

THE MASK OF JANUS: A RE-ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF POLLUTION
IN THE NEW GUINEA HIGHLANDS

by

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ABSTRACT

In the New Guinea Highlands the concept of pollution is utilized rather narrowly by anthropologists within the context of male/female relations and intersexual opposition; as such it has come to signify the capacity women have to endanger and contaminate males. Various structural features such as the separation of the sexes, male initiation ceremonies, and secret cults are commonly cited as evidence of the dangerous effects of females on males. In this paper I demonstrate that pollution beliefs cannot be reduced to a simplistic male/female dichotomy, as previously maintained in the literature, for such an opposition has no overall relevance for an understanding of pollution beliefs in the Highlands. The ability to contaminate another is a transitory phenomenon that is not transmitted solely along sex lines; it is neither a capacity residing only in women, nor are all women considered polluting. Instead, pollution beliefs must be viewed as embedded in a larger system of ideas concerning the life process itself.

RESUME

Dans les hautes-terres de la Nouvelle-Guinée le concept de pollution est utilisé étroitement par les anthropologues dans le contexte des relations male/femelle et les oppositions intersexuelles; Tel quel, le concept signifie la capacité que les femmes ont de mettre en danger et de contaminer les hommes. Quelques traits structurels comme la séparation des sexes, les cérémonies d'initiation chez les hommes, et l'existence de cultes secrets, sont communément cités comme evidence des effets dangereux des femmes sur les hommes. Dans cet article, l'auteur démontre que les croyances de pollution ne peuvent pas être réduite tout simplement dans une dichotomie male/femelle, comme on le maintient dans la littérature sur ce sujet, parce qu'une telle opposition n'a pas de pertinence d'ensemble pour la compréhension des croyances de pollution dans les hautes-terres. La capacité de contaminer un individu est un phénomène transitoire qui n'est pas strictement transmis par la lignée sexuelle. Ce n'est non seulement une capacité possédée par les femmes, et toutes les femmes ne sont pas nécessairement considérées polluantes. Plutôt, les croyances de pollution doivent être fixées dans un système d'idées qui est concerné avec le processus d'existence ou de vie.

Some said this was because the pigs were unclean; others said it was because the pigs were sacred. This... points to a hazy state of religious thought in which the ideas of sanctity and uncleanness are not yet sharply distinguished, both being blent in a sort of vaporous solution to which we give the name taboo. (Frazer [1890] in Douglas 1966:10).

In the Papua New Guinea Highlands the concept of pollution¹ is utilized by anthropologists predominantly within the context of male/female relations and has come to signify the capacity that females have, through their bodily substances or general "femaleness", to contaminate and endanger males. Anthropologists have related such structural features as the separation of the sexes, male initiation ceremonies and secret cults, the presence of elaborate menstrual and post-partum taboo, et cetera, to a presumed need for males to protect themselves from potentially dangerous contact with females. Moreover, the above mentioned features are believed to add up to a basic hostility between the sexes. In fact, such a constellation of features tells us relatively little about male/female interaction in specific circumstances and contexts. Viewing pollution beliefs within the context of male/female relations creates confusion in the analysis of Highlands ethnographic literature and generates a circular and essentially static type of reasoning: fear of the malevolent influence of women gives rise to inter-sexual hostility and such antagonism exacerbates the fear of contamination from women. In this paper I offer an alternative interpretation of the concept of pollution that is not dependent upon a presumed basic antagonism between males and females. I shall demonstrate that pollution beliefs in the Highlands are a multi-faceted phenomenon that cannot be reduced to any simplistic male/female dichotomy. The ability to endanger or pollute another person through the mismanagement of potentially dangerous and powerful substances is a transitory phenomenon that cuts across both age and sex boundaries. Consequently, the concept of pollution must be seen apart from the more ideological statements males may articulate about females in a contextual vacuum, and be viewed instead as embedded in a larger system of ideas concerning the life process itself.

