

Rituals of the Full Moon

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Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture by Chris Knight. Yale, 581 pp, £40.00, October 1991, ISBN 0 300 04911 0

Most people, including most social anthropologists, have only a hazy idea about the origins of human culture. For decades the whole treacherous territory has been avoided, and anthropology has come to construct itself in such a way that the subject is indeed unknowable. But here is a book which calls discretion's bluff. Chris Knight has come up with a new and startling theory: human culture originated with a sex strike by female primates, a revolutionary act of collective solidarity which transformed 'females' into women. Culture came into being, Knight says, when evolving human females decided to control their own sexuality, allowing access only to males who provided them and their offspring with meat from the hunt. The ban on sex coincided with menstruation, women's infertile period, which they now all synchronised with one another. Culture was, in effect, the social ritualisation of the rules consequent on the sex strike. Males had to forgo the consumption of their own kills and feed them to their sexual partners. Females had to prevent the advances of non-hunter males, including their own adolescent sons. Thus appeared the first taboo, against eating meat killed by oneself, and the first human social group, the matrilineal coalition or clan.

Weird, you may well think. However, do not dismiss these ideas before you hear a bit more. This theory is designed to cock a snook at every premise which sleeps undisturbed in our current assumptions, and we should at least start to wonder why we find it so strange. For a start, it has always been presumed that culture was invented by males. The last great anthropological theory on the subject, that of Lévi-Strauss, definitely took this line. In the pre-cultural state, males took sexual partners anywhere, especially in their own group, so that boundaries between categories such as 'wife', 'sister' or 'daughter' were unmarked. The advent of culture occurred when men rejected this sexual free-for-all. One group of males gave its females to a second, trusting in reciprocity, and it was in this discovery of generosity – for a woman was the most precious of all gifts – that culture was born. Human culture was thus a matter of creating social relationships between groups of men. Unlike almost all anthropologists of his generation, Lévi-Strauss rejected the idea that the basic unit of human society was the nuclear family consisting of husband, wife and children. For him, the 'atom of kinship' had to include the wife's brother, who had given her away. It was the incest taboo which marked this act of generosity, ensuring that group after group of males would seek partners outside its own bounds, forming extended chains of social relationships.

While this theory remains respectably gathering a film of dust, neglected perhaps because of the unfashionableness of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism in general, a different type of theory has gained a far more potent influence on the public imagination. This is sociobiology, with its stark doctrines of genetic advantage. The name of the game is to have one's genes survive through the generations. The activity of Dawkins's 'selfish gene' does not stop with nature, but stalks boldly into culture, with differing results for men and women. In earlier days, we had all been happy to leave genetics to 'nature', following the train of thought exemplified by Kroeber's famous case of ants versus children. If you take two ant eggs and raise them in complete isolation they will nonetheless recreate of their own accord an entire ant social system. However, if you take two human babies and bring them up without any learning from other humans they will produce 'only a troop of mutes, without arts, knowledge, fire, without order or religion'. Heredity, Kroeber concluded, preserves all the ant ever had from generation to generation, but it does not and cannot maintain civilisation, which is the one specifically human thing. Culture is not only not reducible to biology, but, as anthropology was only too happy to conclude, free of it. But sociobiology has sliced through this complacency. Now the public receives a more alarming set of assumptions from a series of bestsellers: male competitiveness and ruthlessness in society is natural, rooted in the genetic strategy of inseminating as many females as

possible, while a female's genetic fitness is far more passive, concerned with such things as food and shelter for existing offspring. As Knight and before him Haraway have observed, many feminist challenges to this picture have been somehow in the same mould. Concerned to argue that the female primate is not simply quietly nurturant, they picture her as like the male, another autonomous active plotter of her own aggressive strategies. Knight accuses social anthropology of allowing this 'dire situation' to come about. By turning its back on evolutionary debate, engaging in a self-absorbed analysis of 'cultures' which hovers pleasantly above the gene-bound battlefield, anthropology has allowed sociobiology to triumph. 'The wider public has turned, for lack of an alternative, to ... people who (to exaggerate only slightly) know nothing about culture at all.'

