

From Little Girl to Young Woman: The Menarche Ceremony in Fiji

Marijke Sniekers

Abstract

This article examines female gender identity in Fiji. It focuses on the menarche ceremony in Fijian women's lives. The menarche ceremony is celebrated to acknowledge a little girl's transition into a young woman. During the ceremony perceptions of female gender identity are expressed explicitly, whereas in daily life a girl implicitly and gradually learns how to become a woman. The study explains how these perceptions are expressed, examines what these expressions are and looks at the impact the ceremony has on a girl's life.

Introduction

This article explores people's ideas and expressions about how a girl becomes a woman, by looking at changes in women's lives. The aim of this research was to gain knowledge of Fijian female gender identity through studying the menarche ceremony. This study reflects on the menarche ceremony in Fijian women's lives. It looks at how this ceremony shapes female gender identity and how it impacts on Fijian women's daily lives.

The research approach taken is participant observation and recognizing informants and researcher as conversation partners.¹ The method

¹ This article is based on data collected during six months of anthropological fieldwork in 1999 and 2000 among Fijian woman in Suva and Nausori and in villages in the urban areas around these places. One family kindly offered their place as a home, which provided my entrance into the community. The extended family was living in different places in and around Suva and Nausori. Originally from Vanua Levu, many of them now lived on Viti Levu. One female family member and key person in the research moved from one relative's home to another and I accompanied her. Most time was spent in Suva, Wainibuku, Samabula

of participant observation is not a clear, structured and fixed research method. It varies from participating to observing and all grades in between. It is flexible and dependent on different contexts. According to Wester (1995: 91) participant observation is a research strategy which makes it possible through intensive and variable contact with the people involved to gain insight in the ways in which those people shape their environment. Interviews are conversations in which the realities of the narrated stories are as important as the reality that the two conversation partners share. Notermans (1999: 55) says that the people she is studying are not objective informants, who contribute passively to the research. To the contrary, they shape the conversation and the research process. According to Notermans, anthropological fieldwork does not mean that the researcher collects objective knowledge, but that the researcher searches for knowledge together with the people involved in the research, to bring meaning for discussions and constructive insights (1999: 57). Notermans connects the concept of narrative reality² (Van de Port, 1994 cited in Notermans, 1999: 57) to the concept of the ethnographic present (Hastrup, 1995 cited in Notermans, 1999: 57). In this way she can explain that 'the stories she presents in her study [on polygyny] cannot be seen separately from the fieldwork: the place and time that she has shared with the women' (Notermans, 1999: 58). She uses the combination of these concepts to indicate that notions [like polygyny] cannot be summarized in one coherent text. The women give each a different meaning to the notions [of polygyny]. By putting their stories and conversations in a central position in her fieldwork, she can involve the individual women prominently in the research (Notermans, 1999: 58).

This study captures individual people's experiences and perceptions, their narrative reality, considering the time, place and relationship between the conversation partners in the ethnographic present. Every person reacts differently and gives different responses at a particular time and place. The realities of these people's stories are important and cannot be

and Laqere, with field trips and family visits to Nabukaluka, Korovou, Lami, Coloisuva and Vunisei. Snowball sampling was the means of finding people to speak to. My key research partner was the first source of information. Through her, contact was made with her relatives and friends who then referred me to their relatives and friends. The people involved in this research were from various clans in different areas with different statuses and education levels. In common was that they all had experienced or had knowledge of the menarche ceremony.

² 'Narrative reality' is my translation of the Dutch concept '*verhaalde werkelijkheid*'.

seen separately from the reality in which they told the stories. These individuals have a central place in this study. Because they too have shaped the research, they too have to speak in this article. The people telling about their experiences were showing the way. The conversations can be seen as semi-structured because certain topics and questions guided them. Some conversations were planned and held in a formal way of two people purposefully involved in a dialogue to talk about the menarche ceremony and other topics. Most conversation settings were in people's own environments. Most conversations were unplanned and arose during preparing food, doing laundry or when having a cup of tea or *yaqona* (drink made of the *kava* or pepper plant). Other good moments to informally and in an unstructured way discuss the menarche ceremony were when preparing for other ceremonies such as a wedding, funeral and 100 day ceremony, birth or circumcision feast and four day ceremonies or during and after these ritual gatherings.

The research involves concepts of rite of passage and female gender identity. The rite of passage is discussed in light of Van Gennep's (1960: 11) notions on the three different stages of separation, transition and incorporation through which a girl moves when experiencing the menarche ceremony. To understand female gender identity, gender has to be clarified first. Gender is not a simple concept. It includes the social, cultural and psychological construction of masculinity and femininity (Jansen, 1987: 46). Gender describes what it is to be a woman or a man. It refers to characteristics that are perceived feminine or masculine. It results from the ideas and beliefs about femininity and masculinity, for instance, about what is acceptable behaviour for women and for men. Concepts of gender are dynamic and do not have strict, invariable definitions or meanings because they are learned. The ideas and beliefs relating to gender can and do change. They differ between cultures and within cultures. Gender also varies in different historical, political, religious and economical contexts. The concept of gender is different from the concept of sex, though both determine someone as a woman or a man. Sex refers to the essentially fixed biological characteristics a person is born with such as the reproductive organs.

A person's identity is formed in relation to other people and by other people. Identity distinguishes between 'I' and 'other', between 'us' and 'them'. Without the other there would not be an I (Eriksen, 1993; Jenkins, 1996; Mach, 1993). The existence of another party is necessary in forming one's identity. The other can be a group of people, but also another individual to which someone relates. Identity needs opposition.

People need to be part of a group or part of the other, as much as they need to be distinct from the group or in contrast with the other. Someone's identity is individually as well as collectively shaped. People themselves determine and develop who they are, but they are also influenced from outside, by different people, circumstances or environments. Identity is variable and not absolute. It develops through interaction with others. In various contexts people will express different identities. A woman can show her identity of a mother towards her child and that of a wife towards her husband. Her identity will change over time, because of experiences she will have or situations that will change. She can also express to her husband that she is a mother. What determines her as a mother are not only her own ideas of caring for her children but also the perceptions of other people in her community. This interaction of different perceptions is important in the development of people's gender identities. 'Gender is only the most obvious aspect of individual identity which is constructed in interaction between others' (Jenkins, 1996: 58).

