



Title	Women as Earth : Fertility Rituals, Cosmology and Social Interaction in Rural Odisha, India
Author(s)	Tokita - Tanabe, Yumiko
Citation	Global Collaboration Online: Discussion Papers. 2014, 2014(1), p. 1-13
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/48408
rights	
Note	

The University of Osaka Institutional Knowledge Archive : OUKA

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/>

The University of Osaka

GLOBAL COLLABORATION ONLINE

Discussion P A P E R S

GLOCOL Online Discussion Papers, 2014 (No. 1), pp. 1-13.

Women as Earth: Fertility Rituals, Cosmology and Social Interaction in Rural Odisha, India

Yumiko Tokita-Tanabe

Global Collaboration Center, Osaka University

Women as Earth: Fertility Rituals, Cosmology and Social Interaction in Rural Odisha, India

Yumiko Tokita-Tanabe

Introduction

Women's life course in rural Odisha shows interesting parallels with the agricultural cycle involving the earth's fertility and fecundity. This paper aims to highlight these parallels and to investigate the significance of these parallels in the context of women's lives in contemporary rural Odisha. It argues that the woman's body is constructed through ritual and social interaction in such a way that the woman's life course becomes a social and cosmological process which has meaning beyond the biological ageing process of the individual human being. This can be seen through the participation of the family and community in the women's life cycle rituals and through the agricultural rituals concerning the worship and reverence of mother earth. The paper also examines how the construction of the woman's body and person as being part of larger social and cosmological processes may be seen as both empowering and at the same time problematical for women. In this regard, it considers some recent changes in the practices regarding women's life course and the complex implications for the lives of Odia women today.

Life course and ageing in rural Odisha

A question I often used to ask village women was how old someone was. This information I felt I needed in order to contextualise the person in question, to set some sort of objective standard. Most often, however, the women were vague about the number of years someone had lived, although they were quite certain about the number of children the person had. Counting the number of years someone has lived seemed to be considered less important than the life

stage she was at. On one occasion when a girl had remarked that her aunt was an old woman, I asked the question "*Tankara bayas kete ?*" (literally: "Her age how many ?" = "How old is she?") and was told explicitly that it was not "age" (*bayas*) that mattered but the number of children the woman had.

Establishing knowledge of a person's age in terms of numbers sets a universal objective standard which is divorced from the socio-cultural context and the relationships in which the person is embedded. The relationships in which the person is embedded are created through social interaction involving food, sex, sharing social space and gift exchanges. The relationships in which the person is embedded construct the person's social status and role. At each stage in their lives, women perform roles befitting their particular social status and the roles change in the course of their ageing process. These roles should be seen in the context of cosmological ideas regarding reproduction of society and the world at large, since female power - *sakti* - is considered to be the prime force in the creation and maintenance of the universe.

It has been said that personhood in India combines bodily constitution and social position. This combination may be expressed by the term "body-person." This concept of personhood derives from Marriot's formulation about "Indian notions of identity of the actor and action and of the divisibility of the person" (Marriot 1976: 109). According to Marriot, in the Indian context "what goes on between actors are the same connected processes of mixing and separation that go on within actors" (ibid. Emphasis in the original); hence there is a continuity between substances composing the

actor, substances which flow to a receiver as the result of action and substances composing the receiver of the action. In this way, persons or single actors are not conceptualised as "bounded units" (ibid.: 111).

If we follow Marriot's formulation, persons may be seen as always engaging in action which involves transfer of substances. Transfer of substances occurs through food, sex, sharing social space and gift exchange. In this way a person's bodily constitution is always changing and the life course process may be seen as part of the process of transformation of this body-person. Below we discuss how body-person is transformed from birth to death with particular emphasis on women's life course. It is a process by which their personhood is transformed through food, sex, social space and gift exchange and by which they become embedded in different social relations.

Transformation of the woman's personhood may be said to involve the flow of her power or *sakti* (female power). A woman's ageing process involves *sakti* accumulating in the young girl before it is controlled through union with man in marriage and utilised to produce children. This transformation in the flow of *sakti* is hence a part of the transformation of the woman's body-person. The flow of *sakti* is part of the larger cosmological process of creation and maintenance of the universe. Parallels are drawn between the flow of *sakti* in a woman's life course and the flow of the earth's *sakti* during the course of the agricultural cycle. This suggests that the life course of a woman is related to larger cosmological processes.

Life course as social process in rural Odisha

It could be said that a life course begins even before the person is born. According to the folk idea of conception in Odisha, the seed (*birjya*) of the father and secretion (*raja*) of the mother mix to form the child. The child's body-person is thus constituted from the substance of its father and mother. It is said that the human flesh is made from female secretions and the bone from the male seed. Bone constitutes the more durable part of the body and the more recent

ancestors are represented and venerated in the form of bone in the back yard of the house for several years until their descendants have the opportunity to take the bones to be dispersed in the Ganges. Some of the remains of the deceased's bones after cremation are placed with small pieces of gold, silver and copper in a small earthen pot and buried in the wall of the house facing the back yard (*subha*). If the family can afford it, the bones are placed in a stone or concrete memorial (*samadi*). Bone remains as the essence of the human body, hence the body-person belongs to the line of ancestors which gave bone, namely the father's lineage. In this way, a child belongs to the father's lineage at birth.