Chris Knight has a political agenda, and he is not going to hide it from us. He is a good Marxist ('old-fashioned' as some readers are bound to conclude), believing in class struggle, trade-union activism, workers' solidarity, and most of all in Engels's version of primitive communism and the early matriarchate. Sociobiology, he says briskly, 'is very right-wing, but good for us'. He reminds us that the heyday of sociobiology in the 1980s coincided with the rise of the New Right, and that its language resorts to economic and military metaphors: genetic 'arms races', 'cost-benefit calculations', 'payoffs' and so on. Nevertheless, sociobiology is liberating because it is like a corrosive acid which eats away at our illusions, at all unexamined premises lingering from a previous age, about 'hordes', 'communities' or 'mother-child dyads'. In other words, it questions how natural it is for humans to co-operate with one another at all. Sociobiology does not deny altruism in nature, but it insists that it is a challenge to our understanding; it requires explaining.

Blood Relations is a radically alternative view on this very point: the crucial initial cooperation of our species was that of females, who indeed were 'active', as the feminist sociobiologists had pointed out, but not in a male kind of way. Instead, women took charge of the feminine in themselves and forced men to conform to its rhythms. Knight describes almost mystically how he conceived his theory as a graduate student, gradually absorbing or rejecting other people's ideas through years of reading. The result is an exhilaratingly original edifice of astonishing range. One early influence was Dawkins's notion of a novel form of evolution proper to humans. This was based on the immortality, not of genes, but of culture-constituting instructions, 'memes'. Surviving over generations and rapidly evolving, memes exist over and above the genetic links of the people who transmit them. Myth and ritual are examples of this. It is in these forms that Knight discovers links between lunar periodicity, menstruation, blood, cooking, the image of the snake and the regulation of sound, which persist despite the later imposition of patriarchal marriage and masculinist ritual.

What is the scientific basis for Knight's theory? Most pertinent was his discovery of Turke's research on the evolution of human female reproductivity. Even Knight says that his own intuition came first: 'I had long felt that there was something explicitly competitive about the manner in which female chimpanzees and many other primates display their brightly coloured, swollen genitals at or around the time of ovulation. By the same token, my guess had been that the human condition of ovulation concealment and absence of sexual swellings had evolved in the context of a less behaviourally competitive sexual-political dynamic. To be more precise: I had long felt that inter-female *gender-solidarity* had had something to do with the unusual and characteristic features which the human female showed.'

Turke reasoned as follows: in the 'one dominant male with a harem of females' scenario it was obvious that the females' ovulation would have to be out of cycle in order for them to be impregnated in turn. But if the females rejected the 'alpha male' system so they could each have their own male (even if this was just the weedier, undominant males remaining unmated), it would then be logical for them all to synchronise their ovulatory cycles. This would at the same time strike a blow at the dominant male system and lessen direct sexual competition among themselves. Selection pressures would act to favour the females who resisted pressures to separate them from potentially useful males, even if these males were not inclined towards fighting and dominance. In these circumstances it would be in the females' interest to conceal ovulation and to extend their sexual receptivity throughout the cycle – which is what human females do.

Knight makes no bones about the fact that he wanted his theory to vindicate Engels's vision of primitive communism and the early matriarchate. Now this is a somewhat dicey proposition. Anthropologists have found little evidence that existing matrilineal societies conform to the

matriarchate. Although descent is reckoned through women, females are certainly not the dominant decision-makers in these societies. Nor is it widely accepted that existing patrilineal societies hide earlier matrilineal ones in their past. However, no one actually knows for sure what the earliest human societies were like, and Knight may be right that if mid-20th-century anthropology had not been so anti-evolutionary it might have been less dismissive of the idea of the early matriarchate. But right at the beginning of his book he takes a self-protective (and fashionable) sidestep, by saying that his theory is his myth, just as Engels's theory was his myth. We may well wonder, why use the word 'myth' if not to imply: 'Do not expect all this to be true'? However, this is not quite the line Knight takes. He argues that the test of a good myth is for it to be widely and enduringly believed, and for this to happen it must be part of a common discourse.

In the game of scientific discourse, despite all the contestants' many disagreements and conflicts, the players have no choice but to adhere, for the duration of particular debates and contests, to at least some agreed ground rules. The rules that matter are those for disputing what kinds of observation are to count as data. 'The facts' themselves will never be stably agreed upon or there would be no game. But the procedures for constructing and verifying them must be shared as common currency at least up to a point ... I write under such constraints. I fully expect my narrative to be vigorously contested.

