OPENING DOORS AND GETTING RID OF SHAME
Experiences of first menstruation in Valencia, Spain.

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Abstract: In many societies, the first menstruation is an occasion for festive rituals. To celebrate it may seem especially logical in societies that emphasize motherhood. This is certainly so in Spain, yet the first menstruation there is rather a shameful matter. This paradox is dissolved if we suppose that what arrives with the first menstruation is not potential motherhood but potential sexual activity, and also womanhood (as opposed to manhood), and that both are construed as negative or ambivalent. But this means a new paradox in the present Spanish context. After two decades of mostly positive change, the concept of change has become synonymous with improvement. And sexuality, always culturally emphasized in the Mediterranean area, has taken on the role of a key symbol of change. Through analysis of verbal behavior around menstruation, conclusions are drawn about how sexuality and the female body are interpreted in the Spanish city of Valencia today.
A. INTRODUCTION

Why a study on menstruation? For people interested in women’s studies it may or may not seem obvious. For most Europeans, however, it might seem a very odd study object - menstruation is one of those private things we do not talk about. Now, that does not have to be so. In the societies anthropologists usually study, there are many examples of important and public rituals around menstruation. That is a fact. And the fact that menstruation is not celebrated or even talked about in European societies is also a fact of European culture.

Women’s first menstruation is symbolically marked in many societies. One common theme is the transition to adulthood - the girl is transformed into a woman. Another common theme is that the girl can now become a mother and this is cause for celebration. This is especially common in societies where maternity is culturally emphasized. A third common theme is that menstruation is interpreted as a tremendous force and therefore possibly dangerous. Many societies take measures to neutralize or channel it, separating menstruating women in different ways from ordinary social life.

In the Mediterranean area menstruation has above all been interpreted as the opposite of purity. A menstruating woman is thought to smell bad, she must not have intercourse, etc. and it is her duty to do all she can to hide what is going on. These themes recur in most occidental societies even today. But it is not usually a strongly focused cultural theme. Menstruation is mostly just, as the Valencian women I studied unanimously said, "a hassle". (Cf also Martin 1987.)

A much more important cultural theme in Mediterranean societies is maternity. This may be especially true of Spain. The Franco regime (1939-1977) kept the traditional view of woman as principally wife and mother alive until well into the 1970’s, both ideologically and through social measures such as aid to large families and annual prizes to the largest ones. And even today, Spanish women have more power and prestige as mothers than in any other social role.

In such a society one might expect that the first menstruation would be an occasion for joy and celebration. But this is not so and has never been so. Is this a cultural contradiction?

No, I do not think so. The attitudes towards the first menstruation can be explained without contradiction if we suppose the following: Motherhood is celebrated, but the first menstruation occurs too early in life in relation to both older and newer social practice. The first menstruation is rather associated with sexuality. It is too early for motherhood, but the girl is no longer just a girl - so she is defined as a sexual being. It is thought that she now starts having desires and could have sexual relationships. And that is negative. The first menstruation cannot be celebrated, it is rather something
shameful to be hidden away, because it is the decisive step towards sin and shame, much more than a step towards motherhood.

All of this is not explicit at all today, but most of what people say and do can be coherently explained in the light of it. And religious teachings still emphasize purity, explicitly. And the themes of honour and shame have been central in Mediterranean cultures, and they are basically interpreted and experienced as sexual honour and sexual shame.¹

This article asks: These old Mediterranean ideas of sexuality as impurity, and women’s bodies as the main depositories of sexuality and therefore shameful - are they still valid in an urban context in Spain today? We will see that they are valid enough for opposition to them to be phrased as their logical opposite, but that they are under strong attack. Menstruation is one of the arenas of this cultural battle.