The unborn child's body-person is transformed to include a wider network of relationships when in the fifth and seventh month of pregnancy, gifts of food are sent from the natal home of the prospective mother to her husband's house where she resides. This is shared by all the members of her husband's household, patrilineal group (*kutumba*) and neighbours. Through this gift transaction, the social status of the baby is acknowledged and the relationship between the household of its father and the natal household of its mother is expressed and constituted. Food sent from her natal house is eaten by the pregnant woman and incorporated by the child through her body. The same food is also eaten by relatives and neighbours and the child comes to share substance with them. In this way, the unborn child "ages" as its body-person is transformed from being a combination of the substances of its parents to being constituted of substances of the respective households and relatives of its parents.

At birth, a fire (*entuli*) is lit in the delivery room for four days and is regarded as Goddess Sasthi. All food is offered to this goddess before being eaten by the mother. Sasthi is thought to protect children but her power is ambivalent, since she also has another manifestation as Entuli-suni, a monstrous creature with fangs and hanging breasts, who strangles and kills new-born babies when their mothers are asleep. It is important to give respect to Sasthi and use

the goddess's power (*sakti*) effectively by praying to her and offering her food before it is eaten as *prasad* which contains her power. Intake of the right kind of substances at the right time by the mother is crucial for the constitution of the baby's body-person. The baby's ageing process involves its body-person being transformed by the right substances at the right time in the right manner. By taking in the goddess's power through *prasad*, *sakti* accumulates in the mother and child, enabling the child to grow and mother to recover her strength after delivery.

During the first four days, the baby is periodically placed near the fire and stroked so that it gradually becomes dry. The baby's body-person is gradually transformed from a wet to a dryer being. It seems that, in the Indian context, the ageing process involves gradual transformation of the body-person from being wet at birth to being dry at death. Wetness, associated with water and rain symbolizes growth and fertility, whereas dryness symbolises barrenness. For instance, female secretion which produces children is called "water" (*pani*) in vulgar speech (Marglin: 56). On the other hand, a woman's breasts which have become small and shrivelled after having children are said to "have become dry" (*sukhi gola*) and the woman is considered as being old. At death the dry bones of the deceased remain after cremation. The bone represents and is venerated as ancestors.

On early morning of the 5th day after birth (*Panchuati*), the fire in the delivery room is carefully put out and its remains taken to the woods. The mother and baby bathe for the first time after delivery. A pasted mixture of certain leaves is rubbed on their skins together with pasted turmeric. The pollution (*chhua*) leaves the baby and its mother in stages through bathing in the same way on twelfth and twenty-first days. The baby ages into a five day-old, twelve day-old, twenty-one day-old person as rituals performed on those days mark removal of pollution and transformation of the baby's body-person and that of its mother.

Birth of a child and its ageing process through the transformation of its and its

mother's body-persons also involve transformation in the body-persons of the family members and relatives. When a baby is born, the *kutumba* members become affected by birth pollution (*chhutikia*) for twelve days. During this period they are restricted in several ways, for instance, they may not visit temples and must refrain from worship of any sort. It may be said that the whole *kutumba* "ages", that is to say, enter into a new stage in the life course. When a child is born, those around it enter new stages in their life course as mother, father, grandmother, aunts, and so on.

More gifts are sent from the mother's natal house on the twelfth (*Barajatra*) and twenty-first days (*Ekoisa*) after the baby's birth. On the twenty-first day, guests are invited to the baby's house to witness rituals performed (*mela*) for celebrating the baby's birth and giving the baby a name. A key turning point in the transformation of the baby's personhood comes when the baby is carried by its mother's brother from the house into the street. The baby's name is decided in front of all those present in the street. The social space it occupies changes from the back part to the front part of the house which is nearer the shared public space. In this way, the baby's presence is recognized publically and social status transformed from being just a member of the household to being a member of the community.

Relatives and neighbours who come to witness the naming of the baby receive food offered to the gods invoked in the rituals. By sharing this food the community as a whole goes through a transformation as they come to share common substance in common social space. The baby's mother eats the food offering and the baby incorporates it through her body. The baby "ages" as its body-person is transformed from being constituted of the substances of its parents and relatives to being constituted of substances shared by members of the larger community. In this way, the life course process involves not only the change in one person but also the transformation of those around the person.

As it grows, the baby begins to share substance of those immediately around it as it

consumes the mother's milk which is a substance transformed in the mother's body from food coming from the same fields and gardens as those consumed by other family members. The body requires food harvested from proper land and cooked by the proper person (mother or wife) in order for it to develop into a person fit to perform the necessary duties according to the family status.

