

NOTES ON CULTURAL ASPECTS OF MENSTRUATION IN GHANA

CHRISTINE OPPONG*

The original version of this paper was prepared for a World Health Organisation Task Force on Acceptability of Fertility Regulating Methods, Geneva, April, 1974.

In this brief collection of notes some of the traditional Ghanaian attitudes and practices regarding menstruation, its onset and cessation, are described. These include puberty rites, menstrual taboos and postmenopausal privileges.

Menstruation and Pregnancy

The fact that the beginning of menstruation heralds the potentially fertile period of a woman's life is known by people of all occupational and ethnic groups in Ghana. There is evidence that among the daughters of the better placed sections of the population the mean age of menarche is 12.9 (95 per cent in one school sample began to menstruate between the ages of 12.5 and 13.5 years) (Ofosu Amaah, 1969). In contrast there is evidence that among rural farming populations the age of menarche is somewhat later, the mean age being 15.6 (Ofosu Amaah 1974).

There is strong pressure among the illiterate girls in all ethnic groups to marry and have children as soon as the menstrual cycle is established. Thus in a recent study, first pregnancy was found to occur at the mean age of 18.7, the majority of women bearing at least one child in their teens. Ofosu Amaah (1974) has commented that the age of the onset of menstruation appears to be falling by about 2½ months every decade and warned that if this trend continues the likelihood of girls becoming pregnant in their teens will continually increase. As will be seen below puberty ceremonials or the physical signs that puberty has been reached indicate that the time is ripe for marriage among all, except the school-going girls. Even among these a considerable number drops out of school through pregnancy or are constrained to cause abortion.

Although the connection between menstruation and the possibility of childbearing is universally known, the way in which ovulation occurs during the menstrual cycle is not generally realized for the erroneous idea is widespread among would-be family planners that the days following menstruation are unsafe and that the midpoint of the cycle onwards is safe, a 'method' of planning apparently current among some villagers (Belcher, 1974). There are indications that illiterate women may keep track of the days of the month on which menstruation occurs according to the phases of the moon. How widespread or accurate this reckoning is, requires documentation. Some village women are also said to record with written charcoal marks the number of days by which menstruation is overdue, so that they can calculate their expected date of delivery or take the steps they may consider necessary to terminate the pregnancy.

Puberty Rites

Among most of the peoples of southern Ghana the menarche is a time for public ceremonial. Among the matrilineal Akan the first menses is an occasion for public rejoicing and congratulations, for display, ritual, music, song and prayer. It has even been called the most important event in an Ashanti girl's life (Fortes, 1954: 268). Shaving, washing, anointment, the use of special foods, dusting with white clay and so on, all indicate the ending of the childhood state and the entry into womanhood. During the rituals prayers are said stressing the importance of maternity and fertility. Ten or even thirty children may be mentioned as the goal (Rattray, 1927: 73; Field, 1948: 137). From that day on the girl is addressed as mother to signify her new status.

* Senior Research Fellow, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon Accra

Thirty years ago or more it was a sin and a crime for which both parties were liable to a heavy fine and to public obloquy for a girl to conceive before her puberty ceremony. But after this ceremony no disgrace follows premarital pregnancy if the girl has not been promiscuous (Fortes 1950: 265-266). Before the ceremonies may be performed the local queenmother and a few elderly women would accompany the girl during the more esoteric rites of bathing at the stream (Poku, 1965).

The puberty rites not marriage rites are the *sine qua non* for legitimate birth and as Rattray notes (1927: 188-189) the rites are held far more with the idea of safeguarding the community than in indulging in a display for the benefit of a particular individual. In contrast customary marriage is almost devoid of public ritual or display.

These puberty rites are still held to some extent particularly in rural areas. Among Christians the confirmation ceremony has partly taken over the function of declaring publicly the nubility and maturity of daughters. Formerly and still in some cases the puberty rite was the preliminary to marriage. Education for girls has meant however that in modern times a gap of ten or more years may intervene between the onset of puberty and marriage.

There are indications that the psychological effects of these ceremonies and their significance to the girl may in some cases be traumatic in effect (Field, 1960: 461). It was however an occasion all parents looked forward to and which they celebrated with pride and gratitude.

Among some sections of the Ga people the girl's puberty ceremony is as necessary a preliminary to socially acceptable pregnancy as it is among the Akan (Field, 1940: 23). In former days a girl pregnant before her puberty rites might be driven away from the community with her child. Among other Ga groups, for instance the La families described by Mills Odoi (1967: 77) the puberty rites are minimal and may merely consist of the presentation of a fowl by the father for a special meal and the occasion for advice and admonition by the maternal grandmother.