B. THREE TALES.
Before proceeding further in my argument, let me present three illustrative tales.

1. **Total ignorance: Carmen**²
Carmen was born to very poor parents in Southern Spain in the early fifties and the family had to migrate to Switzerland when she was about ten. Her first menstruation came soon afterwards, while she was in school. "That day I had a terrible tummy ache. So I asked permission to go to the bathroom, and when I got there, I noticed the panties all... blood all over!" She was scared of course. And ashamed. "I went back to class, and the teacher... I was very... sort of ashamed. Imagine that! How come I was ashamed when I didn’t even know what it was?! But I think it was because... I felt strong shame, and I think it was because perhaps I had seen my mother covering up her lower body in the bathroom or something... I know anyway that I associated shame with the lower part of my body. From the waist down, it has always been taboo. Because it has always been hidden away, behind closed doors... that is why I felt ashamed when something was not quite right down there, do you see? And then the teacher explained it to me, as best she could, because I had not been in Switzerland for very long, and she said that now, from then on, I was a woman and... well, I don’t remember the exact words, but I knew that that woman was giving me a great deal of consolation, she was helping me a lot, because... I don’t know, when I got home, I did not say anything to my mother. I took off the panties and threw them away. And I did not say anything to my mother, because that other woman had explained it to me as something normal, and my mother had never told me anything about it, so then I felt very distant from my mother."
I asked Carmen how she managed the practical aspect, then. "I found rags in the kitchen. My mother is very special about that, she always saves everything, any old rag, she cuts it up and saves it, it can come in handy some time. So there were lots of old rags. I put old rags in my school bag, I always had some with me, because I was afraid it would happen again, and I did not want to have to feel such shame again as that first day. Because I was so ashamed." She hoped that perhaps it would not come back. When it did come back for the third time, she took a long walk by herself, to another village, to look up an older female cousin. "And she said, well, Carmen, you just have to buy... she gave me a couple of her towels: you put them on, and when you are finished you put them to soak somewhere where your mother can see it. And that is what I did. And then, when my mother saw my bloody towels, she said... we were all there, I remember I was so ashamed... she said to my father: listen Juan, guess what, we have another woman in the house now! And I turned completely red! And my father, he was sort of happy, I think, but he said, well, in that case, you have to be careful, you know that, from now on you have to be very careful... and I was even more ashamed. What was I supposed to be careful with?! Please! (laughter)" And again, a few days later, the older cousin helped out. "She was the one to tell me about it. She said you have to be careful with these things now, because now, if you have contact with a man or whatever, then you can become... in that way. And me: dear God! If that was something I was scared to death of, how would I... well, if I saw a man, I would run away! Please!" She went on to underline how ignorant she was up to the moment she got married.

Carmen’s tale is both typical and atypical. Several aspects of it are very common, such as feeling ashamed without knowing why, the ambivalent feelings the parents express, the great fear of becoming pregnant and the problem of not knowing exactly how to avoid it. The association to later difficulties in her love life due to ignorance about sexual matters is also representative. However, her situation was especially difficult because she was a migrant, so she had language difficulties and no friends of her own age who could inform her and in whom she could confide when it happened.

2. Average shame: Amparo
In the city of Valencia in 1990, most middle aged women told tales that included these same aspects but that were less emotionally charged. A representative tale is that of a 50-year old woman, from a village in the Valencian region. We can call her Amparo. I interviewed her together with her 17-year old daughter and a friend of the daughter’s. These two young girls had little to say. They insisted that having their first period was "normal" and "natural". Yes, they had been informed ahead of time, both by their mothers and in school. Yes, they knew all about what it was for and how it worked.
When I asked if they did not feel any shame at all, they said they were careful to keep very clean to avoid smelling bad. And that they tried to get excused from physical education class. One of them said she avoided dressing in slacks during those days, in case the pad might show.

At that point Amparo could no longer keep quiet. "What happened to me was very different!" She told how she discovered one day, about 13 years old, that she felt wet and sticky and that she did not know what it was. "I guess I imagined in a way, but I did not really know... You hear some things from friends, but it is talked about as a mystery..." Her mother had never told her anything. Nevertheless, Amparo went to her mother, who turned red and did not know what to say. Finally she got out a towel and said, "Well, so you are a woman now." That was all. Then Amparo had to leave for school. She went, but she felt very strange, she did not want anyone to see her. She felt tremendous shame and also as if some sort of strange, undefinable but heavy responsibility had come over her. "The whole world fell down on me." She could not ask her mother anything more, and she felt as if a new barrier had been erected between herself and the rest of the family, including brothers and sisters. "And all those things my girl friends said, about not being able to wash, about not being able to have a cold drink today... it was repulsive. At the same time it was exciting, like having climbed a step, entering another generation..."

Women who have had their first period after approximately 1975, and especially after 1980 do not usually have the kind of experience Carmen and Amparo described. But even though the young girls tell very different tales, most of them still talk of shame in one way or another.

3. Innovations: Nieves

But there are a few, a very few, who have positive experiences, outright celebrations. Let us look at one such case. It is a good example of purposeful cultural change.

Nieves, born in 1975, was well informed ahead of time. Her parents are manual workers, but they had been careful to buy books on sexual education, so Nieves and her two younger brothers had "always" known where babies come from and how male and female bodies differ. She was thirteen when one day, just as she was about to leave for school, she saw a small brown stain. She rushed to tell her grandmother about it. Her mother was away at work. Her grandmother was ashamed and did not know what to say, but this did not affect Nieves’ happiness. She went to school full of joy, eager to tell her friends. When she got back, her mother was waiting by the door with a flower in her hand, and as she handed it over, one of her brothers flashed a photograph. "It was so beautiful, it was a total surprise, my mother had never given me flowers, not for birthdays or anything. Then at dinner she announced to the whole family that I was
now a woman and that was why she had made a special dessert." Nieves was aware that this was a highly unusual way to handle the news, but she did not see it as cultural innovation, only as an expression of her mother’s love for her. Nieves plans to do the same for her daughters, if she gets any.