The child often demands to be suckled even when it is as old as 4 or 5 years. Going to school marks a change in the child's status and role as he/she has a role outside the household. He/she is encouraged to be with the mother less and play outside the house. He/she is also given tasks to perform, such as collecting firewood, going for errands to village stores and grazing cows and goats. At this stage in life, the child is allowed to go anywhere it pleases as long as does not venture out too far and get lost.

Children continue to be fed by their mothers who cook and lay out their meals for them. Young pre-pubertal girls are encouraged to share household chores and to take care of babies but these tasks are by no means compulsory for them. Young children are not blamed for going to low-caste neighbourhoods or for eating the wrong things, such as food given by people of lower status. They do not have to be too strict over their toilet habits, about washing their private parts, feet and hands after urinating and so on. They are not expected to know any better because after all they are only children and also because they are not required to keep their bodies in a pure state for cooking and feeding members of the household. This is related to the fact that any cooked food sent to a house by neighbours is eaten by children and their grandmother. Children and old women are peripheral members of the household who can risk the consequences of wandering about outside and consuming food coming from outside because they do not share the central task of feeding the family and are simply fed by the young married women of the house.

Children gradually learn correct behaviour as regards food and toilet habits. However, the radical change in girl's status and personhood,

from one who is fed by her mother to one who has the potential of feeding others, comes at puberty. A girl's first menstruation is an important part of her ageing process since it involves transformation of her body-person from an asexual child to a sexually active woman who is ready for marriage and who has the potential of producing, feeding and maintaining offspring. This transformation is expressed and constituted through rituals and gift exchange.

When a girl finds she has started her first periods, she runs straight back to her house and tells her mother who shuts her up in a room. She hides behind closed doors for until morning of the fourth day and is not to be seen by men and boys who are said to break out in fever or boils at the sight of her. She may be seen by women and girls but is treated as untouchable by them and if touched by her the clothes worn by women and girls must be given to a washerwoman to keep.

News is sent to her mother's brother's house that she has started her first period and she is given gifts of food, clothes and ornaments. She is likely to be presented with a sari, which is a dress worn by married women and marriageable girls. Her girl friends come to visit her with gifts of food, ornaments and cosmetics. Such gifts express and constitute social relations between the girl and gift givers, as well as between the girl's household and the households which send the gifts. It is through such social relations that the girl's transformation into her new status as a girl who is ready for marriage becomes recognised publically.

The transformation of the girl's status is also expressed and constituted through rituals performed by seven married women whose husbands are alive. Just as it was important for the transformation of the baby's body-person that the mother took the right substances at the right time in the right manner, it is important for the transformation of the girl's body-person that correct action is performed by appropriate persons in the right order and the right substances are taken at the right time.

On late night of third day or early morning of fourth, seven married women whose husbands

are alive (*ahya/sadhava*) gather in front of the room where the girl is hiding and take her to a pond to bathe. At the pond the women and the girl rub their bodies in turmeric and oil and bathe. After bathing, the girl throws a small stone behind her while facing away from the pond. She strips off all her clothes and ornaments, puts them in a basket with money, rice and turmeric. She eats a little salt, wears eye black on her eyes, forehead and head, then hides the basket in a grove nearby for the washerwoman, who has been informed beforehand to collect the basket and its contents in the morning to keep. She then puts on new clothes and goes back with the women to the room where she has been hiding. They take care not to be seen by men and boys. The girl goes back into the room and decorates her feet with red dye (*alata*). The seven women put *alata* on their feet, *vermillon* (*sindura*) in the parting of their hair and draw a dot with it on their forehead (*sindura tapa*) and wear black eye cosmetic (*kajala*). These decorations are used in particular by married women whose husbands are alive on auspicious occasions. The women return to their respective houses while it is still dark.

Seven married women whose husbands are alive are auspicious beings whose *sakti* are controlled and beneficial. They perform rituals on auspicious occasions such as those of first menstruation and marriage. In the occasion of a girl's first menstruation, they use their power to transform the girl's body-person from a dangerous and untouchable state to a controlled and beneficial one. On the other hand, if a pre-pubertal girl participates in the bathing part of the ritual, she is said to get fever. A post-pubertal unmarried girl may go with them but can only watch and not participate. This suggests that first menstruation is a key turning point in a woman's life course which transforms her into a powerful being, and that marriage is another turning point which consolidates her position as a beneficial being.

After dawn, a small quantity of raw rice is collected from seven neighbouring houses and cooked into a sweet rice pudding (*khiri*). This is served to seven small children on seven

eggplant leaves in the room where the menstruating girl had been hiding. The girl seats one of the children - a boy - on her lap and feeds him rice pudding from one of the leaves before eating some herself. She then bows down to her elders. The girl's house prepares a feast to be served on eggplant leaves for their relatives and neighbours.