Among the neighbouring Krobo and Shai however the rites were traditionally elaborate and formerly protracted up to one year of seclusion. In former times groups of *dipo* girls who were undergoing the puberty rites would ordinarily spend at least twelve months in the ancestral mountain homes of the people under the supervision of priestesses and old women (Huber, 1963: 37). The occasion was one for special foods, cosmetics, dress, songs and ceremonies which are still to a great extent used and observed (Ayi, 1966) just as in the case of the Akan and some of the Ga, if a girl conceived before passing through her puberty ceremonies it was thought to cause a situation of ritual pollution for her family and community which required cleansing and pacifying rites for the supernatural world (Huber, 1963: 77). Such an unfortunate event was and now is avoided by the performance of the puberty ceremonies for girls at the tender ages of seven and eight (Huber 1963: 101). As among the Ga and Akan, it is the puberty rites among the Krobo which have been an even more crucial prerequisite for pregnancy than marriage. We are informed that premarital conception is rather common, many of such children becoming attached to the families of their mothers' father rather than to those of their *genitors*. The *dipo* ceremony is the time when the Krobo girl enters womanhood and is the most important ritual in her whole life. It is more than simply a celebration for first menstruation with which it does not necessarily coincide. According to Quarcoo (1965: 119) the Shai *dipo* ceremony has been shortened first to three months and now is a three to six week affair. While the teaching of mother craft aspect of the Shai *dipo* has disappeared it is considered crucial to prevent barrenness, which is felt to be increasingly prevalent. After *dipo* a Shai girl is expected to marry and bear children.

Among the Ewe the girl's physical development, puberty rites and marriage follow each other in quick succession (Nukunya 1969: 152). In former times Ewe girls among the Anlo who had reached puberty went through a ceremony in which they were paraded through the village dressed in rich beads and clothes, a demonstration of their nubility (*ibid.* p. 79). At the present time puberty ceremonies are no longer performed. Instead youths begin to court girls as soon as they know that they have come of age.

In the northern and upper regions of Ghana the menarche is rather the signal to prepare for marriage than for the celebration of public puberty rites. Indeed young girls have frequently in the past been married before puberty, menstruation marking their maturity and readiness to take up residence or commence sexual relations with their waiting husbands. Some groups such as the Konkomba have widely practised infant betrothal, fiancées going to join their husbands at about eighteen years of age or when pregnant, whichever is earlier (Tait, 1961: 163).

Restrictions and Taboos

There are many restrictions and taboos commonly associated with menstruation in traditional Ghanaian thought and practice. There is a widely recognized traditional taboo on a menstruant woman's cooking food for any man including her husband (e.g. Rattray, 1927: 74). It may be thought necessary to protect even crops from her evil influence (Rattray, 1932: 380). She may be forbidden to enter sacred places and to touch ritual and sacred objects (Rattray, 1927: 74-5). She may even be forbidden to cross the threshold of any man's house (Rattray, 1927: 75). She may not be allowed to enter any stream to get water (Field 1948: 137). Thus traditionally Akan villages have had special houses where women should go to stay during their menstrual periods, so as not to come into contact with men or they may stay outside their homes till night fall. The taboo may be so strict that she cannot speak to her husband at this time except through a spokesman usually a child or even touch the pans and plates used in cooking her husband's food. A menstruating woman is referred to by the Akan as *oko mfikyir* "she has gone behind the house".

Field (1948: 95) states that the chief reason one seldom finds a nuclear family household among the Akan is that a woman may neither cook for her husband, enter his room nor (in strict households) penetrate beyond the entrance porch of his compound while she is ceremonially unclean. This does not mean that a man and wife never share the same house but that there must always be another woman who can relieve her of cooking from time to time and there must always be an arrangement whereby she can avoid her husband's room (*ibid.*: 96).

Among the Ga the segregation of the sexes is such that they did not traditionally coreside and one of the main reasons for this residential separation was said to be that in the former time many lineages procured war medicines which were buried in their compounds and it was believed that these medicines would be rendered useless if menstruating women were allowed to live there (Mills Odoi, 1967: 24). Thus the only women occasionally observed to live in men's compound are women who have passed the menopause (Manoukian, 1950: 74).