Gender identity is constructed of characteristics that people perceive they have themselves and characteristics that people perceive others to have. These attributes are related to the gender people identify with or to the gender others ascribe to them. Expressions of individual femininity and masculinity are compared to how other people express their gender. How people are seen as women or men is determined by themselves and the people they relate to and comparing themselves with. Female gender identity consists of ideas about femininity and beliefs and practices related to women. These are contrasted with ideas, beliefs and practices about men and masculinity. 'The symbolic categories woman and man, and the difference inscribed within and between them, have something to do with the representations and self-representations and day-to-day practices of individual women and men' (Moore, 1994: 51). This article looks at how female gender identity is expressed by the girls who experienced the menarche ceremony and also by other women involved in this ceremony. It explains what the category of woman means for the girls and women involved and the impact of the ceremony in their daily life.

Menarche

Discovering their first menstruation, their menarche, has been a big surprise for each conversation partner. Some of them did not know that they would ever menstruate, know what it was or what happened. Even for the ones who did know what menstruation was, it was still a big surprise when they actually experienced their first menstruation. They did not expect it to happen when it did. At first they forgot all about what

others had ever told them about menstruation. All kinds of thoughts about being wounded or pregnant ran through their head, as the following women describe.

J: 'I was fifteen years old when I found out. I cried. I thought I got hurt somewhere or fell. Very few girls know about it. Parents, they don't tell them. That was before. Now everything is open. They tell their daughters [...] It used to be very hard. If they don't tell in the house then they tell in school. But I think it's better to hear from our own mother, from home.'

K: 'I was scared. I had it when I was in school. And I didn't know about it until my teacher told me.'

MS: 'Your mother didn't tell you before?'

K: 'No, 'cause I was in school. And I had a stain. And I was pretty frightened. Terrified.'

MS: 'So what did you do?'

K: 'I was crying. I thought I was having a baby or something.'

Later, when they recovered from the initial shock, the disaster did not seem to be as bad as they initially thought. They started remembering what had been told to them by their mother or teacher. One woman explained she later remembered that her mother had told her about menstruation, but because she was so afraid she forgot it all. When the big scare was over, she could recall the things her mother had explained her.

Of the girls who knew they had their first menstrual period, many were afraid to tell their mothers or other female relatives like their aunts. Even though they did not tell them, their mothers would find out. The girls tried to hide it with excuses, but that did not work. The mother usually discovered what had happened, if for example she saw that her daughter was not feeling well or if she found her daughter's blood stained clothes. Or the mother found out if the person she did share her experience with had told the girl's mother. This shows in some accounts of women about this topic.

M: 'The first time I had it that was when I was eh in class six. And I was I think eleven years of age. And then first of all I was hiding it, like, I didn't want everybody to know it.'

MS: 'You didn't.'

M: 'And before that, I went to the bathroom, 'cause I was feeling very uneasy. [...] So my mother was saying, "what's wrong?" And then I said "no" I think. And then I started asking questions, eh "what do you do when your menstruation cycle starts to flow?" Because I said that, "why are you asking that question?" my mother said. "No, it was for

my health science.” [I said] But you know, I was really hiding it.’

E: ‘When I had my period, she [mother] didn’t know about it until after... I got sick. Didn’t want to eat, kept on vomiting. She saw the pimples on my face. “You got your menstruation?” She said.’

MS: ‘She saw?’

E: ‘She asked, yeah she saw on my face. “No!” I said, “Who told you? You mad?” You know, it was really uncomfortable. It was like something bad has happened to me. [...] I was kind of embarrassed about it.’

S: ‘I was like... ashamed’

MS: ‘You were at school?’

S: ‘Yeah. I was at school, actually. And then the first person I told was my auntie. My mother’s youngest sister. [...] And she like, I told her as a secret and then she told my mother.’

Two women had not told their mother or other relatives. By the time of the conversations they thought that their mothers would have figured out that it had happened, since they both had given birth to children. These women did not pay special attention to their first menstruation. One woman did celebrate her daughter’s menarche whereas the other one did not. The latter did not consider it important and did not feel like she had missed something in her life. Her parents had never asked her about her menarche or brought attention to menstruation in another way.

MS: ‘Do you know why your parents didn’t do that for you?’

M: ‘Probably because I was away for school. I was at boarding school. [...] And when I was at home I didn’t tell them. And nobody bothered to ask. All they know is that I completed form four and go from form four to form five. Oh, she’s a grown up girl and that’s all. [...] It was just a part of life. [...] We don’t miss it. Like some people do miss that because they seen it done. Like it’s a normal thing for them to have done it for them.’

S: ‘With me it just came. I knew about it. The senior girls at school told me about it. I was at boarding school at the time. I didn’t tell anyone at home.’

One conversation partner did not tell her daughter anything about menstruation. At school the daughter had sexual health lessons in which the teacher explained about the human body, what happens in puberty and about the changes in the body. Teachers at school also talked to girls about sex, pregnancy and having boyfriends. The girl was happy with these lessons. She was very disappointed in her mother because her mother had not told her anything. At the time of the conversation she

could understand it because her mother was raised in a conservative way, she said. But she still thought that a mother should tell her daughter openly about these things.

Menarche is the first time when a girl consciously experiences becoming a woman. She is aware of her femininity once she understands that she is menstruating, which happens to women and not to men, and that she is not bleeding because of an injury that can happen to either women or men. She realises that this 'thing of bleeding', as one woman called it, is not happening to her only. She knows that it happens to all women. Some women felt special because they personally experienced it and others felt like they finally belonged to the other women in her family. The contrast between the girl and her girlfriends who have not yet had their first period and between the girl and men in her environment has become bigger. The bond between the girl and the women in her community has grown stronger. The image of who the other is has changed which has made changes to her gender identity and image of herself.

The first menstruation is the only time when menstruation is marked by a ceremony in Fiji. All other menstruations do not get this special attention. People do not discuss menstruation openly. There are some women however who do talk about it. One woman liked to challenge her mother by bringing up the subject of menstruation during a family dinner. She was an exception to most women who felt it was a too sensitive subject to discuss.

A: 'It's a very difficult subject, very sensitive. Sex and all that. Fijian people don't talk about it, not even the women. [...] It's not like Fiji is conservative. It's not. It does happen. But people don't talk about it openly, especially in the family. [...] At home it is mostly the mother's responsibility. They don't tell the girl but let it happen for the first time. Let you experience for yourself. It's like sex education. It's not discussed at home.'

Several women raised the conversation topics of secrecy and prudence surrounding menstruation. One talk turned to the various ways of how women avoid to show that they are menstruating. This led to laughter among all conversation partners about ways in which women try to hide their menstrual period. In addition to indicating fun, laughing is also a way of hiding insecurity or fear. Though women did talk about the topic of menstruation, they were reluctant sometimes. They were hesitant in pronouncing words like 'menstruation'. They said words like 'you know' or they fell silent for a short moment. Shame and fear can be reasons why people do not discuss menstruation and related topics like sexuality.