The girl's pollution (*chhua*) is said to leave her in stages as she bathes with the seven married women whose husbands are alive. However, the pollution does not leave her completely until she feeds the sweet rice pudding to a small boy on her lap. She is made to "play mother" to a small boy to bring an end to her seclusion. Feeding is very much associated with motherhood and status of married woman whose husband is alive. For instance, a mother, provided her husband is still alive, feeds her son - the groom - when he goes to bride's house. However, this feeding is not simply about expression of motherly love but about the continuation of the male line, since a mother does not feed her daughter in the same way before her marriage as the daughter goes away to join another household and does not contribute to the continuation of her natal line. In the same way, the girl feeds a small boy on her lap and not a small girl.

It is said that eating sweet rice pudding on eggplant leaves with seven children and feeding a boy on her lap get rid of the girl's impurity and at the same time it is considered to be good for the children's health, and particularly for the health of the boy who is fed on her lap. The power which causes impurity in the girl eventually becomes beneficial for a boy's well-being and by extension for the continuity of the male line. Rituals of first menstruation expresses and constitutes the transformation of the potentially dangerous female power - *sakti* - generated by the girl reaching puberty into a beneficial one by controlling and directing the flow of this power.

The ageing process for a girl on her first menstruation involves the transformation of the flow of *sakti*. The girl's body-person is transformed by her first menstruation which generates power (*sakti*). At this stage the power

is uncontrolled and harmful particularly for men and boys. The girl's person is considered dangerous, but at the same time, her condition is celebrated as her girl friends come to visit her and she is sent gifts. The occasion of a girl's first menstruation is said to be an auspicious (*subha*) one. This power is gradually brought under control by seven married women whose husbands are alive through rituals and through bathing. As a result, the girl's body-person is transformed from a very dangerous and polluting state to one that is less so. Having been brought under some control, the girl's *sakti* is then directed to providing welfare of a small boy through feeding him. On feeding the boy, the girl's body-person is transformed from a dangerous and polluting state to a benign one, and her social status changes from a child who is fed to a woman who has the potential of feeding others.

After feeding the boy, the girl pays respect to her elders by bowing down at their feet. Bowing down to one's elders on appropriate occasions is important etiquette, particularly for married women. This is the first time a girl is required to pay respect to her elders in this way, and through this action she is transformed from a carefree child to a woman who has to observe certain restrictions and codes of proper conduct. Married women are expected to bow down at the feet of her elders on greeting them and also after performing fasts and household rituals.

The girl's household prepares a feast for relatives and neighbours. Particularly, members of those households which sent the girl gifts during the period of her seclusion are called. Social relations expressed and constituted through such food sharing lead to public recognition of the change in girl's status from a child to a marriageable woman. The feast is served on eggplant leaves, just as the sweet rice pudding served to the seven children are. This indicates a parallel with the children whose health benefits from eating with the girl. It may be said that those who share the feast at the girl's house share the benefits of her power generated from her first menstruation.

Transformation in the girl's person is further expressed and constituted by the change in the

social space she occupies. The girl who was allowed to move freely before puberty becomes restricted. She is not supposed to venture far outside the neighbourhood to bazaars and fields and is expected to stay at home to help with the housework. She is protected and kept an eye on by the male members of her household lest she has sexual relations with men before her marriage. In this way the girl is made ready for marriage as she is to be given away as gift (*kanya dana*). Money, ornaments and household items are collected and set aside for her to take to her husband's house.

Marriage brings about the next great transformation in a woman's body-person and is hence a major step in her ageing process. Before a girl of boy gets married, a ritual called *kanamantra* is performed. A brahman comes to the house to chant a mantra into her/his ear and puts a necklace made of *tulasi* (basil tree) wood beads around her/his neck. A girl wears this for seven days during which time she refrains from eating non-vegetarian foods. In this way her body-person is transformed into a state ready for marriage.

After this event, the prospect of the girl's marriage becomes more immediate and grooms are sought for with more enthusiasm. When a groom is found, the girl's party visits the boy's house with her astrological table to see whether it matches his. It is essential that the astrological configurations affecting the boy and the girl are compatible because marriage leads to mixing and exchange of their bodily substances. If the tables match, a date is fixed for the engagement ceremony (*nirbanda*), which takes place at the girl's house.

On the actual wedding day, the bride bathes in water consecrated by offering it first to the village goddess. The goddess's power is crucial for transformation of the body-person of the bride and groom. The bride is helped by seven women in the back yard of her house as she bathes in this water. This is done just as the groom's party arrives and only after the groom's presence is made certain because when the girl bathes in this consecrated water she must get married that very day and can no longer remain in her father's house. This bathing transforms

the body-person of the bride such that she no longer belongs to her father's line.

A barber woman puts red foot lac on the bride's feet and red *sankha* bangles on her hands. The bangles are provided by the groom's side. By wearing items provided by the groom's family, the bride's person is transformed one step closer to being incorporated into the groom's household. The crucial transformations come, however, when the *brahman* performs the marriage rituals. The key turning points in the transformation of the bride occur during the ritual of changing the bride's clan (*gotra paribartana*) and the ritual of tying together the hands of the bride and groom (*hasta ganthi*).