Nieves was the only interviewed woman to talk about physical motherhood as something beautiful. (Whereas the social advantages of being a mother and the wonders of babies once born were common themes.) She was also the only one to think menstruation might be worthwhile in itself, apart from its reproductive functions.

I did not meet many women who had had their first period celebrated. But the stories of the few who did were spreading and I did meet several women who had heard of them, and these women all found them beautiful.

C. METHOD
What do these experiences mean? Why do women have to experience their bodily functions with shame, why do they have to suffer from ignorance? Is this really changing? Why is it that some young girls even now react violently and negatively to their first menstruation?

I started to think about this while I did fieldwork in a working class barrio (suburb) of Valencia, the third city of Spain, in 1983. I collected life stories, and I realized that quite a few women spontaneously told me about their first menstruation, and these tales were almost always strongly negative. "Trauma" was the word the women themselves preferred. It is always interesting when a sizeable proportion of a population start criticizing important aspects of their own ideas. This is happening in Spain in many ways (cf Thurén 1988) and this is logical seeing the dramatic processes of change that the country has gone through lately.

Naturally, there was a possibility that those tales were not representative. So in 1990 I went back to Valencia to interview specifically about menstruation. As could be expected, the interviews yielded a bewildering amount of different and contradictory opinions. But the variation followed certain patterns.

People naturalize their culture. More or less, in different societies, and more or less in different areas of life within one society. The body and its functions is one aspect of life that is often strongly naturalized; it is easily seen as given and unchangeable. However, in times of change, things seem less natural. If everything has been changing deeply for quite some time, one may have the feeling of living in a flux. Many of my informants said things like, "One always has to improvise nowadays." "There are no values any more." "People say one thing and do another." In such times, processes of conscious cultural innovation become common.
I went back to the peripheral working class area where I had done fieldwork for 18 months in 1982-83. Two weeks in November 1990 and two weeks in February 1991 yielded interviews with 36 women. All the interviews were with women I had known already in 1983 and seen often since then or else with friends or relatives of theirs. In other words I used a snowball method, but selecting among the possible contacts to get a wide spread of ages. The spread along other variables was produced mostly by chance but the result is more or less representative for the barrio population.3

I always started the interview by explaining who I was, if the interviewee did not already know me, and why I was interested in hearing about the experiences of the first period. I chose phrases that were familiar to the women, e.g. "since these things have been changing so much". Then I said approximately, "So, now I want you to tell me about when you had your first period. Whatever you want to tell me, whatever you remember." Usually that was enough to get the tale started. If not, I prompted a little bit. When the interviewee had told me her basic story, we usually went on chatting for a while, covering the ground of a number of more specific questions in a relaxed conversation-like way. 4

D. THE EXPERIENCE
Some women told of emotionally neutral experiences. But the negative experiences still dominated, especially among women over 40. And the neutral tales were often short and colourless. "Nothing to it. My mother told me about it in quite a natural way. That is all I can tell you, I don’t remember anything else." Only two women, both of them young girls, had had definitely positive experiences.

In order to generalize about the experiences, the women have to be divided into two groups according to age. Other variables, such as income, level of education attained, region of origin, husband’s occupation, own occupation, etc. have much less discriminating power. And it is logical that in a society undergoing radical change, time/age should make more of a difference than anything else.

In view of general social, political and economic changes in Spain, it is logical to place a cultural watershed around 1975. And this coincides with what the women have to tell. For women who have had their first menstruation later than that - and the later, the more pronounced the contrast - the experience has been much less naturalized. They may deplore the lack of information, their parents’ "backwardness", the shame they were made to feel, and so on. But they do deplore these things. They did not seem natural and inevitable any longer. They had more opportunities to contrast opinions and thus obtain a certain cultural distance to whatever happened.
1. Women over 30
   a) Ignorance and information
   Women born before 1960 were practically unanimous in thinking they did not receive sufficient information ahead of time.

   They usually found out about the existence of menstruation because they had older sisters, or because their mothers did not hide the little buckets in which they put the rags or towels to soak. Almost all also had girl friends with whom they whispered and speculated. A few women tell about female teachers, - "ahead of their times", as they usually explain - who gave some information in school, with or without the parents’ knowledge.

   Female persons of one’s own generation - friends and cousins, above all - were much preferred to mothers as sources of information. The women felt that mothers communicated too much shame and too little of what they needed at that moment: practical information and emotional support. This is yet another indication of continuity in the cultural management of shame. Mothers must communicate shame to their daughters, not on purpose, but because that is what they have learnt. Yet the mother-daughter relationship is the opposite of shame - it is intimate, positive, practical-minded. The solution to this contradiction is to avoid subjects associated with shame as much as possible in the interaction between mother and daughter.

   b) Shame and fear
   What all these women felt, without exception, was shame. They felt it intimately, strongly, irremediably, and they did not experience it as something learnt but rather like something that grew irresistibly inside themselves.