The perduring assumption in the ethnographic literature that the ability to harm another through the mismanagement of potentially dangerous substances resides exclusively in females (see for example, Berndt 1962, Langness 1967, Lindenbaum 1972, Meggitt 1964, Read 1952, and Strathern 1972), stems from the conviction that pollution fears in the Highlands are rooted in a general conflict between men and women. A presumed characteristic of Highlands societies frequently cited in the literature is the apparent antagonism between the sexes (Allen 1967, Berndt 1962, Langness 1967, Lindenbaum 1972, Meggitt 1964, and Read 1952). Indeed, the postulated sharp division between the male and female domains has become a defining characteristic of Highlands societies, and has prompted Meggitt (1964: 205) to exclaim that "...none of the material so far published upsets the general proposition that, in the Highlands, relations between the sexes exhibit to a greater or lesser degree elements of tension and antagonism." Langness (1967: 162) reiterates this point, noting that "Relations between males and

females (in the Highlands) are everywhere tense and hostile." The strength and pervasiveness of pollution beliefs are viewed as one important, indeed crucial, "symptom" of such conflict between the sexes.

Meggitt (1964) attempts to correlate high pollution anxiety with inter-group relations, and contends that among the Mae Enga pollution fears are "great" because men must marry women from enemy groups. Consequently, he establishes a continuum of pollution anxiety ranging from high to low, correlated with intergroup relations. However, the difficulty of evaluating pollution anxiety as "great" or "small" is problematic. As Strathern (1972: 302) points out, the extent to which a plurality of rules can be taken as an index of fear and anxiety is questionable, and it involves a leap from one level of reality to another that cannot be justified. Meggitt's (1964; 1965; 1976) interpretation of pollution beliefs among the Mae Enga rests ultimately on Enga statements that "we marry our enemies". Yet, as Feil (1978) has cogently noted in his reanalysis of the te² exchange cycle, such ideological statements may only be relevant at a group level. At the level of the individual, for a male to marry a woman from an enemy group may not be the same as marrying an enemy, for affines do not equal enemies but rather friends. Feil maintains that the nexus of competition in the te exchange cycle is located primarily among sub-clan brothers, with one's affines as a man's staunchest supporters. By any measure (i.e. pig distribution, frequency and stability of transactions, etc.) one's closest and most important allies are a man's wife's brother and father, sister's husband, mother's brother, and cross-cousins, that is, those persons who are members of descent groups enemies to one's own. In fact, the non-agnatic connection is essential. Te partners within the clan are transformed into non-agnates by genealogical adjustment. Furthermore, women play a key role in the te exchange, directing, in large measure, the distribution of pigs. Husbands and wives work together and, within the context of exchange, interaction is generally co-operative and supportive, not antagonistic (Feil: 1978).

To what extent is it meaningful or even legitimate to characterize male/female interaction in general as discordant and divisive? Men and women interact with one another in a variety of contexts and roles. Viewing male/female relations as simply reflected in spatial segregation or behavioural taboos is surely only one aspect of the interaction between the sexes, and not necessarily relevant to all men and women, or in all circumstances. In fact behavioural taboos are not a sufficient basis for categorizing women as a group vis-a-vis men. Rather than attempting to gloss male/female relations in general, what is needed is careful investigation of interaction between the sexes in a variety of contexts and roles. If, as Faithorn (1975: 130) suggests, our general understanding of male/female relations is based primarily on husband/wife interaction, then as Kaberry (1939: 276) noted previously in her study of Australian Aborigines, we are not justified in inferring from one sphere of relations a fixed relationship between men and women that holds throughout the social structure. Nor can we assume that husband/wife interaction is always characterized by one particular type of interaction in all contexts. Yet even a cursory

examination of the literature reveals that such generalizations are rampant. Many of the examples cited to substantiate the assumption of intersexual hostility and the malevolent influence of women involve husbands and wives. Essentially Highlands ethnographers have implicitly assumed what was more explicitly stated by Evans-Pritchard years ago, "...the adult primitive woman is above all a wife, whose life is centered on her home and family" (1965:46). This perception of females strictly as wives results in women appearing in the literature as simple, uni-dimensional creatures.

Such tunnel vision is not restricted to anthropologists alone. The tendency to view women as wives is part of native perception as well. Questions concerning women often elicit responses that are couched in terms of women as wives. This appears to be a widespread phenomenon. For the Chimbu, while a man is yagl, its opposite ambu connotes wife, rather than woman. Strathern (1972:175) notes that the perception of women as wives prevails in Hagen thinking. Many Hagen stereotypes about women in general touch on their specific role as wives. Similarly Kelly (1976:51), states that among the Etoro all mature females occupy the social position of wife. Meggitt (1964:218) recognizes this, if not its consequences, when he observes that the rule of clan exogamy serves to disperse female agnates at a relatively early age. Therefore the only adult women that a man is in regular contact with, and who would exemplify for him overall "femaleness", are a man's wife, his clan brothers' wives, and to a lesser extent their mothers.