The change in the woman's clan marks a significant transformation of her body-person from that which is a part of her father's household to that which is a part of her husband's. She becomes eligible to take care of the ancestors of her husband's household. It is said that married daughters cannot feed or give water to ancestors of their natal household because they belong to a different *gotra*. The tying of bride and groom's hands is considered to be the key symbol of marriage. The husband and wife are said to be of one body. The woman's body-person is transformed as she changes her body substance to become her husband's "half body" (*arddhangini*). The joining of the bride and groom's hands anticipates their union in sexual intercourse on the fourth night of marriage.

On the fourth day of marriage (*chaturti*), a *brahman* comes to perform a ritual for ancestors (*sraddha*) of the groom's household. The bride and groom sit together with the *brahman* to offer oblations to ancestors. This is the only time a woman sits next to the *brahman* during the performance of *sraddha*. The bride is thus introduced to her husband's line of ancestors and from then on she becomes responsible for feeding them. It is only after this that the bride cooks in the kitchen of her husband's house for the first time. She cooks a small amount of green leaf vegetable and balls made from pasted black gram for her husband's household members. She does not take part in major cooking chores, however, until her marriage is

consummated that night and her body-person transformed through sex into being of one body with her husband. Her union with her husband completes the transformation of her body-person from a virgin whose powers are uncontrolled and potentially dangerous, to a woman whose powers are controlled and beneficial.

Sex is one of the major ways in which body-person is transformed through exchange of substances. Man fears loss of energy by loss of semen during intercourse. Both man and woman lose a part of themselves when they produce a child as it is said the man provides the bones and woman the flesh of the child. As they lose body fluids, they become less wet and more dry. As we have seen from the way a new-born baby is periodically dried by fire, ageing is a process by which the body gradually transforms from wet to dry. Giving birth to children leads to ageing for women and men as both lose some of their wetness. A woman further loses her wetness and becomes dry through breast feeding her children. Hence the more children a woman has, the more she ages.

When her first child is born, a woman begins to conduct fasting rituals (*osa*) held on certain annual occasions for the well being of her child. Women perform different fasts for different purposes at each stage in their life course befitting their particular social status. Young girls perform fasts for the well being of their brothers. *Khudurukuni Osa* is the most important fast performed by young unmarried girls. After marriage, a woman usually continues to perform this fast each year until her first child is born. From then on she performs another fast called *Budhei Osa* held during the same month which is a fast for the welfare of her husband and children. This indicates that the woman is still conceptualised as belonging to her natal line when she fasts for the well-being of her brothers during *Khudurukuni Osa*, but after the birth of her first child she belongs more to her husband's line as she stops performing fasts for her brothers and starts performing them for her husband and children.

The social space in which a married woman can move is severely restricted in her husband's

village. In the first few years of marriage in particular she is allowed to bathe while it is still dark and cover herself completely when going anywhere outside the household compound. Although she may go to village fairs and visit neighbours and relatives when she returns to her natal village, she is barred from such activities at her husband's place. Restrictions on her movements are gradually lifted after she produces a number of children and as these children grow up.

A woman maintains her status as the prime feeder of the family until her son gets married and a new bride comes to take over her tasks. After the eldest son's wedding, his parents move out of the master bedroom to make way for him and his wife. This movement in household space indicates a major change in status for the parents as they cease to be the reproducers of the household line. The son's wife becomes primarily responsible for feeding the family members and household ancestors as her mother-in-law gradually begins to take on other household chores. She goes to the fields to collect firewood and becomes relatively free to move outside the household compound.

Freedom to move outside the household compound increases for a woman after menopause. She is considered no longer to be sexually active and her power (*sakti*) declines. She ages as there is a transformation of her body-person from a sexual being to an asexual one. Just as the social space of an asexual child is not so restricted, the social space in which a post-menopausal woman can move becomes less restricted than that for sexually active women. This is because she is no longer responsible for feeding the household members and ancestors and there is no more fear of her producing children of other men.

A woman can only feed the household ancestors as long as her husband is alive. She may continue to cook for her family members only if there is no one else to do so. On the death of her husband, her body-person is transformed from the feeder and maintainer of the household line to someone who is fed by others. This transformation occurs when her husband dies and the woman is taken to a pond

to bathe. There in the pond, old women (usually other widows) help her to break the glass bangles which she had been wearing as a sign of marriage. From then onwards, she no longer wears glass bangles (*kacha*), vermilion dot on her forehead (*sindura tapa*) nor vermilion in the parting of her hair (*sindura*), which are all signs of a married woman whose husband is alive and hence signs of her auspicious and benevolent power. Widows cannot perform roles of the seven married women in wedding rituals and rituals of first menstruation. Widowhood is a dormant stage in the reproductive life course involving the flow of *sakti*.