   Fear is the second common feeling. For some, it was more like a heavy responsibility, which was somehow positive at the same time. Whether fear or responsibility, it was connected to the fact of being now considered a grown-up, something they hardly ever felt they were ready for, but above all it was connected to the danger of sexuality, usually expressed as the danger of becoming pregnant. Sometimes the fear of mysterious dangers was translated into a concrete fear of boys/men.

   In other words, the main message, apart from minimal instruction in the practicalities, was negative. You are now a woman, and this means that there is something you must NOT do. To be a woman is not something you do, it is something you do not do. And, since most women did not know exactly what it was they must not do, they were overcome with fear, anguish, confusion.
c) To become a woman

Some of the younger women have unclear memories of the day the first period started, but this is not so for the older ones. For them it was a momentous day. Whatever the emotional tone, there was strong emotional charge or at least that is how they tell it. Almost all were told "You are now a woman." (Ya eres una mujer.)

Naturally, then, mixed with the shame and fear, was often a feeling of pride, a new dignity. However, several women added, ironically, that they soon discovered they were still treated as little girls by parents and older siblings. No one told me anything about receiving instructions about what this dignity consisted in nor about receiving any material symbolic marker.

One can say, then, that the first menstruation is very clearly conceptualized as the sign of womanhood. But being a woman is construed as an absence rather than a presence of activities. And the phrase "you are a woman" is not corresponded in practice with any change in social status. There is no public celebration, on the contrary, for most it was something to be carefully concealed. And apart from the shame and the short phrase, there is also a symbolic vacuum.

d) The danger of cold things

Now, perhaps the so-called "taboos" could be considered as a kind of symbolic elaboration making what must be hidden indirectly visible. If a woman refuses an offer of an ice cream, giggles will ensue!

Even the older women usually broach this subject signalling carefully their present cultural distance to these "taboos", which, they say, they now "know" to be "irrational" and "old-fashioned." Then they say, almost without exception, that whoever the person was to whom they had turned, that person included in her minimal practical instruction a warning about washing. Exactly what was not to be washed or how varies widely. The most common warning was "You must not wash yourself during those days" without further specifications. Some women were told they could wash but not shower. Others could wash their bodies but not their hair or feet. Some were told they could wash in hot water but not in cold.

Almost all women were told not to eat ice-creams during menstruation. Cold drinks were also prohibited.

The reasons given for these prohibitions varied but always had something to do with great physical danger. One could go blind in the shower or die sitting on a cold stone. The danger is expressed as the period "being cut off". Some said this means the blood stays inside your body and poisons you. Most could give no explanations beyond saying that if the menstruation is cut off, this must "obviously" be dangerous. Apparently there is (or was) an idea of menstruation as a hot process, a flow, which could stop if cooled off, and related to this some concept of menstrual blood as
dangerous to the woman herself, so its flow out of the body must be assured. But this does not seem to have been clearly verbalized. The conceptualization was vague, just like everything else connected to shame must be vague.

Much less common but still common ideas were that menstruating women could not make mayonnaise because it would not turn out, could not touch plants because they would wither, could not have a hair permanent, because it would not take, etc.\footnote{5}

Many women of all ages reported that they do refrain from certain activities during their period. Not, however, they underline, because of any belief in danger, but for reasons of hygiene and comfort.

All of these prohibitions have one thing in common - they impose a change in activity which cannot be totally concealed. Whatever their conscious or semi-conscious reasons and rationalizations, then, one effect was to afford a symbolic marker. Perhaps, in spite of their air of negativity and danger, they were upheld and believed in - and nowadays told about with evident relish, as something both fun and funny - because they constituted a presence at that otherwise so eerily empty even though important moment of the first menstruation. They helped to transcend the contradiction between important change of social status and absence of celebrations.

2. Women under 30

a) Sexual education

The younger women hardly ever admit ignorance.\footnote{6} They usually say that their parents did not inform them very well (but there are significant exceptions) but this did not matter, because nowadays there is plenty of information to be had from school, from books and magazines and from knowledgeable friends. Some younger women say that their parents escaped the duty to talk to them about sexual matters saying that "nowadays you young people know everything anyway."

From about 1983, sexual education is a compulsory subject in school, in the fifth year (ten-year-olds) and again in the eighth, and to judge from my material most children do receive this piece of teaching, even though tales of embarrassed teachers abound.

b) The normal, the natural and the rational

The key words for younger women are "normal" and "natural". They feel pity or disdain for the "old taboos". Their guiding star is "rationality".