These reasons are related to the notions of self and other. Women said they felt ashamed to themselves or to others. They were afraid that people might see that they were menstruating. Menstruation is something women are usually personally not afraid of after the discovery of their first period. They are afraid however of what other people might think if those others know they are menstruating.

Another reason people are not talking about it, someone mentioned, is because of a taboo connected to menstruation and blood and the uncleanliness of it. This taboo does not allow people to talk about it more freely, which is something she regrets. She thinks that people should be able to openly discuss menstruation and sexuality. It is especially important for parents to talk to their children and even more for mothers to talk to their daughters. If people are more open about it, young children will know better what happens in their bodies during puberty.

T: 'I think people know about it. I think mothers know about it and men know about it. I think just that... the taboo is something that is attached to it yeah, [...] sort of the impurity that involves with you know, with menstruation and blood and the... the discussion that comes with it. That enables people not to discuss it openly.'

There is not much talk and not much in writing about menstruation and the menarche ceremony. One woman reasoned that it was so because menstruation and the menarche ceremony are not important to women. According to her it is not related to a taboo, pollution, fear or shame. It is because women themselves think it is not important. And men do not regard it as important that women have this special ceremony, because, she said, women are inferior to men.

A: 'There's not much written about it. Probably because we don't regard menstruation as an important step towards becoming a woman. It used to be though, and they did write about the tattooing. But not menstruation in particular. [...] It's no big deal for women. Women are inferior. They used to be and still are. Their rituals aren't as important as men's. That's why they [men] still have circumcision.'

Celebrating menarche or not?

Many special events in the life of a Fijian woman, like a childbirth or a marriage, are marked with a ceremony. Of these ceremonies the menarche ceremony is one that people do not often celebrate anymore. Not many people are celebrating this ceremony but the ones who do, attach great value to it for various reasons. To them traditions are important if people want to live the Fijian way of life. Not everybody does celebrate

it, but more people should, at least this is what one woman said, to keep the tradition alive. M stated: 'Any Fijian should know what this first menstruation ceremony is, what was their experience like and that of their friends.' Most women said that the menarche ceremony would only be celebrated for a first-born girl in a family. But other women believed that the ceremony would be celebrated also for a girl, who has an older brother or sister. It depends on the persons involved and the circumstances the family is in.

According to most conversation partners there are different reasons for a family not to mark the first menstruation of a girl in their family with a ceremony. Women explain some of the reasons:

A: 'It's important, but not like everybody has to know about it. It's mad to let everybody know. I was feeling bad and then my aunts and mother came and asked how I was feeling. I did not want a feast. I felt bad, that's why. I didn't want everybody to know. Not in that way it's important. You don't have to make a big deal of it. Only for family like your parents and your brothers and sisters. Not all the families in the village have to know that you have it.'

N: 'I had bad luck when I had my first menstruation. I was with my sister. I was not in the village with my mum. I had bad luck because I was the youngest of five sisters. I did not have a big ceremony with mats. They only prepared food for me.'

J: 'Now it's only when people can afford. Not like they did before. Not all of us but it should be all of us. But not all, some can't do it. They have no mats, no food, no money.'

I: 'They don't do it in the west. I'm from the west and I never heard of it done. Not in my family, not in my village. Only in Bau, a lot of chiefly people still living there. Or in the Lau group.'

Not everybody in Fiji is familiar with the custom of the menarche ceremony. The ceremony is celebrated differently throughout the country. In urban areas people do not commemorate the menarche with this traditional ceremony as frequently as in rural areas. People expressed that Fiji is westernizing. L stated: 'Fijian families are getting more westernized now. [...] The Fijian traditional custom is getting, it's getting, like, disintegrated. It's breaking down.' Economic pressures have also affected the ability of families to host ceremonies. With insufficient money, no feast can take place. Other people consider this event not important enough to celebrate with the whole family. It is then a memorable occasion but only for the girl herself and maybe for her nuclear family. Some people feel that it is something that every girl has to go through, which makes it un-

necessary to call special attention to. Others think it is a very memorable time for a girl that does call for special attention.

From Little Girl to Young Woman

In Fiji the menarche ceremony is a rite of passage as Van Gennep (1960: 11) calls it, in which the girl becomes a woman in three symbolic phases: separation, transition and incorporation. The menarche ceremony can be seen as a rite of passage because the first menstruation is marked with a ceremony that indicates that the girl has become a woman. The girl thus transforms into a young woman. People shared their opinions about this change.

T: 'It marks the beginning of being an adult. [...] You're no longer a child. So that phase of your life being a child is, the end of that childhood period is, now what do you call, marked with that ceremony. Doing that ceremony means that you are now entering into adulthood life and there are certain aspects of life that a girl needs to know.'

A: 'She's not a young girl anymore but she is a woman now. They respect her, respect 'cause she is growing up. [...] They separate the small from the old. We know now that she's going to be a woman.'

S: 'It's a special event. The girl reached the stages from childhood to puberty. Now she knows she is no longer a small girl anymore, but a young woman.'

A: 'To let people know that she has reached maturity.'

L: 'It's just something like, say that you reach puberty... womanhood.'

The phase of separation starts when the girl discovers blood. Her first reaction will be fear and shock, because she does not immediately know what is happening. She then realises that it is not because she is wounded. She somehow finds out that it is menstrual blood. She tells her mother about her discovery of blood and thus steps over the imaginary threshold to another phase in life. If she does not tell her mother, then her mother will find out in another way by hearing it from other female relatives or friends the girl has confided in. By telling someone, she leaves behind her identity as a little girl, acknowledging that she has moved to another stage in life to become an adult. Usually the girl's mother is the person who tells the girl's father about their daughter's first menstrual period. If the parents, usually in accordance with the girl, decide to mark the occasion with a ceremony, the father will inform all relatives formally. If the girl is from a chiefly family then the father also informs people outside the extended family. He also invites people from other villages or *mataqali*

(clan), who are part of the same chiefdom, to celebrate with them.

S: 'Like they had this meeting. My mother and father, with the relatives. Like all the relatives have to come together and bring this food.'

M: 'Some of them only attend the feast. And some of them during those four days, they come to visit the girl. And everybody who comes they take a bundle of fish or a bundle of *dalo* (taro) or *tapa* (bark cloth, usually called *masi* in Fiji) or mats.'

All relatives and visitors acknowledge her new gender identity by welcoming her in their group as another person than she was before. She is now a young woman and as such she is part of their community.

