

# Relations of Production, the Incest and Menstrual Tabus Among Pre-Colonial Barnabans and Gilbertese

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article porte sur la problématique des relations entre le tabou de l'inceste et le tabou des menstruations dans les sociétés pré-coloniales banaban et gilbertaine de Micronésie, dans le Pacifique central. Ces deux tabous sont situés l'un et l'autre comme membres d'un ensemble de "séparations" ayant trait aux relations entre les sexes par rapport à la production et aux conditions de la production.

The incest tabu, or the *idea* of the incest tabu, is so powerful that all our major anthropological approaches have tried to absorb it: Structuralism has tried, structural-functionalism has tried, psychoanalysis, ethology. Rather recently, Needham (1971) has announced that there cannot be a general theory of the incest tabu, because the 'phenomenon' is not really a unitary one; the 'each culture in its own terms' view is also trying to absorb the incest tabu by saying that 'it' does not exist.

There is another tabu, or the idea of another tabu, which is very powerful and not yet so definitively absorbed: the menstrual tabu. I am not going to try and absorb it here, but rather indicate an analytic context, for one group of peoples, which can help explore interrelations between the incest and menstrual tabus: not explain them or make them go away, but perhaps provoke some thought about them.

Once the context begins to be identified, it is extremely obvious. The beginning of the identification is: the relations between men

and women. While this does seem obvious, it still requires a few interpretive steps from the ethnography.

I am focussing primarily on the people from Banaba (Ocean Island), which lies to the west of the Gilbert Island group in the Central Pacific, and in pre-colonial times.<sup>1</sup> The resettlement site of the Banabans is Rabi Island, Fiji. The Banabans have a certain current notoriety because of their conflict with the British government and the British Phosphate Commission. The Banabans are culturally linked to the Gilbertese, speak Gilbertese, and there is some interesting older ethnography of the Gilberts.

The Gilbertese are usually identified as Micronesian, with more affinities to Polynesia than to Melanesia. Matters of the kind I am discussing here are more familiar in the literature about Melanesia than in the literature about other parts of the Pacific. One wonders (once again) about the utility of the divisions conventionally made among Pacific peoples.

We are perhaps most accustomed to thinking about the incest tabu in the context of kinship and marriage, or of reciprocity in general. Rivière's paper on reassessing 'marriage' (Rivière 1971) is helpful here, in that he says we should think of marriage as one of the possible relations between male and female, even given some instances of marriage between people of the same sex. He moves from the 'kinship' context to the 'cultural definition of the sexes' context. I think we can try to move it one step further to the 'relations between men and women' context: Not 'sex roles', but how men and women relate to one another.

As for marriage, so for the incest tabu. We are by now familiar with the point that the incest tabu does not equal exogamy, but they are clearly related in some rather close fashion.

There are instances, still to be described in detail, of institutionalized male homosexuality in Papua-New Guinea, with rules about what might be termed homosexual incest. But from

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a very condensed version of a longer argument made in Barnett and Silverman 1977. In that volume there are citations, qualifications, discussion of sources, etc. The pieces of evidence for the analysis are such that one has unequal degrees of confidence in them. The analysis is *very* 'hypothetical'.

the little that I know about these cultures, the institutionalization of male homosexuality has very much to do with practices and beliefs about the differences between men and women, and with the consequences of contact between men and women. Hence the question of the relations between men and women can still be defended as a context of understanding.

As far as I know, for Banaba and the Gilberts, homosexuality was not an issue. The incest tabu did deal with sexual relations between men and women, men and women who were, for Banaba, people whose grandparents were siblings, or who were more closely related. (The 'boundary', and the issue of what constituted an act of incest, were more complicated in the Gilberts, where there were descent units with unilineal aspects.)

Regarding the menstrual tabu, the men-women context is in a sense even less immediately apparent. Menstruating women polluted not only men, but also other women, and quite possibly even other menstruating women.<sup>2</sup> But menstruation seems to have been very much tied up with 'femaleness'. In one report for pre-colonial Banaba (Maude & Maude 1932), women were excluded from the coastal areas of the island where men performed their most important ritual. The ritual (among other things) was one through which men attained health, prowess, and success, from the Sun. Women in general were excluded from this area, but the reason given was that they might be menstruating, and menstruating women had a lethal effect on magic. Now, menstruating women are also 'secluded' to some degree, and the prohibition apparently applied to female infants and to post-menopausal women too. There was something about menstruation and femaleness, and a lethal effect on ritual.<sup>3</sup>

While menstruating women polluted men and women, and also polluted anything tied up with productivity, it is thus possible to see the menstrual tabu in the context of the relations between men and women.