The common story is rather short. The girl knew "all about" menstruation and was expecting it well in advance. Either her mother or an older sister or friends had told her ahead of time about the practical matters. She usually wanted to start menstruating so as not to be more childish than her friends. If some older woman tried to instruct her according to some "old taboo" she would answer back, explaining that such beliefs were
irrational. If her father tried to warn her about boys, she might laugh it off, or she might show him a neutral face, to spare his feelings, and then laugh about it with her girl friends.

All of the girls had heard of the prohibitions on washing, in one version or another, but no one under twenty had paid any heed. Or so they said - a few of them said, always with an air of superiority, that "many classmates" did not wash their hair during those days, "still".

The young women had also usually been told that they were now women. Their reactions varied, but in no case were their feelings very strong. Some thought it sounded old-fashioned but sort of nice, some thought it was a euphemism used by older women who did not dare to pronounce the word menstruation, some said they used the expression themselves sometimes, but that it did not mean very much to them. When I asked if they had felt they were now adults, they invariably laughed and said that obviously they were not, they were still growing, they were still in school... They could not usually remember reflecting very much at all about the significance of the event. Perhaps that is why they usually felt uncomfortable when they heard their mothers comment with relatives or neighbourhood women that they had "become women". On the other hand, why should they feel any discomfort at all if it is all so natural?

c) New contradictions?

We see then that a former clear marker of changed social status is losing its meaning. The event is much less of an event, therefore it is surrounded by fewer feelings of any kind, and the younger women have much less to tell about it.

For the very few girls who have had celebrations, the cultural change has been from something negative to something positive. For most younger women, however, the move is only from the negative to the neutral.

They seem to have internalized completely that what can and should be said is that all body functions are natural and "therefore" good, and that the direction of change is towards "openness". That does not mean, however, that they do not feel certain ambivalences. These can sometimes grow into acute cultural insecurity that finds some psychological outlet, such as fear of growing up. And new contradictions are being produced.

Several mothers told me about what they thought were inexplicable reactions in their daughters. One girl stayed in bed for a whole day, refusing all explanations, refusing all attentions, and only when she was forced out of bed to go to the bathroom could her mother sneak in and see the bloody sheets. One mother found a heap of bloody panties behind the bidet and when she confronted her daughter, the daughter just screamed "leave me alone!" All of the mothers who told these things were unanimous in
expressing negative surprise: Now that the girls have all sorts of information and do not have to feel shame, these reactions are strange and stupid, they think.

What the mothers do not understand is that the girls are still made to feel shame. What we have now is a tense historical moment, in which the dominant discourse has completely changed to one of "rationality", "openness" etc, but in which many of the old cultural processes that produce feelings of shame are still at work. What we get then is shame that cannot be mercifully concealed. On top of that it has become shameful to feel shame. It can no longer be culturally translated as feminine virtue and becoming modesty. It can only be interpreted as a personal shortcoming, as "not being up-to-date" and not having "overcome old taboos".

What are the processes that still produce shame? Most evidently the sayings and doings of older women. The mothers, aunts, grandmothers, teachers and so on feel shame of the older kind and communicate it to some degree to the younger women. The messages from the mass media are ambivalent and mixed: clinical-minded ads for tampons and condoms appear along with old-fashioned sexist jokes about female anatomy. The great Valencian fiesta, Fallas, has gross representations of female bodies as one of its major themes. Church teachings are being "adapted" but can hardly abandon the basic tenet of "purity". Etcetera.

Obviously all of this is connected to the gender system as a whole. As long as belonging to the gender category "women" has more negative than positive consequences, both materially and symbolically, an event construed as the official entrance to that category can hardly be experienced totally without opposition, or evoke unmixed feelings of pride.

3. Common characteristics
   a) Practicalities

Today, almost all women use factory-made pads. However, when most of the women had their first period, factory made products were not available or they were too expensive. They came into use between 1965 and 1975. What was used before that were rags or towels, usually made of terry cloth. Naturally they had to be washed. This is an important subject for all women who ever used them.

In the homes where menstruation could not be talked about, neither could signs of it be seen. In such homes, the women used all sorts of tricks to conceal the procedures. They locked themselves in the bathroom to wash. They hid the dirty towels rolled up in newspapers, if they could not wash them right away. The greatest problem was how to put them to soak, which was necessary to get the stains out. In some families a corner of the yard was used, and the men of the family knew they were not supposed to go near any bucket in that corner. The clean towels could usually be
hung to dry without shame, but in one extreme family the women strung rope underneath their beds for this purpose.

Usually however, complete concealment was not necessary, only "discretion". The discretion was not conceptualized as a guarding of own privacy as much as a courtesy towards others. Any sign of menstruation offended. A couple of women of "open" convictions told me of how their mothers had reacted when they realized that the daughter did not conceal her menstruation from her own children. The older women felt pity for the children. They should not "have to" know. I suspect similar feelings in those young and "open-minded" women who said they want to inform their daughters about menstruation ahead of time, "but not too early". If menstruation/sexuality/female bodily functions are negative, it is logical to want to spare small children the realization of what is in store.