As a woman grows older, she becomes more and more part of her husband's household until at death, she becomes an ancestor of her husband's lineage. Ageing for a married woman can be seen as a process by which her body-person is gradually transformed from being a member of her natal household to being a member of her husband's household and lineage. After puberty, the girl is made ready to leave her natal household to be given away at marriage. Marriage rituals, as we have seen, transform the brides' body-person in stages incorporating her into her husband's household. Through sex, the woman is transformed into being half the body of her husband. The birth of children, or rather of a son, guarantees that she will be placed among the ancestors of her husband's lineage as her son and his descendants will continue the line and worship her as their ancestor, and hence she becomes more established as a member of the household. At death, some pieces of her bones after cremation is buried in a wall of the house facing the back yard.

In this way, a woman's life course involves several aspects of transformation of her body-person and status. She is transformed from someone who is fed by her elders at her natal household to be given away at marriage, to someone who gives birth to, feeds and maintains her husband's household members and then to someone who is fed by her youngers having established her status in her husband's household as an ancestor-to-be. Also, her body

is transformed from being wet at birth to dry at death as she gradually loses her wetness, that is, source of fertility, through bearing children.

The ageing process through bearing children also involves process in which a woman's power is controlled and used in reproduction. During menstruation, the newly married woman poses a great threat to the members of her husband's line. Until the birth of her first child, she is required to stay behind closed doors alone for three days and does not cook or perform any household chores. After having her first child, however, a woman is no longer barred from cooking during menstruation. Married women whose husbands are alive and who has given birth to children are powerful and benevolent beings whose powers are controlled and channelled into providing offspring, feeding and maintaining them and hence continuing the household line.

The life course of a woman may be seen in terms of the transformation of flow of this power - *sakti* - at different stages in her life course. Such transformation in flow of *sakti* may also be seen in the annual agricultural cycle. A parallel may hence be drawn between the women's life cycle and processes of agricultural reproduction.

The woman's life course and the agricultural cycle in Odisha

We have tried to show up till now that a woman's life course involves a process of change in her body-person in which *sakti* is transformed. The *sakti* is dormant in a child until she reaches puberty. It becomes very powerful and dangerous at first menstruation and is controlled by the first menstruation ritual. It continues to be a dangerous power since it provides a threat to the social order if a child is born before the girl is married. It is transformed into a generative power for reproduction at marriage and into a nurturing power in childbirth and rearing the young. It becomes dormant again at old age when the woman stops menstruating.

Sakti is important aspect of social and cosmological reproduction. The transformation

of *sakti* can be said to be the process of life itself. The process in which *sakti* is transformed is cyclic as it can be seen in agricultural reproduction. The earth is dormant until spring comes and it begins to heat up gradually. The earth's fertility is tested as paddy seeds are sown for the first time in the year in a ritual performed by peasants on *Akshaya Trtiya* day in the month of *Baisakha* (April-May). Paddy seeds are ritually sown on a special part of the field called the "field of auspicious beginning" (*anukula kiari*). The rice grown on this patch of land is eaten by the family members only and will never be given to outsiders or sold. It is used in another important agricultural festival in the month of Margasira called *Mana Osa* (*mana dhana*). This rice is then made in to sweet rice pudding (*jau*) and eaten by members of the lineage (*kutumba*) on the day of the car festival of Lord Jagannath (*Ratha Jatra*). Some of the rice is kept as paddy seeds for the ritual sowing in *Akshaya trtiya* in the following year.

Sowing proper begins after the festival of *Raja* which takes place just before the first rains of the monsoon fall in the month of *Jyestha* (May-June). The earth is said to reach puberty and become full of *sakti* during this festival celebrating productivity of the earth. Like the occasion of a girl's first menstruation, the earth is said to menstruate for three days and must be given special treatment during this period. Ploughing stops for those three days and men are restricted from doing any kind of work on the land. The first day is called *pahili raja*, the second day *raja samkranti* and the third day *bhui dahana*. In these three days, it is said to be so hot that any paddy sown on these days will be burnt to ashes. The earth rests for three days just as women are supposed to rest for three days during their periods. The restriction on ploughing reminds us of the restriction regarding sexual intercourse during the first three days of a woman's periods. Indeed the word for "to plough" (*hala kariba*) is a colloquial term for sexual intercourse.

Raja festival is celebrated mainly by women and girls. They say that they are "girls who are menstruating for the first time" (*rajabati*) just as mother earth and all goddesses are during the

three days. Parallels drawn between the earth's condition during *Raja* and the condition of a girl on her first menstruation show that menstruation, particularly first menstruation, is regarded as celebrations of female reproductive power beyond the control of men.

The first rain of the monsoon season is said to fall on the fourth day of the *Raja* festival, called *basumati snana*. The rains are said to purify and make the earth fertile as girls are said to have become pure and mature after bathing on the early morning of the fourth day of her first menstruation and are fit for marriage. In the case of married women, they are believed to be especially fertile on the fourth day after the beginning of menstruation, and it is recommended to have sexual intercourse on the fourth day of a woman's period. After the rainfall, the earth becomes wet and cool, ready for reproductive activity. The farmers choose an auspicious day after *raja* festival to begin sowing proper. In this way, the earth's *sakti* is directed to produce crops.