Staying inside

During four days the girl has to stay at home and more specifically inside the house. The imaginary threshold she passed will become a real threshold by stepping inside the house. She will stay in the house for four days. Inside she is no longer a little girl but not yet a young woman. She is, like Turner (1964: 95) said, betwixt and between. She is not little anymore but she is not adult yet. She has to develop a new identity as a young adult woman. In this phase of transition she is accompanied by the group of adult women from her family. These are usually her mother, grandmothers, aunts and if she is a chiefly girl also her cousins. They tell her family histories, myths and stories. These women also inform her about what is happening during this ceremony. They will tell her how her life will be from now on. They teach her about menstruation and about every woman menstruating every month. They say that she does not have to be afraid of it. The women advise the girl how to deal with it and they explain about the necessary hygiene. They warn her to be careful with boys and not to get involved with them sexually, because now she is a woman able to conceive and bear children. The women want her to be a virgin until she marries. These expressions of female gender identity are things the girl has to know for her future life to become a woman and understand the meaning of her new identity as young woman.

M: 'And I said, look now, you [daughter] sit down and I tell you all about it. And her aunt was telling her about it, and her *bu* (grandmother). [...]The mother or the grandma will tell the girl what to expect. They will prepare her for womanhood. For motherhood. It's the responsibility of the mother to tell her daughter what she is supposed to do.'

M: 'My mum was telling me a lot about it, getting, you know, getting boyfriends, and I have to be careful. That's what I've learned from it.'

[...] There's another thing, there's another important thing is virgin. When like, say, when I myself keep myself from getting, I mean having say sex with my partner.'

L: 'When a girl starts growing up, she can't go out anymore. She never goes out. The parents, they keep the young. The never let her get a boyfriend until she marries.'

T: 'You know she was like a queen. You know, she was treated very highly for the four nights that she was... And she had to be fed, you know, the food has to be brought into her room, and at that time the relatives from, eh the maternal connections, the grandmother, her aunts are very close to her.'

MS: 'They're close.'

T: 'Not only close to her physically, but they were also sharing with her some oral history. You know, and the importance of looking after oneself, the importance of motherhood, the importance of what happens with first menstruation. And also the boy-girl relationship that will be coming as well you know, the attraction that will be coming as well. Attached to the menstruation and the other issues as well that were discussed with her when she was at fourth night *tabu* time. They also discussed the physical nature and how her body will be changing and how her body will be adapting to the changes that will be coming up in the future.'

S: 'The mother will be telling the girl to clean herself, change the cloth and change the pad and how to use the pads and how often you should change them. [...] The woman will be telling the girl that it is a normal thing to have and that all women have it. [...] The mother will tell her about the changes that will come. She will have to wear a bra one day and about the grooming up, like putting on deodorant.'

Her mother, aunts and grandma tell the girl personal stories of their experiences. They reveal what being a woman means to them and inform her on what being a woman means in society. Both interpretations are interwoven. Women tell stories of their first menstruation and of their marriage. At the same time they warn her to behave and not make mistakes they might have made. One woman admitted she had eloped because she did not want to marry the boy who was arranged to marry her. She told her daughter that she could not elope with a boy and marry him. They inform her on the norms and expectations of society. The girl has to be aware of these things to be acknowledged into the group of the people who are the outsiders in a symbolical and literal sense; the relatives and visitors waiting for her outside the house.

Visitors bring mats and other gifts, like *masi*, food and clothes. The mats that people bring are not only gifts with great ceremonial value but they are also articles of use. For this ceremony female relatives of the girl have made special mats for the girl to sit on, to lie on and to sleep on. The women will pile up many mats and on top of those mats they will spread the best *masi*. All the women said that the girl has to stay on those mats. Some whispered, as if revealing a big secret, that the girl is sometimes allowed to walk around a little or go to the toilet.

The women of her family take care of the girl. They wash her, dress her and feed her. They also see to it that she does not leave the house and stays seated on the piled up bedding. Sometimes they screen the girl from the outside world by *masi* curtains hung up inside the house.

M: 'The girl, they keep her in the house, looking after her.'

S: 'They used to do it for four nights. But not anymore. The girl had to stay inside. They made the bedding, you know. They spread the *tapa* and she lay there for four days.'

J: 'Don't go outside and just lay on top of the bed.'

This separation from the outside world has different reasons according to most conversation partners. First of all they say that the girl has to stay inside for four days, because this period is believed to be the duration of the menstrual bleeding. Furthermore it is a tradition known from their ancestors that they have to follow. Related to this is the number four as a special number. Most women did not elaborate on this much, but in many ceremonies four days mark a special occasion. People celebrate four days after a child is born. After four marital nights the bedding on which the newly weds have slept, is checked for blood. Four days also mark a special time in death rites to mourn for the deceased.

S: 'Those four days is about as long as the menstruation period takes. After four days it finishes. That's why it's four days. It's the first time that she's having this and she can't go outside and play. It might give marks on the clothing. It might show stains.'

M: 'Okay, the taboo is that we are not allowed to go outside right after the beginning of the menstruation cycle until after four nights when it finishes.'

I: 'It is part of our tradition. It is what the ancestors did.'

M: 'Just to keep her private, for the changes.'

MS: 'Those four days, why can't you go out?'

S: 'I don't know. I was only told to stay on the bed except for when my bath and at dinner-time and lunch and breakfast. And that was all.'

Some people said they did not know why the girl has to stay inside for four days. One woman said that the girl has to stay inside because otherwise other people might see bloodstains on her clothes. Blood is dirty and makes stains. So another reason for the girl not to go outside is to be able to wash and clean herself easily, immediately and in private if necessary.

Tabu and Mana

Some women said it is *tabu* for the girl to go outside for four days. The Fijian word *tabu* means taboo. A taboo is something that is not allowed and which a person is forbidden to do, according to the women involved in the conversations. Bradd Shore (1989: 144) distinguishes between an active and a passive meaning of taboo; the active meaning being the potency of some thing, place or person and the passive meaning being forbidden or dangerous to someone. From my conversations with Fijian women it also shows that a taboo is more than only a prohibition. For the women taboo is related to danger, fear and prohibition but it is also related to power and strength.

Tabu is connected with *mana*, a concept commonly used in the Pacific region. Christine Toren sees *mana* as effectiveness (1999: 70); a certain power. The taboo of leaving the house when bleeding is related to *mana*, the sacred and special power of the menstruation blood. This menstruation blood is called *dratabu* or sacred blood (Dari et al, 1994: 95). It has the same name as the blood that flows when boys are circumcised (Dari et al, 1994: 95). Kyakas and Wiessner describe menstrual blood as being powerful (1992: 76). It is not dangerous in itself. It can be harmful to others if not treated properly and disposed of carefully (Kyakas and Wiessner, 1992: 78). It has the power to enhance women's beauty and make them appear more mature and it can also give women power to enhance their husband's success in public events (Kyakas and Wiessner, 1992: 76, 78). This power however is never used to purposefully harm anyone else (Kyakas and Wiessner, 1992: 82).