Almost all girls had to wash their own towels from the very first period and on. This was the most obvious immediate sign of what it meant to "become a woman" - and the girls experienced it as work, i.e. mostly negatively, some also felt revulsion. On the other hand, for many it was also a responsibility, a marker of adult status.

For all the women the pads were a relief, mostly because they saved time. Nobody said anything about the cost of pads. For some women the pads were a great relief, too, because they were more comfortable. And they were better because they were smaller, i.e. showed less.

As a whole the women did not talk very much about the practicalities around menstruation. I interpret this semi-absence as yet another indication that menstruation is not very elaborated culturally and becoming ever less so.

My last question, the "mental experiment" of imagining a world without menstruation, was usually met with laughter and exclamations: "What a relief!" "One hassle less!" Only Nieves said that she thought women might lose something if we did not menstruate. But several women made sure, before they answered, that I really meant only menstruation. They would be glad not to have that, but they underlined that they wanted to retain the capacity to bear children.

In conclusion, the practical aspect of menstruation is that and that only, a question of practicalities. It is not symbolically elaborated, except for the shame that leads to concealment. To hide the smell of menstruation and the contours of the pad was still important to all, even the young women and perhaps most of all to the very young.

b) Religion
Since the Catholic Church has had an undoubtedly strong influence on all aspects of Spanish culture, and not least on gender matters, I included a question on the religious significance "of all of this". The majority of the women interviewed did not understand
the question. This shows that there is no immediate association between menstruation as such and the teachings of the Church on motherhood and female purity.

When the women asked me to clarify the question, I usually said something about the idea that a woman should be a good mother above all. I did not want to suggest the word purity myself, to see whether the informants would think of it. Hardly anyone did. Those who did said something like, "Oh, you mean all that stuff about women having to be pure and so on?!" usually with a derisive laugh.

It looks, then, as if the cultural watershed has made the official Church language go out of style.

This is consistent with my findings in Valencia, in 1983, and also with my current work in a middle class context in Madrid. In both contexts, many persons have faith and quite a few of these also express their faith observing church duties. But this does not mean that they make any conscious connections between church teachings and their everyday life. We must also remember that according to most surveys, about half of the Spanish population today have at most lukewarm feelings about religion.

c) Expressions

The only aspect of menstruation that has been well elaborated is the vocabulary. The women talked about this with some of the same feelings of cultural distance as they had towards the "taboos", but much less so. For example, the young girls said that the most common word is regla and that is the word they almost always use, "but they also say..." and then followed a list of expressions. Older women sometimes said that they used these expressions more when they were younger and mostly in order to talk about it with their girl friends if there were boys around, but that nowadays they always say regla. Younger girls did not seem to feel a need for euphemisms. They said regla without much shame. Menstruación is not a common name. It is well known but felt by both young and old to be a clinical, professional word.

Most of the expressions have a friendly, intimate and slightly ironic tint. Perhaps they are a kind of female counter-cultural elaboration of female body functions as something not shameful at all, not a hassle after all, something nice and fun and friendly. But in that case it is a counter-cultural elaboration that does not seem to have had any effects at all on other shared ideas, or even to be compatible with them. It could also be that the expressions are part of a general European heritage, but that would not be enough to explain why they are in current use in their present form in a Spanish city. I mention them mainly because they constitute the only aspect of the interview data that does not clearly support my conclusions. But neither does it contradict them. There is just room for improved questions.
E. CONCLUSIONS

Even though "old taboos" have been "overcome" rather efficiently, and even though a very clear cultural watershed occurred in the mid 1970’s, menstruation has not been redefined as something positive. It has been redefined from something negative - shameful, obscure, dangerous - to something more or less neutral, a simple hassle. But it is not positive.

Its one positive meaning, that of change of social status, has been weakened. The phrase "to become a woman" is still widely used. But younger women do not experience it as altogether positive. The relevant entrance into adult status nowadays is rather finishing school and/or getting a job and/or moving away from home. To have one’s first menstruation, then, is to be ushered into a negative phase of life, in which one will have a monthly practical problem to deal with. This is called "to become a woman". To become an adult is something very different.

What is positive in "modern society" is to "become a person", which is automatic for men while women have to fight for it, and that fight entails, in some sense, to learn NOT to be a woman in the ways womanhood used to be defined. The challenge, then, is to redefine womanhood as something positive and redefine personhood as something equally related to male and female lives. A neutralizing of the meaning of menstruation is probably necessary in that process. But the kind of neutralizing that has so far happened is either incomplete or else too unbalanced, too full of contradictions, to work well.

What is happening in Spain is similar to what is happening all over the Western world. It is a chain of events that seems to point towards a more positive view of the female body. For women at least (and I would hope for men, too) this is an easier and more satisfying way to move towards a new gender system than to reject the female body, having women try to be like men. But there is still a long way to go.

