on her way to Kailasa carrying the severed head of Daruka. Manodari took vengeance by throwing the drops of perspiration upon Kali which at once turned into small-pox. As she was attacked by this terrible disease, Kali fell down exhausted and weak. Siva at once came to know about this mishap and created a *bhuta* from his ears who was called Karnakarna (Karna means the ear). This *bhuta* proceeded to the spot where Kali was lying and began to lick on her body to wipe away the swollen skin. He succeeded in removing all eruptions from all over the body except the face. Kali, it appears, did not allow him to lick her face, because, after all, she was his sister, born of the same father. Therefore, the eruptions on her face remained as a permanent feature. In the ritual dance-drama of *Tiyyattu*, the actor who plays the role of Kali makes up her face to show these eruptions. As soon as Kali recovered from her disease, she got hold of Manodari and broke her bones, so that she could not move about. Manodari's eyes were also injured, so that she could not see. Kali then cursed her: 'you may not be able to harass humanity hereafter. You may not be called Manodari, but Vasurimala.' Thus, according to this story, we have a harmless deity here, not capable of injury to anybody. The story of Vasurimala does not occur in the other legends, but Kali appears as the destroyer of small-pox. In one song, Siva tells her that human beings who would not offer her prayers and who would not conduct rituals in her honour, would be attacked by various kinds of small-pox. In another place, Siva tells her to spread the contagion of the disease among men who would not conduct rituals in her honour."

APPENDIX D: SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF MENARCHE RITUALS OCCURRING ON MORE THAN ONE CONTINENT

The Maiden must:

1. Not eat meat
2. Not eat fish
3. Stay in a separate place, not go outside
4. Not touch others or her own body
5. Not go near natural bodies of water
6. Cover her head when she goes outside
7. Sit or lie on a mat or raised plank and not directly on the earth
8. Abstain from sex, and not be seen or approached by men
9. Be separated from the general cooking area, or even have her own fire
10. Use her own dishes (which may be destroyed after menarche)
11. Maintain silence and stillness
12. Hold her eyes in a lowered position
13. Stay in seclusion for a designated number of days
14. Receive specially cooked dishes
15. Receive a special bath and dressing at her emergence
16. Be accompanied by girl companions or grandmother or aunt

APPENDIX E: SHAKTI AND WESTERN SCIENCE

From: *Kundalini in the Physical World*, Mary Scott

“A coiled Shakti or Shakti at rest should be understood as energy in a state of equilibrium, not a state of inertia. Mahakundalini coiled is therefore the Shakti in the physical world which keeps all lesser Shaktis in balance. It is polarised between the faces of generation and destruction, growth and decay, entropy and negentropy. Understood in this way, it is probably the force physicists have been looking for since the time of Einstein. It is as impossible to observe directly as electricity, magnetism, gravity and the nuclear forces. It may be, as the Tantras imply, equally real and a great deal more basic. It is more basic because postulating it might enable mathematical scientists to bring intelligence and life into their equations since neither differ from the forces of physics in any essential way. Their presence is discovered by essentially the same means. They are similarly elusive in themselves and yet must be inferred from the manner in which things behave. They are every bit as much part of the phenomenal world as the wind. It is only our engrained Western tendency to mind-matter dualism which prevents us from accepting this as readily as they do in the East.” (Scott, 86)

APPENDIX F: Fragment from A MARIAMMA CREATION STORY

From *The Earth Mother*, Pupul Jayakar, 40-1.

“Before the existence of hills or trees or fields or plants there was only water. In the midst of this existed the great world light.” Pedamma-Mariamamma was born of this cosmic light meditating on itself. The moment she was born she grew to womanhood, and the desire for man arose within her. As she wandered in a garden near an anthill, a jasmine bough bent over her, and the lady plucked a flower and said, ‘This will be my love.’ The virgin goddess took the jasmine flower and placed it within a lotus blossom which floated on the surface of the water. Then, with the magic powers held within her, the goddess transformed herself into a bird and settled upon the lotus, brooding over the jasmine flower. The sacred bird became pregnant of the flower and laid three eggs within the lotus. From one egg was born the heavens, the sun and moon, the stars, and all the encircling sea. From the black speck within the egg was born Siva, Vishnu, and Brahma. From the second egg were born...the demons. The third egg was addled.”

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