Shore (1989) refers to Polynesia, whereas Toren (1999) and Kyakas and Wiessner (1992) refer to Melanesia in their work. In many societies, menstruating women, like women who are pregnant or who have just given birth, are regarded as unclean and polluting (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988: 26). The Fijian women conferred little about pollution and uncleanness during menstruation. They did talk about danger and power. The idea of menstrual blood possessing power and taboos including notions of power are beliefs prevalent throughout the Pacific region and certainly existing in Fiji among the women involved in this study.

Three women have spoken about negative associations related to menstruation blood. These are taboos to go fishing during menstruation or to make pots during that time. The women who explained about these taboos had heard about them only. They knew these taboos were not prevalent in the whole country but they could not tell much more about them. One woman knew that people in the north of Viti Levu have a taboo for a menstruating woman and others who have been in contact with her to go fishing.

A: 'It [the taboo] is something they don't know anything about and don't know how to deal with. So it had to be harmful. A menstruating woman is seen as not good. Something that chases all fish away.'

A: 'They think pottery is a traditional God gifted talent and that you have to be clean, that you have to take out all the things that are not clean. With us, it is like that. We believe that it's sacred. [...] It is a sacred thing that they have to follow. Otherwise the pot might burst or crack. It will show somewhere along the line when the taboos are not strictly followed.'

In the first case, the fish will die or nobody will catch a fish. In the second case, the pots will crack. These are omens of bad things that might happen to the menstruating women. The taboos are not meant to prevent women from purposely or unintentionally harming others. It is the opposite. They are to protect the women themselves from bad influences.

Normally, however, most women said that during menstruation they are allowed to cook, go to the gardens or go fishing. They can do the things they do when they are not menstruating. Some mentioned that they would not go to the river to take a bath together with someone else and that others could not bathe in the same water area. They said that menstruating women themselves would bathe in a different place in the river or sea than where other people bathe. They would only do this because others might notice that they were bleeding if they bathed at the same place. Most women said that there were no formal taboos around menstruation in general. No customs or traditional beliefs prevent them from doing things they normally do. Women did express the informal taboo that people do not talk about menstruation because it is regarded women's private business. People can be very secretive about it. Some conversation partners admitted that among close female relatives they do talk about it.

During the menarche ceremony's four days of confinement in the house, there is a customary taboo for the girl to go out of the house. The first menstruation is, therefore, different than the regular menstruation af-

ter menarche. From this taboo to leave the house it follows that the girl is not allowed to take a bath, because bathing usually happens outside of the house. She does wash herself inside the house, using a bucket of water and some cloth. Furthermore it follows she is not allowed to collect firewood, go to the gardens or to visit friends and go to school. All these activities imply going out of the house, which she cannot do.

S: 'She can't do everything she used to do, like collecting firewood or going to the garden, bringing the vegetables.'

M: 'For me, my mum prepared eh boiling water. From the heater, and I wasn't supposed to bath myself with cold water. So she has come to take the water and I clean myself up with warm water. For otherwise, the blood will stop.'

J: 'She can't swim in the river, or sea. She is not allowed to bathe until after the four days.'

Going out of the house is one specific taboo for the girl. It has various implications and reasons connected to the power of the blood. One woman spoke about the outside world where evil spirits live that can harm the girl if she goes out of the house too early, within those four days. The outside world is polluting she said, which is why a girl cannot go outside. This connects to the sacred aspect of menstruation. Menstrual blood is sacred and has power, *mana*. If someone from outside tries to influence this power, something bad can and will happen, the woman said. The girl is unprotected when she goes outside during her first menstruation. She is thus vulnerable to evil influences. The power of her menstrual blood is not a negative power. It is a supernatural power. Most women believed that menstrual flow is a biological phenomenon, but still they found it strange that it would just come and go. In this sense it is supernatural, even though there is a biological explanation. To their daughters women explain what happens in their body. Besides that natural explanation, the women also look for a supernatural explanation. They find that in the *mana* of the menstrual blood. Blood is not polluting in a symbolic way for these women. Blood is polluting in a sense that it is dirty and unclean. Clothes need to be washed because the blood stains them. Blood stained clothes and mats used to be burned or buried, because others should not notice that someone was menstruating. A girl's seclusion is not to separate others from her and her menstrual blood. The seclusion and those few taboos are not ways of oppressing women. According to many conversation partners the seclusion exists because the girl needs to be protected from others, from the outside world because evil spirits and people might harm her. The others to whom she does not yet belong can

be dangerous to her. The women that care for her and guide her are not a part of this outside world. They can relate to her and are not dangerous for the girl. They know what forces are living in the outside world, because they have been in the same situation as the girl. They were menstruating once too for the first time. They were also protected at that time. They were surrounded with sacred *mana*, the power of their own menstrual blood. They possessed this special power themselves. This makes these women more sensitive to what external forces can impact on the girl's life.

T: 'Where one has to prepare oneself psychologically, physically and also the purity that comes with it. I think the *tabu* that one gives a girl not even to go outside. [...] That the outside world is waiting for her and also for her to be prepared to enter into this world. They wouldn't want it to be premature, you know, for the girl to enter into that, you know, out of the blue the first day or the second day. Someone might harm her if she goes out premature.'

The girl has to prepare herself for the outside world. She cannot go outside prematurely. She has her menarche and, therefore, she is susceptible to evil ancestral spirits, bad intentions of men or strange diseases. She is not unclean herself, but can become unclean by contact with bad spirits, intentions or diseases. That is why she has to abide by the taboo of leaving the house. She has to stay inside to prepare herself for her new identity. Outside forces might harm her personally, which will also harm the women as a group who tried to prepare and protect her. Strictly speaking the women surrounding her are outsiders to the girl herself. As they have experienced what the girl has gone through they can be considered insiders as well. This makes outsiders of the rest of the community, especially of the men who do not menstruate and can harm the girl.

Going outside

N: 'The fourth night is also a big moment. We prepared a big feast.'