The cultural change in Spain is truly deep. The cultural construction of the body, especially its sexual aspects, is centrally important in most societies; therefore it must change when other things change. But it is also psychologically central to individuals; therefore it is painful to change, and so will change only when absolutely necessary. The cultural change in Spain seems to have reached such a depth. It is no longer a matter of just a few more or less rebellious individuals experimenting with their own lives, or a matter of a number of "progressives" subscribing to a new discourse.

The fact that change is really deep can be seen in the discourse around menstruation. It has changed. And this is not just a superficial adaptation to what is considered new, and therefore (in the present cultural logic) presentable in public, e.g. in an interview. The range of possible interpretations of the details shows that the women renegotiated the cultural meanings of menstruation quite freely.
But there was an emphasis on the opposition to shame. The title of this article refers to what many women said in varying ways: "I grew up with closed doors everywhere. I don’t want my children to have that kind of experience. I don’t want them to see the body as something ugly, to be concealed. So I never close the bathroom door."

I interpret such affirmations as a metaphor for a specific wish for more information and less shame. Spanish women have suffered from a negative body image and a negative image of self in general. They have suffered from shame - that Mediterranean concept that places on women the burden of making a very complex conceptualization of sexuality work.

In all gender systems where it is negative to be a woman, women must internalize self-images that make them comply. In the Mediterranean systems, they learn that their bodies are dangerous. Their bodies are very attractive to men, so attractive that they must be concealed to avoid social chaos. Their bodies are also disgusting, so women want to hide them. And this hidden object, the female body, is also culturally central, constantly talked about, tremendously valuable for society. These contradictory ideas - even more contradictory when compared to ideas about male bodies, and even more complexly contradictory when expressed in organized bodies of ideas, such as religion - can only be internalized at a prize. They cannot be allowed to be clearly expressed, lest their contradictions explode.11

All of this is changing, deeply and rapidly. For many Spaniards today, change in itself is a major cultural value. What is old is bad, what is new is better, what is to come should be even better (unless something goes wrong).

In such a situation, for many women the repression of female bodies is no longer legitimate. The burden should be lifted. They may not be able to verbalize this abstractly, but they express it with metaphors about the needed corrections. If doors were closed, they must now be opened. Since some women (and men) react in the opposite direction, trying to safeguard and adapt traditional ideas, we get a polarization. And the logical result is that those women who want to sweep out shame, feel a need to open many more doors than persons in other European cultures, where similar but slower processes are at work.

The battle around cultural change takes place on many fronts in Spain today - but as usually happens in the Mediterranean area, whatever the issue, the female body is the central metaphor. The really deep cultural change around menstruation or any other subject connected to the female body will have happened the day when shame is such a far-fetched idea that non-shame does not have to be emphasized as anti-shame. The cultural change in Spain is deep but not (yet?) that deep.
REFERENCES


There is no room in this article for a good description of the common features of Mediterranean gender systems. Put very simply, the fundamental principles of gender in the Mediterranean area are three: a) Gender is a central organizing principle, on which many other features of social organization are made to depend. b) Two genders are recognized, women and men, and they are conceived to be mutually exclusive and strongly contrasted. c) The two genders are placed in a hierarchy, in which women are sometimes conceived to be superior in some limited ways, sometimes not, but men are considered superior in overall value and therefore accorded all legitimate power, i.e. authority.

Furthermore it is a characteristic of most Mediterranean societies, that sexuality is used as the central metaphor for the whole gender system. Since gender is used as a metaphor for many other things, so is sexuality. Placing sexuality in such a central cultural place makes it difficult, indeed, to see it as pure pleasure. It becomes too important. It is what one desires most and also the most dangerous thing. The result is that it must be surrounded with strong norms, but that those norms will inevitably be broken. The whole set of connected ideas can be seen as a very dangerous game. One way to defuse it is to blame the participants which are seen as powerless - women. Women always do wrong, but by prohibiting the access of women to essential spaces, that wrong is enclosed, prevented from having wide effects. Another way, which also fits well with that other constellation of ideas that sees mind and body as separate, is to blame not the women themselves but their bodies. Female bodies are the locus of sexuality. They are therefore very attractive and very dangerous. They must be hidden, preferably even from the women themselves.


The age distribution was as follows: Below 20: 8. 20-29: 2. 30-39: 13. 40-49: 6. 50-70: 5. Over 70: 2. Eight girls were in school, eleven women over school age had only primary schooling or less (one was illiterate), six women had only had primary schooling or less when young but had later attended adult literacy classes, seven women had secondary schooling and/or some occupational training (e.g. secretary, nurse, grade school teacher), and four women had university level studies, with or without a final degree. These numbers correspond approximately to the proportions in the barrio as a whole. Only fourteen of the women were full time housewives, which would be about 50% of the adult women, whereas the barrio average is over 80%. However, the kinds of occupations the working women had were representative. Eleven of the women were unmarried, including all the school girls. Twentyone were married and four were separated. Noone was divorced and noone was a widow. About half of the women had lived in a
village at the time of their first menstruation, the other half, including all the young girls, had lived in a city. Twentysix were born in the Valencian region, ten in other parts of Spain.