<sup>2</sup> I have some reservations about using the term 'pollution' here, but use it for economy, and also to suggest links with questions raised by Mary Douglas.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding menstruating as a kind of defining attribute for femaleness in the Pacific was first suggested (to me) in a conference discussion by Goodale.

If among these peoples there is some unity discernible in the variety of practices concerning the relations between men and women, then our understanding of the incest tabu and of the menstrual tabu should join at some point or at some points.

According to Grimble, who was a colonial officer in the Gilberts and on Banaba, and conducted ethnographic and ethnological investigations:

Incest was punished on Tamana and Arorae by laying the offenders face down in a shallow pool of water and suffocating them; in the Northern Gilberts the culprits were lashed to a log of wood and set adrift in the ocean; the lightest punishment awarded seems to have been to put the incestuous couple aboard a small canoe, with a few coco-nuts, a paddle but not sail, and thus abandon them to the elements. The belief was that the sun would hide his face from the place in which two such offenders were allowed to live unpunished. The superstition is connected with the story of a great culture-hero named Bue, some of whose deeds were exactly similar to those of Polynesian Maui. Bue, on his return from a wondrous voyage into the east, lay with his sister under the noonday sky; the sun (Gilbertese, *Taa*), their ancestor, seeing their act, was filled with rage and destroyed their craft; only the possession of a magic staff saved them from drowning. Ever since that day the sun has set his curse on incest, and in deference to him all offenders must be punished with the watery death that he would have visited upon Bue and his sister (Grimble 1921:21).<sup>4</sup>

The threat of the Sun hiding his face may very well have presented the prospect that men would not have access to the powers they derived from the Sun, which were aspects of their maleness. And women had to be excluded from the male ritual area because they might be menstruating, and menstruating women had a lethal effect on 'magic'. It does not seem to have been the case that the Sun was a generalized source of punishment. Hence the connections between the incest tabu, menstruation, and the relations between men and women, may be seen through practices relating to the Sun, as a source of success and prowess.

If menstruating women were so lethal, it is reasonable for us to imagine that they had a great deal of power, using the term 'power' very loosely, since we do not know much about the people's own concept of power. The matter then becomes clearer: women

<sup>4</sup> There is a great deal more to be said about this myth and related myths; see, e.g., Grimble 1972.

had a power which was inimical to the attainment of power by men. It is interesting to observe that men had to attain power, from the Sun, while women were (perhaps) 'naturally endowed' with it. Women have a power which is 'ascribed'; men, 'achieved'? (Or: 'A woman's always a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke!')

One way of interpreting menstruation as the locus of this power, is that it was an activity of women uncontrolled by men. It was not only womanpower, but, even worse, uncontrolled womanpower. If we say: Womanpower uncontrolled by men interfered with men's access to the source of manpower, that makes a good deal of sense. That the men were worried about this sort of thing appears not only logical, but also very realistic. And women may even have 'had an interest' in it themselves, of one sort or another.

For both the menstrual tabu and the incest tabu, we can propose a common 'theme' of 'failure of control', or 'resistance to control', in a number of ways.

If the contemporary Banaban theory that both parents contribute substance to the child was true precolonially, then we may state one way as follows: incest was the failure of control over the transmission of substance from one generation to the next.<sup>5</sup> Menstruation was the failure of control over the nontransmission of substance from one generation to the next. Women had substance which they transmitted to their children, and women had substance which they did not transmit to their children. But the 'problem' created by the substance which they did not transmit to their children was not the fact that the women were not 'reproducing' *per se*. The problem was that when they were reproducing, men were preconditionally involved in the act; when they were menstruating, men were not.

Thus far the way I used to define the incest tabu has been in terms of the 'genealogical line' within which people could not engage in sexual relations. One might try to rewrite the definition as a 'functional' one. Let us say: Incest was when a woman had

<sup>5</sup> Of course, this is not to suggest that incest was *only* the failure of control of the transmission of substance from generation to generation; nor is it to suggest that the only kind of failure of control of the transmission of substance from generation to generation was incest.

sexual relations with a man who could not repay that woman's debt to her parents; in particular, to her father. How may we understand this?