During the four days people are already preparing for the *vakabogi va* (four days). This is the feast on the fourth evening, for which the men have prepared the *lovo* (earth oven). Before the meal the girl receives more presents of *masi* and mats. All the gifts she receives are called *yau* (wealth). The gift giving is a formal ceremony with the girl in the centre of attention. Later the gifts are distributed among relatives. The girl can keep some presents, like the new clothes, cosmetic products, mats and *masi* on which she has sat and slept. The rest will be distributed among

mainly female relatives. While the women are distributing the *yau*, the men will get the *tanoa* (*yaqona* bowl) and start preparing *yaqona*. They present *yaqona* to honour the girl because her menstrual cycle has started. Before the *yau* distribution and meal, the girl had her first bath after which she is dressed nicely in *masi* with a *salusalu* (flower garland). Her body is rubbed with coconut oil, which protects her and makes her skin shine beautifully. Preparing the girl to go outside, is when the phase of incorporation starts. As a new person in her adornments the girl can step outside, receive gifts and attend the meal. Literally and figuratively speaking she steps over the threshold. She has moved past the *masi* curtain and stands outside for the first time after the discovery of her menstrual blood.

P: 'I really enjoyed it. And all the things that are done for me. I still remember by this time, what has been done to me, on that day.'

L: 'After the fourth night she can bathe. Every day they change her clothes and give her new clothes. After four nights she can go out.'

S: 'So after four nights there's this big feast. I have to like sit down on the floor at the special mat. Like, I have to sit right in front. The table [mat] will be like this [she draws an oblong in the air]. And I have to sit like right on top. And all my uncles and aunties and cousins have to sit there at the side of the thing. And they're all facing you.'

M: 'And at the end of that four days they are going to do another dinner. Just our family alone and it is just to thank relatives for coming and getting gifts and that's all.'

The girl is allowed outside of the house for the first time and will be re-incorporated in the group. From now on she can go out again. During the meal, she is seated at the head of the eating mat on which the food is spread. Normally chief or elders sit there. They will sit beside her now and the other relatives will sit beside them. The girl will be offered the nicest and the most food. Before having the meal people will pray for her and for the food. Relatives present speeches. The most important person in the family or the father of the girl explains why everybody is gathered together for the feast meal. They explain that the girl has had her first menstruation and that she has become a woman now.

From the moment of entering the adult world, the girl can dress like a woman in a *sulu* (wraparound skirt) and she can wear the typical Fijian short, round haircut. The *tobe* (virginity plaits) are part of that hairstyle. Women do not usually wear these *tobe* anymore. The girl's appearance is not as significant as in the past. It is more important that she has a new identity and is part of the group of women and adults in her society.

M: 'After the girl reached puberty she can dress like a lady, she can wear the *sulu*. Because she is a woman now.'

The phase of separation ended when she went inside the house and the women took over the care for her. In the house she is on the threshold. She has to be shaped and raised again, with the help of the women of her family. Without them this transition would not be possible. The girl will be part of their community, which is why the women have to initiate her. This initiation is important for the whole community. The community will change when a new person enters. She is not entirely a new person, but she will enter with a different individual identity. Thus the collective identity will change. She will be a young woman. She will be part of the group of women and she will be part of the group of adults. At the same time she will be facing part of the adult group, the men, because she is a woman now. She will be facing the children because she is an adult now.

The last phase of the rite of passage is the phase of incorporation, which started when she set foot outside. She is included in the group now, in a different group than before. She was an asexual person, a girl who could play with girls and boys. After her first menstruation she has turned into a woman who knows sexual shame and prudence. She cannot play with her boyfriends anymore, but has to help her mother in the household. She has more responsibilities now she has started puberty. Before puberty she already helped her mother, but in contrast to before, this help is now a formal part of her becoming a woman. She is on her way to become an adult and has to learn tasks and roles attached to being an adult woman. She has not fully reached adulthood yet. In theory she has reached a new phase in her life, but in practice nothing much changes in her life. She can continue schooling. Only formally she has more responsibilities. Still she is not allowed to do whatever she likes. As long as she lives in her parents' house, she has to do what they tell her. Her responsibilities will grow as she gets older each year. In this way she will gradually learn to be more independent so in the end she can stand on her own feet and will know how to take care of a family.

The girl gradually learns about matters related to her new female gender identity. The menarche ceremony on the other hand, is a rite of passage whereby everything that she has to learn in the course of years is explained to her and emphasized on that special, specific moment. Her new female gender identity has become more complex because she has to interact with more people expressing different identities towards them. She has to negotiate between her individual identity, which does not change much in daily life, and her collective identity to which new and

more gender expectations and roles are attached now. The next symbolic step to adulthood she will take when she has stepped over the threshold of her new house. This is when she will be married and will be living with her husband in their own house. This is when her daily life changes severely. When she has given birth to her first child, she will finally be regarded as an adult woman. In the past there was another indicator of womanhood before a marriage and childbirth. This was the practice of tattooing the girl who has had her first menstrual period.

Tattoos

In the past, which for many people refers to the time before the colonisers and missionaries arrived in Fiji, the menarche ceremony involved tattooing women's bodies. Before a girl would be adult, she had to be tattooed. This began after the *vakabogi va* feast. For chiefly girls the tattooing took place at a late stage in their puberty. Often this happened even after a girl's marriage or after the birth of her first child (Clunie, 1980: 2-9; Clunie, 1982: 5-6; Thomson, 1908: 217-20). For common girls the tattooing would start after menarche. Tattoos were made on a girl's thighs, buttocks, hips, lower back and abdomen. The tattooed patterns look like a girl is wearing short tights. Women used to wear a *liku*, a short skirt made of natural fibres, fastened on the hips. Women were only allowed to wear the *liku* after the tattooing process was finished and the pattern covered the destined parts of her body. By looking at a female's dress, people could see if the female was already a woman. In the past her femininity was very obvious. People now cannot distinguish between a woman who has and a woman who has not menstruated; gender identity has become more personal and is a less public event.

An older woman, who had learned the process and inherited the gift of tattooing from her mother, would tattoo the girl. The process of tattooing could take several months. Usually the women tattooed the skin only for a few hours per day, after which she took a break of a few days, to let the skin heal and to relieve the girl of pain (Clunie, 1980; Thomson, 1908: 217-20). Tattooing is very painful, said most conversation partners, and that is one of the reasons why it does not happen anymore, at least not in that specific traditional way. Today the patterns are different and are in different places, mostly on the hands, arms and back.