4 The questions were:
- What information did you have beforehand and from whom and how had you obtained it?
- To whom did you turn when it happened?
- What instructions did you receive at that moment?
- Did anyone say anything about not washing your hair, not eating icecream and that kind of things?
- Were there any other restrictions on your activities?
- What did you think it was going to mean for you, for the future?
- How did you feel?
- And how do you feel about it now?
- Do you use pads or tampons or what?
- How have you explained menstruation to your daughters? (alt: how will you explain or how would you if you had any)
- What do you think about the fact that these things are now taught in school?
- Did all of this have any religious significance to you? Does being a woman have any such significance? Or if not religious, perhaps spiritual in general, in some way?
- Do you remember if you felt different after having that first period?
- Now, as the last question, let us make a little mental experiment. Imagine a world where women do not have periods! Everything else is the same, just that women do not menstruate. Do you think that would be better or worse or would it make no difference?

5 These ideas vary according to region, evidently, but Valencia is a city of immigrants from all over Spain. More interesting, for my purposes, than pinning detailed beliefs to exact locations, is the fact that approximately similar ideas are shared by women from all parts of Spain. Furthermore, similar ideas exist in other parts of Europe, not only the Mediterranean parts. Cf e.g. Delaney, Lupton and Toth 1988, Guio Cerezo 1991, Malmberg 1991, Martin 1987, Paige and Paige 1981, Snowden and Christian 1983, Verdier 1988. On some high level of abstraction, these similarities probably indicate some commonality across time and space in European ideas about the female body and/or about pollution. But one must always be on guard against overgeneralizing - the differences in usage of taboos and expressions are probably more important than similarities in wording. Context overrules history. Therefore, also, in a given context, like the city of Valencia in 1990, the similarities in expressed ideas are more important than differences in regional origin.

6 Just like the rest of what the women say, this must be read as precisely what they say, not necessarily objective truth. Interview material tells about what can or should be said in a given cultural context. It may also say something about true circumstances, but this cannot be taken for granted. The amount of sexual information has undoubtedly increased, but health professionals are worried about the signs of lack of information. The high rates of abortion, for example, can be attributed to the contradictory situation created by an ideology of sexual liberation in combination with lack of access to information about sexuality in general and contraceptives in particular. Cf e.g. several articles in Bernis et al 1991.

7 Few use tampons. The older ones cannot usually explain why, they just say they feel "doubts" (reparos) about it. One middle-aged perceptive woman said she thought that it was "too much like penetration" to be palatable to women of her own age or older. Somewhat younger women sometimes admitted that they felt unsure of the "techniques", i.e. they felt ignorant, and/or ashamed to ask anyone, and/or unsure of their own anatomy. I was regaled with a few stories of failed attempts, all told with lots of laughter as hilarious stories of the meeting of ignorance and valiant effor.

8 For example: la regla (the period, literally the regulation); el cuerpo (the body); la amiga (the /girl/friend); la amiga roja (the red /girl/friend); mi amigo (my /boy/friend); el cuento (the count, or the story, the invention); it is more logical if the first meaning is the original one, but several informants associated to the second one; mi tía (my aunt); mi tio (my uncle); el periodo (the period); menstruación (menstruation); mi tío Paco (uncle Paco); mi tío/tía de América (my uncle/aunt from America); estar así (to be in that way); la (it); estar mala (to be ill); estar indispuesta (to be unwell, indisposed) (this expression was felt to be old-fashioned and more appropriate for other social classes); bandera roja (red flag); mi prima (my /female/cousin); la María (Mary); el mes de María (the month of Mary); la mariana (the Mary-ish, the thing that belongs to Mary); la catarata (the waterfall), Niagara (these two expressions were only mentioned by young girls, who explained that they were used to signify unusually strong flow); chof (just a sound, also mentioned only by young girls); la alegría de la casa (the joy of the house) (only mentioned by one informant who explained that the period for her meant joy because it meant that she had not become pregnant that month).
They are, in fact, similar to expressions in other Western countries with different gender systems and different ideas about menstruation. Cf note 5.

Cf Thurén 1988 and most of Spanish feminist writing from the last fifteen years. "Person" is a strongly valued albeit abstract symbol.

A caveat: I have used a teleological language here. This is a stylistic device in order to abbreviate. Please note that I do not subscribe to a functionalist interpretation of gender systems - as I hope will be clear from the rest of my analysis.