Among the Krobo because of the supposed ritual uncleanness of the menstruating woman, she traditionally passes her time living behind the house and taking her meals separately from others and only after ritual cleansing and sprinkling of her cooking pots with herbal water does she return to her normal way of life. At the present time this custom is not observed everywhere any more (Huber, 1963: 188). Such restrictions and taboos appear to have been most strict among those people, the southern Akan, Ga, Ewe and Krobo who also have puberty rituals. Among northern peoples the

taboos are much less strict. Thus Tait notes that a man will still go to sleep in his wife's room at the time she is menstruating when it is her turn in a polygynous household even though sexual relations are then forbidden (Tait, 1961: 183). However among the Gonja, E. Goody notes that the linking of cooking and sexual services is central to the distribution of tasks and privileges among co-wives in the households and as wives take turns to cook or sleep with their husbands and as a menstruating woman cannot cook or sleep with her husband she will arrange with their co-wife to reschedule their domestic tasks (1973: 109). Among the Tallensi of northern Ghana there are apparently no taboos connected with puberty or menstruation (Fortes 1949: 201).

In modern times many of the taboos are no longer observed, but observance remains strict in houses of chiefs and traditional religious officials. For the idea is widespread that contact with a menstruating woman will have a negative effect on all supernatural and protective powers possessed by individuals, spirits or objects (Rattray (1927: 75). Field (1960:41) goes so far as to say of the Akan that a potentially bad magic is thought to be possessed by all menstruating women. It is even believed that water or cloth which has been in contact with menstrual blood can be used to destroy supernatural influences and to cause harm. At the same time the menstruating woman is thought to have special powers so that no ghost, bad medicines or witchcraft can harm her (Field, 1948). Since traditionally men have had about them so many objects subject to supernatural influence of one kind or another, such as ancestral stools, shrines, medicines talismans, blessings and medicines attached to tools and instruments, it has been considered dangerous for an unclean woman to be near these and spread her contagion to them.

The Menopause

It has been estimated that the menopause among rural women seldom occurs before the age of fifty (Field 1960: 150). The cessation of the monthly bleeding is the beginning of a new era in the life of a woman. On the one hand she may be worried that she will now lose her attraction for her husband and be replaced in his affections by a young and fertile wife. Field (1960: 150) has indicated the plight of the aging woman, who at the onset of amenorrhea may go from shrine to shrine for several years with the complaint that she is pregnant but that the pregnancy does not grow. This fear is a very real one in the light of the fact that several surveys have revealed a desire for larger numbers of offspring on the part of men than women in both rural and urban areas (e.g. Belcher, 1974; Caldwell, 1968; Oppong 1973).

On the other hand the end of her periods of 'uncleaness' may give a new era of freedom and power to a woman who may be now able to undertake many kinds of tasks and positions she was barred from carrying out before. She may be able to reside in men's houses (Manoukian, 1950-74); she may be able to approach the ancestral shrines and stools and participate in rituals from which she was previously strictly barred (Nukunya 1969: 152). As the Lowiili phrase it at the menopause a woman 'turns into a man' (Goody 1962: 56, 201; Goody 1967: 52). She can no longer perform the main task of women, bearing children and so is in a sense of sexual. As Goody states, "Authority ritual and otherwise is normally vested in men; within the general category of women, it is those past menopause who most nearly approach the male". Thus she may be able to perform intimate physical acts for both sexes including bathing of corpses and midwifery. The extent of her power may even be such that she can become a chief in her own right as among the Mamprussi and Dagomba, among whom a number of important titled offices are specifically reserved for women past the menopause (Rattray, 1932: 557; Oppong, 1974). Among the Akan however fertile women may be made queenmothers, may obtain both at the community and domestic level a role in decision-making which she could never have aspired to as a potentially

fertile sexually active woman. Thus speaking of the Tallensi, Fortes has written, a woman attains her fullest freedom in the family when she ceases to have sexual value. ... when she ceases to be reproductive" (Fortes, 1949: 100). Indeed her ceasing to have a sexual value in marriage may in some cases be associated with a withdrawal from the married state a retreat to residence with kin, as among the Gongga described by Goody E. (1973) and called terminal separation of marriage.

The menopause obviously has its traditional drawbacks and compensations, which for the individual woman will differ according to her personal evaluation of her roles as wife, mother, kinswoman or community member.