Four nights after the completion of the tattoos, people prepared a feast. The family of the boy to whom the girl had been promised a long time ago, even before her menarche, usually hosted this. During the feast the girl was the centre of attention. She was praised for her beauty. People

told her that she was on her way to become a good woman (Clunie, 1980: 8). Being tattooed meant being an adult woman, some conversation partners said. A motive to be tattooed was the fear of being ridiculed by others, states Thomson (1908: 219). If you were not tattooed, you were not a real woman, and nobody would want to marry you. If you did not get married, others would not accept you (Thomson, 1908: 219). Clunie gives a different reason for the tattoos; that the tattoos are for the woman to be sexually attractive to a man (1986: 48). Another reason is the fear of being pursued in the hereafter. If a woman had not suffered in this life, women in the afterlife who did have tattoos would come and cut her skin with sharp shells to make her feel pain and suffering. This would go on perpetually. That is why most women thought it better to suffer only for a few weeks in this life than suffer eternally in the afterlife (Clunie, 1986: 48). The pride of having gone through it was a way of showing strength. If a woman, who was not tattooed, died, relatives would paint her lower body with black paint, to imitate the tattoo and deceive the ancestors (Clunie, 1980: 2-3).

Tattoos were another reason for women to be part of the group. Suffering now would prevent becoming an outsider who would suffer later. Tattoos also increased a woman's status as a marriageable woman. This change of identity is significant in a woman's life, because without a husband and child a woman was not considered a real woman. The notion of femininity was very much related to gender roles of wife and mother. These roles have not changed much nowadays, since all women said marriage is the most important ceremony in a woman's life. The expression of these roles however has changed. Tattoos are not necessary anymore to show that you are a real woman and will be capable of being a good wife and mother. The menarche ceremony is not as significant anymore to show that a girl has matured and is eligible to get married. Individual gender identity is surpassing collective gender identity, which is also seen by comparing the menarche ceremony with male circumcision.

Menarche ceremony, tattoos and circumcision

People celebrate the menarche ceremony, because the parents and especially the mother, grandmothers and aunts are proud of the girl. A boy will be circumcised. Through his circumcision his relatives show their pride and appreciation towards him. For girls the menarche ceremony will not always take place. If the ceremony is held, the parents and relatives let the girl know that they value her highly and that they love her very much.

T: The people in Lau are very particular with women's ceremony in relation to menstruation. Because my own experience is that apart from the Lau group in other parts of Fiji there is a lot of emphasis on the male circumcision. [...] That there's so much emphasis on the male, maybe because of our patriarchal society. But I found in the case of the Lau group that they really treasure and they really find the importance of women in society to also to show that women ourselves we are also important as men and that is why this type of ceremonies are not only done for males [...] This kind of ceremonies are also emphasised on women to also show that they are reaching womanhood.

Quain (1948) saw tattoos and the menarche ceremony as equivalent of a boy's circumcision. But many conversation partners said it is not the same. They said that in the past not being circumcised was more shameful than not being tattooed. When a boy is shamed, then his family is shamed, according to a woman whose brothers had recently been circumcised.

S: 'A boy who's not circumcised is the joke of the family. It's a disgrace for his family and also for the whole village. If he isn't cut they will laugh at him. He'll be ashamed.'

Nowadays it is still important for boys to be circumcised, whereas girls are not usually tattooed anymore. Boys usually are circumcised at about age five. This will happen during a school holiday. Circumcision can be planned, whereas menarche cannot. This is one of the reasons why many girls who are in school during their menarche will not celebrate it ceremonially. They cannot go home and miss school. Education is important for both boys and girls. A boy cannot attend school for a few days after his circumcision, because he has to heal and is suffering from pain. That is why boys' circumcision is usually planned in a holiday. Another reason why girls are not tattooed anymore and why boys are still circumcised is missionary influence. Missionaries found tattooing a heathen ritual and an unhygienic, painful practice (Clunie, 1980: 13). Circumcision is thought to be more hygienic and less painful than tattooing. Circumcision could still be practiced but tattooing had to be abandoned.

Not having the menarche ceremony is not as bad as not being circumcised, informed another conversation partner. The shame for a family when a girl has not celebrated her menarche with the ceremony has shifted to shame for the girl when the tattoo ceremony is celebrated. Individual shame has replaced collective shame. Individual fear has replaced collective pride. Every woman expressed her happiness not to have been tattooed. All women thought it would hurt badly. They preferred to cele-

brate the menarche with a feast and return to school without having to be tattooed. Female gender identity has changed into a more personal expression of femininity rather than a collective one. Recognition of the family and clan for the girl turning into a young woman and thus developing a different gender identity does not have a big significance anymore. Girls do not want others to know what has happened. Their close relatives know it is already fearful and shameful enough for them. Most people do not notice when a girl's female gender identity transforms from a little girl into a young woman.

Female gender identity

During the ceremony at a girl's first menstruation, she has intense contact with her female relatives. This strengthens bonds between them. She will receive many gifts. The time she spends with her relatives will be the greatest gift; not only for her but also for the people she spends time with, especially the women. This is the first time in her life where she realises she is the focus of attention because of what has happened to her personally. It is not only a significant event to her but also for her relatives. By telling the girl how she is supposed to subsequently behave and what will await her in the future, the women explain to her how a woman should behave and how a woman will be a woman. This is where the importance of the menarche ceremony lies. Scott indicates that gender is a social category imposed on a sexed body (1991: 16). Gender is a social construction that conveys ideas about the appropriate role of the sexes (Scott, cited in Guadeloupe, 1999: 15). This social aspect of constructing identities should be expanded to include cultural and other contexts. Not only ideas about roles are conveyed here, but also the behaviour and actions that come with it and the meanings attached to these. Aspects that are not directly biological and not directly feminine will become part of the female gender identity through people's expectations and ideals about femininity. With the changing identity of the girl, different expectations and ideas will surface; she will be a young woman so these expectations will have to become part of her female gender identity.

Menstruation is biological and is an important motive for celebrating the menarche ceremony. The stories of the women, their explanations and their behaviour make it clear that it is more than the body losing blood. The blood is not the main point. The main things are the girl growing up and her identity taking shape as that of a young woman. Women will guide and support her in this. This is her individual gender identity (Tonkens, 1998). It is the socially constructed individual identity, which

is only partially and defectively connected to 'the reality' and to the perception of sex differences (Tonkens, 1998: 44). Women tell the girl how things should be, how the behavioural rules are lived by in an ideal life. They know that this ideal image they present the girl with will only help her to deal with her identity as a young woman in real life. The advice is well meant, serious and should not be ignored. But they know this ideal image is not in accordance with what will happen to the girl after the ceremony. The women clarify this when they say that in reality nothing much changes for the girl. However they compare themselves to the other. Identity does not exist without some image of the other. The women who surround the girl are the most important persons during the four days to shape her image of her gender identity as a young woman. They tell her what being a woman means. Implicitly and explicitly they contrast this with the notion of manhood. They contrast childhood with adolescence or adulthood. The girl internalises this information and uses it to form her own female gender identity. She has formed her identity for the public when she comes out of the house after four days and will shape it further for herself in the time after the ceremony.