The ears of paddy are said to be like a pregnant (*garbhana*) woman on *Garbhana Sankranti* day in the month of *Kartika* (October-November). The paddy plants bearing swollen grains are said to be "pregnant". Sweet rice pudding (*jau*) is cooked in the paddy fields to be offered first to goddess Lakshmi, who is represented by the "pregnant" paddy. The rice pudding is then brought back to the house to be enjoyed by the household members.

Harvest is celebrated in the lunar month of *Margasira* (November - December). Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune and auspiciousness, blesses cultivators in form of ripe paddy and is worshipped. On all the Thursdays, which is considered the day of Lakshmi, of *Margasira* month, Lakshmi, as represented by the newly harvested rice, is worshipped with varieties of cakes and other delicacies. The married women whose husband are alive take charge of this festival. They clean and decorate the house with beautiful designs painted with a paste made of ground rice and water. The last Thursday is "placing of rice-measuring basket" (*mana basa*) which is celebrated with the greatest importance. A measuring basket (*mana*) is filled to with the

paddy rice harvested from the "field of auspicious beginning" and worshipped as Lakshmi. It is said that this rice (*mana dhana*) can only be eaten by the members of the family. If outsiders consume it, Lakshmi will leave the household and the family will be left in poverty and misery.

After the harvest, the earth is laid to rest and becomes asexual. It remains dormant until it accumulates *sakti* again in the form of heat in spring and summer. It reaches fertility during *raja* when the rains come, it becomes pregnant with rice and gives birth at harvest and becomes dormant again, and the cycle continues. The parallels drawn between women and the earth show that the women's life course and the agricultural cycle are conceptually related. The processes of production and reproduction in human beings and those in agriculture are part of the wider cosmological process in which the world is created, maintained and destroyed. The parallel thus places the woman's life course into a larger perspective of reproduction of society and the world.

The complexities regarding the disjunction between the life cycle rhythm and contemporary life

So what can we say about the implications of the parallel between the woman's life course and the agricultural cycle? In the early years of feminism women's subordination was said to be located precisely in their reproductive capacity and the devaluing of this capacity. According to such a view, the association between women's life course and the agricultural cycle may be straightforwardly labelled as conducive to patriarchy since it identifies women with their reproductive capacity and dismissed as that. However, with the diversification of feminist discourses, the relationship between women and reproduction has come to be discussed in terms of its complexity. As Ginsburg and Rapp point out, after "the 1970's, the analysis of reproduction has been greatly enriched by the encounter between second-wave feminism and anthropology, in which women's reproductive experiences were analysed as sources of power

as well as subordination” (Ginsburg and Rapp 1991: 312). It is in view of the complexity that women’s relationship with reproduction can be seen as both empowering and problematical for women that we would like to contextualise the contemporary changes in the practices regarding women’s life course and the agricultural cycle in Odisha.

We have seen that in the agricultural cycle, the earth is considered as the mother goddess, who gradually matures in the heat of spring and summer. She reaches puberty at the time of *raja* festival when the first rains come and cool her down. She is inseminated with the paddy seeds, and becomes pregnant with the new paddy, bringing forth food and prosperity to the people in the form of newly harvested rice, which is worshipped as Lakshmi, an aspect of the mother goddess in the form of prosperity and auspiciousness. In this process, there is fear and gratitude towards the mother earth who provides for all. It is often said that just as a child should always be grateful to the mother, humans should be grateful to mother earth for taking care of them. This is expressed particularly through agricultural rituals. It is through correct performance of these rituals and timely agricultural works which are closely interwoven, that the bestowal of the blessings of mother goddess in the form of food and abundance is brought about. Correct performance of rituals requires cooperation and interaction between people not only at the level of the household but also at that of the community. This is also true of the rituals performed for women’s life course, such as first menstruation, marriage and childbirth, which all require help from women in the neighbourhood. These are constituted from the kinds of social interaction mentioned above which involve the transformation of substances that construct the body-person of women in their life course. Without the feeling of good will in the family and community, neither agricultural nor life cycle rites can be performed in a satisfactory manner.

Now, it can be seen today when there is an increasing reliance on cash income in the villages, competition and pursuit of self interest,

instead of cooperation and community values are becoming more important. In order to get cash, many people have employment outside the village and the cultivation of cashew nuts as a cash crop has been popular since the government began to encourage planting cashew trees in the 1970’s as a soil conservation measure. The cultivation of cashew nuts differs in interesting ways to paddy agriculture. Whereas paddy agriculture is accompanied by various rituals at different stages in the development of the crop expressing the condition of mother earth, cashew cultivation involves no ritual at all. The cashew trees require little tending to and the nuts are harvested in April when buyers come from outside the village to buy the nuts at prices which fluctuate from day to day depending on the market rate. Villagers show little interest in the condition of the trees and that of the earth. They are simply concerned about the selling price of the nuts.