A Concluding Comment

In these brief notes we have recorded several facts; one is that the onset of menstruation is treated differently in the various Ghanaian ethnic groups but that its connection with fertility is universally recognized. Among the Akan, the Ga and the Krobo puberty ceremonies were formerly essential and are still carried out by traditionalists. Among the Ewe puberty ceremonies were formerly important but are no longer so. Among the peoples further north marriage rather than puberty tends to be publicized. Among all groups the menarche indicates readiness for marriage and pregnancy usually follows quite soon.

Menstruation in general is associated with ideas of uncleanness and pollution but again the extent varies to which taboos are upheld and enforced including residential and culinary taboos. They appear to be most strict and far reaching among the peoples who have public puberty ceremonials. These taboos appear to be falling into disuse especially among the Christians and the socially and spatially mobile, but to be still observed most strictly in households inhabited by men of importance in the traditional, political and religious hierarchies.

Among all peoples the menopause is associated with a relaxation of such taboos and greater freedom and authority for women in religious, political and domestic matters.

Further studies in detail of attitudes and practices related to menstruation and in particular to traditional procedures intended to postpone or prevent pregnancy through regulation of menstruation could be of relevance to the current Family Planning Programme. In addition ceremonies warrant documentation such as those performed by the Akan after the birth of a tenth child *Badu*, intended to bring about the end of childbearing through ancestral intervention or the seating of a royal woman upon a black ancestral stool with the invocation to the ancestors that her child-bearing should now cease.

References

- Ayi, C. K., 1966 *A Study of the Music of Dipo Custom*. Diploma in African Music, I.A.S., Legon.
- Belcher, D. W., 1974 *Male and Female Family Planning K.A.P. data*. Paper read at Danfa project review meeting Ghana Medical School.
- Cadwell, J., 1968 *Population Growth and Family Change in Africa*. Australian National University Press.
- Fortes, M., 1949 *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi*. Oxford University Press.
- Fortes, M., 1950 *Kinship and Marriage among the Ashanti in African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*. O.U.P.

- Fortes, M., 1954 A demographic Field Study in Ashanti in Lorimer (ed.) *Culture and Human Fertility* 253-339.
- Field, M. J., 1940 *The Social Organization of the Ga people*. Crown Agents for the Colonies.
- Field, M. J., 1948 *Akim Kotoku: an oman of the Gold Coast*. Crown Agents for the Colonies.
- Field, M. J., 1960 *Search for Security, An ethnopsychiatric study of rural Ghana*. Faber and Faber.
- Gaisie, S. K., 1969 *Dynamics of Population Growth in Ghana*. Demographic Unit, Legon.
- Goody, E., 1973 *Contexts of Kinship: an essay in the family sociology of the Gonja of northern Ghana*. Cambridge University Press.
- Goody, J., 1962 *Death Property and the Ancestors: A Study of Mortuary customs of the Lodagaa of West Africa*. Tavistock Publications.
- Goody, J., 1967 *The Social Organisation of the Lowilli*. Oxford University Press.
- Huber, H., 1963 *The Krobo: Traditional, social and religious life of a West African people*. Anthropos Institute St. Augustin Benn.
- Lorimer, F., (ed.) 1954 *Culture and Human Fertility*. U.N.E.S.C.O.
- Nukunya, G. K., 1969 *Kinship and Marriage among the Anlo Ewe*. The Athlone Press.
- Ofosu Amaah, S. O., 1969 *The Menarche at Aburi Girls School*. Ghana Journal of Child Development. Vol. 2, No. 2.
- Ofosu Amaah, S. O., 1974 *Fertility Survey Data and its Implications for Family Planning* Paper read at Danfa project review meeting. Ghana Medical School.
- Opong, C., 1973 *Growing up in Dagbon*. Ghana Publishing Corporation.
- Opong, C., 1974 *Attitudes to Family Size among unmarried junior civil servants* Journal of African and Asian Studies, Vol. 9, 1-2 January and April.
- Poku, D. Y., 1965 *Bragoro: The Music of Akan Puberty Rites*. Diploma in African Music, I.A.S., Legon.
- Quarcoo, A. K., 1965 *Processes of Social Control Among the Shai (Dangme)* M.A. Thesis, I.A.S., Legon.
- Radcliffe Brown, A. R. & Forde De (ed.) 1950 *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*. Oxford University Press.
- Rattray, R. S., 1927 *Religion and Art in Ashanti*. Oxford University Press.
- Rattray, R. S., 1932 *The Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*. Vols. 1 & II, Clarendon Press
- Tait, D., 1961 *The Konkomba of Northern Ghana*. Oxford University Press.