The child has to learn to live with her public image. This may differ from her self-image, is not always within her control, and may vary from context to context. The internal-external dialectic of identification, the problematic relationship between how we see ourselves and how others see us, becomes a central concern and theme of her social life. Whether wholly consciously or not, identities are increasingly entered into as projects, or resisted when they are imposed and unwelcome (Jenkins, 1996: 67).

The context in which gender identity is defined is important. In this case the female gender identity is defined in the context of the menarche ceremony, while in daily life there is no special attention for menstruation. In this case the girl is conscious of her femininity because of her menstruation and because everyone around her makes her even more aware of it. They do that not only by talking about it, but also by being there, like the women inside, or by not being there, like the men outside. The women inside the house will explain to her the ways in which she needs to behave towards others, how she should dress and the tasks she will have when she will be a young woman. During these four days this is explicitly told, whereas in the years before and after her menarche these things are implicitly expressed. She will gain ownership of the symbolical category 'woman' (Moore, 1994: 51), with the help of the representations from others during special ceremonies as well as during daily life. This is

how she will shape herself and is a self-representation of female gender identity.

Conclusion

The menarche ceremony is one of many celebrations in Fijian life. A marriage ceremony and the birth of a child are great celebrations too. Women regard marriage and child birth as the most important events in their life and as the most important ceremonies for them. The first menstruation is not celebrated ceremonially by many people anymore. During the menarche ceremony the girl is going through a rite of passage whereby she passes the different stages of separation, transition and incorporation and transforms from a little girl into a young woman (Van Gennep, 1960: 11). She will learn about becoming a woman, while staying inside the house for four days. She has to stay inside the house, because going outside while still menstruating can harm her. She is vulnerable because of her menstrual blood and evil spirits might take advantage of that. At the same time this blood is supernatural, sacred and possesses *mana*. The girl needs to learn about these things from older women. After four days she is honoured with a big feast. With this her relatives acknowledge her first step to adulthood and recognise her new female gender identity.

The time of menarche, of reaching puberty and becoming a woman, is one of the first times and may be the only time when people speak openly about menstruation and sexuality. Fear, insecurity and shame to others and for themselves can prevent people from talking about these topics. These feelings and the unofficial taboo of speaking openly about these subjects disappear when the girl is in transition to become a woman. Her first menstruation has become more important and has surpassed these feelings and the taboo. Menarche is the very reason of breaking the silence, without creating negative outcomes. This is what the *mana* of the blood can do. It has great power so nothing bad will happen. The breaking of the silence does not mean that everyone is chatting about menstruation. Men are excluded from the house and thus from the group of women who discuss the topic. Usually only inside the house women speak about it. The father of the girl is in one sense an outsider because he is a man and in another sense he is part of the group because he can openly address the menarche of his daughter. He presents *yaqona* for her, informs people of what has happened and invites them to the feast. At the feast he announces to the guests that his daughter has had her first menstruation and has become a young woman now. During the ceremony and the feast

women know that men know about it and vice versa. There is no reason to avoid the subject or to be secretive. Still people will be careful not to tempt the evil spirits to harm the girl. The power of her blood and the knowledge from the older women will also help to prevent the girl from being harmed.

Through this ceremony the girl learns that she is growing up to be an adult woman. As a young woman she will grow into someone with her own personality and identity. She will stand her ground between all her relatives who will play an important role in her life and who have played an important role in the menarche ceremony. All relatives are important in the menarche ceremony by shaping the girl's identity. The men of her family and community are her image of the other. She should not grow up to be part of that group, but she has to be incorporated into the group of women. During the ceremony she is accepted slowly in the group of women. Only when she has stepped outside will she be incorporated fully because then she has faced the men who see her now as a young woman. She is not a child anymore and cannot behave childishly. She has to behave like a young woman according to the collective idea of femininity. In daily life, she can continue life as she did, but with the change that her relatives will be more protective of her because she is mature now. She should be able to take care of herself because she is an adult. In reality, however, her relatives will be more careful because she is menstruating now, which means she is susceptible to evil more than before.

Female gender identity is not explicitly expressed in the narratives. The conversation partners did discuss certain aspects of being a woman and how a woman should behave and dress and talk. These are not only the stories and advice about the menarche ceremony and menstruation they give to the girl when she is in seclusion. They also explained about the traditional customs of tattooing, about marriage, childbirth and about growing up to be a woman. These different expressions of womanhood are noticeable for woman at different stages in their lives. They are emphasised during various ceremonies and celebrations. Their femininity is then compared and contrasted with other stages in their lives and other groups of people they relate to. When these celebrated stages and special events are over their expressions of femininity are not as much related to others. Then their experiences are much more individual and not part of or excluded from the other. Their expressions of being a woman then may be shared with their peers. This depends on the feelings of the individuals related to the topic, on the taboos and traditional beliefs attached to it and on how close the other is to the individual that shares experiences.

The complete picture of femininity is hard to comprehend for the

women. This image is hard to narrate and explain in words at once, for example, during the menarche ceremony. It is expressed in visible and concrete things, like the work that women do, the hairstyle and dress code for women or appropriate behaviour in interaction with other people especially men. There is no identical experience of womanhood for every woman. In the menarche ceremony the perceptions of female gender identity are reflected on. Women share experiences and narratives to express their notions of femininity and being a woman to the girl. The women tell her about their own lives and personal feelings. At the same time they warn her to behave in a way that is considered by the community to be appropriate for a woman. They try to give the girl a complete image of what being a woman means. But this also changes over time. Stories the girl hears from her grandmother will differ from what her cousins tell her. Times have changed, is what many women said. Nowadays girls receive an education and work in a formal job. In the past women did not go to school nor have a formal job. They took care of the house and the children. Girls are not tattooed anymore. They wear trousers now and go out. This is a change in society and in the images that people have in their minds about femininity, about women and how they should be and act. Images of women, by women and from women have changed over time. For the Fijian woman, the menarche ceremony reflects this. It is an important means for girls to learn about femininity and develop their own female gender identity.

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Marijke Sniekers works via development organisation Voluntary Service Overseas as a lecturer for the Department of Papua New Guinea Studies and International Relations at the Divine Word University in Madang, Papua New Guinea. She is also a gender officer at the VSO program office in Madang, Papua New Guinea.
e-mail: msniekers@dwu.ac.pg or msniekers@hotmail.com