Parents produced for their children; children should re-produce for their parents. But the positions of the son and of the daughter were not the same. Both son and daughter were productive members of their parents' circle, but a son, being male, could engage in more highly valued tasks than could a daughter. The son, much more than the daughter, re-produced for his parents while he was still young; he, much more than she, before marriage had already 'repayed his debt' to his parents. But a daughter, being female, could not, given the kinds of activities in which she could engage, and their devaluation in relation to men's activities. (One can speak of 'men's labour' and 'women's labour' here, but that would require a long discussion about what it means to use the category 'labour' in this setting.) So the daughter had to get a man to do this for her (her husband), and that man had to be outside the incest boundary.

Women were supposed to be weaker than men. If that weakness were tied with menstruation (and one of the ways of talking about menstruation is saying that women 'are sick'), then the connection between the incest tabu and the menstrual tabu would be even tighter: uncontrolled womanpower was weakening to both men and women; being women-weak-menstruating, women's activities were devalued in relation to men's; 'because' of this, women could not repay their debts to their parents, especially the father; in order to repay the debt they had to get a man; the man had to be a man outside the incest boundary. How may we understand the relation between the 'genealogical' and the 'functional' 'definitions'?

I think we can discern a general practice, which fits rather well with the Marxist concept of 'simple reproduction'. The practice was that people must reproduce for those who produce for them; people should not realize an 'increase' at other people's expense, and people should not go uncompensated for a decrease.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In this formulation I draw on Sahlins' discussion of Mauss' discussion of the Maori; see Sahlins, 'The spirit of the gift', in Sahlins 1972.

With regard to material reproduction, men and women were in different positions, in that the woman had to get a man to reproduce her parents' material production for her. The husband's family did not suffer a decrease because it received exclusive rights to her sexual-procreative activity in 'exchange'.

Procreatively, the situation was different. As the son or daughter produced a child, the son or daughter was also reproducing the parents' production of him or her. (As Marx said, every act of production is also an act of reproduction). In Gilbertese kin terminology and practices, there is something of an identification of the grandchild and grandparent generations, which we can interpret in this light.

As far as material things are concerned, the woman had to get a man; women's activities were inferior to men's, and this *might* have had something to do with menstruation. As far as generational (or procreational) things were concerned, the woman had to get a man, but the man also had to get a woman. Both sexes contributed equally to the children.

Since in producing a child one was reproducing the production of oneself, the process of generational reproduction was a three-generational process (your parents, yourself, your children). The incest tabu constituted the 'unit' of reproduction as a three-generational unit. If the logic of simple reproduction applied not only to a person *but also to a sibling set*, this may shed a little light on the incest tabu: As siblings produced children (who, terminologically, were siblings themselves), they reproduced their own production as siblings by the sibling set of the previous generation.

But I think there was a problem. As far as inheritance and procreation were concerned on Banaba, men and women were more or less equal. As far as "division of labour" was concerned, they were more or less unequal.

Men could pride themselves in their division of labour superiority, but could not be totally negative toward women, in part because connections with women were very important for them, including land connections with women. The men dealt with their problem as they dealt with uncontrolled womanpower. Women

were put away 'periodically'. This at least *partially* 'localized' the problem, and in an ideologically spectacular — while at the same time totally unremarkable — way: through the division between substance being transmitted to children, and substance not being transmitted to children.

### CONCLUSION

One of the more interesting aspects of the situation broached here is this: In the understanding of western capitalist societies, we have encountered something of an analytic block: that is to delineate *precisely* the relations between (a) the relations between men and women, and (b) the relations of production of the capitalist mode of production.

Among the peoples discussed here, we find production for use-value, and we can make the case that the relations between men and women, in relation to their productive activities and the conditions of their production, *were* the relations of production.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the understanding of one will aid the understanding of the other.

Finally: If the men-women-production-reproduction nexus is the basic one for these Oceanic societies, what would be *most* surprising would be the discovery that these concerns were *un*-related to bodies, and to dreams, and to things that go bump in the night.

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<sup>7</sup> The notion of 'relations of production' that I am using close to that developed by Balibar (1970) in his reading of Marx, but without accepting the proposition that 'relations of production' can be formulated in the same way in different formations. The position is argued in Barnett & Silverman 1977.



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