In this context, the process of transformation of *sakti* has come to have a restricted meaning in contemporary life. As cash becomes more important in sustaining village livelihood, cashew nut cropping (as well as other means to provide cash) comes to play crucial parts in people’s lives and the cyclic process of rice agriculture no longer encompasses all aspects of everyday practice. This means that the people feel no longer fully dependent on mother earth who provides sustenance and gratitude towards her is less intensely felt.

The life course of women is also affected. In urban areas, many women work outside the household and most girls go to school or college. It is interesting that the first menstruation of girls is no longer so elaborately celebrated particularly in urban areas because school is considered too important to miss. Instead of staying in the house for four days, many of them have a bath on the first day and go to school on that very day. This lack of regard for first menstruation takes away the significance of the parallel between women and mother earth, and the consciousness that women and their reproductive powers are sacred due to their special relationship with mother earth.

Raja, the festival of the first menstruation of mother earth, is celebrated in urban Odisha just as in rural areas, and urban people are aware that this festival celebrates the fertility of mother earth who rests in this time just as women rest during their periods. However, since they do not celebrate the first menstruation of girls, the parallel between mother earth and women is not put into practice. Furthermore, in towns and cities, girls are increasingly beginning to consider menstruation as a “private” matter and the aspect of menstruation as a sign of power, fertility and reproduction is played down. The aspect of menstruation as impure, however, is observed as women abstain from going into Hindu temples during this time.

The disappearance of first menstruation ritual also means that a distinctive stage in the life course of women is obscured and the life course becomes more homogeneous. In this regard it is important to note that it is difficult to distinguish between unmarried working ladies and widows in urban areas these days. Neither of them wears the vermilion mark in the parting of their hair. In villages, widows do not wear any bangles but working women in towns who are widowed often wear a gold bangle on each of their hands as well as ear rings and chains, so that they do not look so plain. Unmarried women past the age of around thirty are still quite uncommon in Odisha. They too do not wear as many ornaments and dress as colourfully as married women whose husbands are alive. A widow and an unmarried woman of around the same age may dress in a similar fashion and it is difficult to tell whether a woman is unmarried or widowed. The fact that widows and unmarried women are becoming indistinguishable means that life stages of women are becoming less clearly marked, rather like the life stages of men, which are not marked externally. This results in the life course of women being homogeneous and reduces their association with the cycle of mother earth.

Having thus pointed out the increasing disassociation of the women’s life course from the cycle of mother earth, it is important to ask what this implies for women’s lives. On the one

hand, the parallels between women and mother earth might be said to be empowering for women, since by being embedded in wider social and cosmological contexts women are provided ontological grounds for their identity and existence. From this perspective, the disassociation of women’s life course from the earth’s cycle would imply the disengaging of women from a potential source of empowerment. However, on the other hand, it should be pointed out that the very nature of their embeddedness in social and cosmological reproduction means that their ontological meaning is only defined in relation to the reproductive cycle. This is not in accordance with present day values where many girls are encouraged to enter further education in order to better their employment opportunities. Moreover, this parallel restricts women’s value to her reproductive capacity to continue the male line.

The ritual of a girl’s first menstruation is particularly illustrative of this paradoxical situation. The construction of the girl’s body-person as the mother of boys can be seen on the one hand as an expression of male dependency on female for reproduction. On the other hand, however, it can also be interpreted as an expression of the girl’s body-person serving as an instrument for the perpetuation of the male line. In the same way, the association of women with mother earth can be empowering in the sense that it may be said to express the idea that all life is born of women. At the same time, however, it can be said that women are instruments for the perpetuation of the male world.

Conclusion

The life course of women in rural Odisha constitutes transformation of the body-person brought about through rituals and social interaction at each life stage of women. This is parallel to stages in the agricultural cycle and part of a larger cosmological process represented by the cycle of mother earth. The association of women’s life course with the larger cosmological process of reproduction, as

we have tried to show, has the potential of being both empowering and problematical for women.

The contemporary disassociation of women's life course from the agricultural cycle may be seen as liberatory at one level since women are disassociated with the reproductive cycle which identifies them in terms of their reproductive capacity and moreover in terms of their role in continuing the male line. At another level, however, there is also something to be said in the argument that the source of women's empowerment can be located in their embeddedness in social interaction and association with the earth's cycle in an age when human life is losing ontological values due to alienation from these social and cosmological processes.

Another consideration that needs to be born in mind is the meaning of the celebratory aspects of women's reproductive capacity or motherhood in the current political climate. It is important to remind ourselves that the parallel between women and mother earth can no longer be discussed in neutral or apolitical terms due to the highly political employment of the "Mother India" symbolism by the Hindu right wing movements in India today (Mazumdar 1995).

References

Ginsburg, F. and R. Rapp 1991 "The Politics of Reproduction" in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20, pp. 311-43.

Marglin, F. 1985. *Wives of the God King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Marriot, M. 1976. "Hindu Transactions: Diversity Without Dualism" in B. Kapferer (ed.), *Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behaviour*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.

Mazumdar, S. 1995 "Women on the March: Right-wing Mobilisation in Contemporary India" in *Feminist Review*, no. 49, pp. 1-28.