So Knight sort of steps back into the critical arena. His book alternates the 'this is a politically-inspired myth' idea with chapters devoted to evidence and proof. The former wins out at the end though, with some passages so buoyant that one feels the guy-ropes are only just tying them down.

I would like to acknowledge the bold imagination and range shown in this book. Few reviewers, and certainly not this one, would be capable of judging all the arguments and facts from many disciplines which are assembled as evidence. But there are some parts of the theory which seem worrying on purely logical grounds. Why, for example, should it not be in the female's interest to strike-break – to keep a weedy husband by her side but secretly mate with the powerful 'alpha male', all the time concealing the true fatherhood of her offspring? Life suggests another unfortunate possibility. Would a female sex-strike actually overturn the dominance of the lord of the harem? It is not inconceivable that some fertile brute would cope perfectly well with quite a large number of females, even if they did synchronise their menstrual cycles. Though distant from humans, there is the example of lions. In a pride of lions the females all come into oestrus together. This happens, among other occasions, when one dominant male has just taken over the pride, driving off his rival. He then inseminates all the females in one short period. Ethologists have suggested that this pattern is to the females' advantage: their offspring are given a better chance of survival when they venture into the wild by the fact that they are a cohort (of half-siblings). Even if, as Knight argues, there are many primate cases in which the single male is unable to prevent other males from entering the group if females come into cycle together, the argument is not watertight as regards early humans. Since women in general do not have synchronised menstrual cycles, and hunters in fact often eat game killed by themselves, a large part of the book is taken up with broken taboos, rules which are not observed, hidden mythic meanings and suppressed harmonies. All this indirectness means that Knight's evidence is often susceptible to quite different interpretations.

But I find this book stimulating, positive and brave. True, the particular version of feminism assumed here is unsubtle, and the 'class struggle' rhetoric seems as arrogant as the masculinist metaphors of the New Right which it aims to supersede. But heavy instruments are perhaps required, and it might be said that it is Knight's conviction that enables him to make his unique exploration from biology through archaeology to anthropology. Human cultures *are* pervaded with symbolic and mysterious meanings, and feminine images and rhythms have been repressed through most of history. When they surface, anthropologists are often at a loss, because these things seem to have so little purchase on the functioning of society around them. No one these days is satisfied with the idea that the awesome compilation of Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* is simply a matter of structured thinking. It was time that someone looked again at what is in these myths, and Knight's resurrection of the collaborative and female in culture allows him to do this. He suggests a new way to think about a host of enigmas, from bloody snake images to rituals of the full moon, and for this daring we should certainly be grateful.

Letters

In her generous review of my *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture* ([LRB, 27 February](#)), Caroline Humphrey commends me for the ‘daring’ of my argument that women created culture. Her worries focus less on my data than my logic. In a lion pride, she objects, the numerous females synchronise their oestrus periods yet – in apparent contradiction of my theory – get themselves impregnated by a single dominant male. I restrict my response to two points. Unlike evolving human females, lionesses require sperm from males but little else, being physiologically well-equipped to do their own hunting for themselves. Correspondingly, in permitting impregnation a lioness insists on little sexual *time* from her consort, releasing him to move from one female to the next in quick succession. Reflecting this, lionesses lack the continuous sexual receptivity, oestrus-concealment and other time-consuming features so intriguingly characteristic of human female reproductive physiology and sexuality. My book argues that human female ovulatory synchrony just wouldn’t have worked without these additional features, which emerged all together as a package.

An incoming lion in the situation Humphrey describes stimulates the synchronised receptivity of his newly-monopolised females by killing their existing cubs (carriers of the genes of his defeated rival). Once these ‘unwanted’ cubs are dead, the mothers stop lactating and in consequence come jointly back into heat. Had your reviewer mentioned this detail, I doubt whether her logic would have seemed more compelling than mine. Lion sexual politics are fascinating, but no school of palaeoanthropology, to my knowledge, holds that evolving *human* females could have tolerated such a wastage of pregnancies and maternal energies in the interests of ‘paternal certainty’.

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