It would appear therefore that the presumed discord between the sexes has been generalized from specific categories of men and women to all men and women. And while Highlands males may indeed be overwhelmingly concerned with women as wives, it is a fact that women occupy a number of roles and interact with men in a variety of contexts. Can we assume a priori that the perception of women as polluters goes with them in every context? When Meggitt, Langness, and others speak of women in this manner we are entitled to know if they are referring to women as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, or perhaps all four? Is a sister as dangerous as a wife, or a mother equally polluting as a daughter? Unfortunately such questions cannot be definitively answered at the present time. There is evidence, however, to suggest that the categories of women considered polluting varies according to context, social relationship, et cetera. Lindenbaum (1976:59) states that food from sisters contains no threat of contamination, and Strathern (1972:172) reports that in Mt. Hagen, mothers are not feared for their capacity to harm to the same extent as wives. Elsewhere Meggitt (1976:70) has commented on the warm relationship between Enga brothers and sisters, and mothers and sons. His interpretation of Western Enga stories as revealing a desire for males to remain as boys and share a happy domestic establishment with warm, loving sisters who would produce the necessary children without risk to male health and vigour indicates that sisters, and by extension mothers (sisters are viewed as surrogate mothers), are not viewed with either hostility or suspicion. Hence it would appear that what was purported to be a phenomenon embodying all adult females may in fact be applicable only to certain categories of females.

Although the capacity of males to endanger others through the mismanagement of their own bodily substances, most notably semen, has been noted in the literature (Brown 1978, Hogbin 1970, Langness 1967, Mead 1940, Meigs 1978, Strathern 1972, Buchbinder and Rappaport 1976), with few exceptions this has been treated as an anomaly with little systematic attention paid to the danger and taboos surrounding male sexuality. In fact a curious inversion seems to have taken place. While attention has focused predominantly on the negative aspects of female secretions, male bodily secretions have primarily been regarded in a positive light, despite the fact that the literature clearly indicates their negative and dangerous aspects. Faithorn (1975:137-138), reports that Kafe women of the New Guinea Highlands may refuse to launder men's clothing where there is danger of contact with semen. Care is taken to avoid the ill effects of both male and female pollution in other contexts as well. Men and women are prohibited from stepping over other persons, their possessions, or food and the shadow of either a man or woman that falls upon the sweet potatoes of his or her spouse or affinal kin renders such food unfit to eat. Similarly it would be unthinkable for spouses or affinal kin to wear one another's clothing. (This raises an interesting point which will be taken up in more detail later, namely that relationship appears to be an important factor in determining who is considered contaminating to whom). Fear of sexual intercourse appears to be based on the belief that a woman's private parts may harbour old menstrual blood and semen. In her discussion of pollution beliefs among the Hageners of the Western Highlands Strathern notes in passing that there is "...danger attributed to menstrual blood or semen out of place" (1972:163), and attributes long postpartum taboos in Hagen to the fact that semen can pollute the young child (1972:168).

Not only can men and women pollute one another, but they may bring danger to themselves and others of the same sex. Strathern (1972:166) cites a case among Hageners where a woman killed her husband by mixing his own semen in with the food she cooked for him. In a parallel vein, Kafe, and, outside the Highlands, Wogeo males must take care not to contaminate themselves or other men with their toxic substances (Faithorn 1975, Hogbin 1970). Meggitt (1964:211) also implies that men are potentially dangerous to one another; a bachelor, contaminated through sexual intercourse with a woman or the acceptance of food from the hands of a woman, strikes at the welfare of his peers as well as himself.

In some Highland societies women are considered to be potentially dangerous to themselves and other females through the careless mismanagement of toxic substances. A Kafe woman, upon menarche, is warned of the danger of menstrual blood to others, both male and female, and to herself (Faithorn 1975:134) and she is not allowed to cook for herself while menstruating (Faithorn 1976:92). Similar concern for contamination is expressed among the Wola of the southern Highlands of New Guinea. Sillitoe (1979:79) reports that when a woman secludes herself during childbirth (menstruation too?) female relatives will bring her food and water but they will not enter the hut for fear of contamination. Prohibition on such women cooking their own food may indicate potential danger for the secluded woman as well. The

Gururumba of the eastern Highlands manifest similar concerns. A menstruating woman must not touch herself or eat with her fingers for she is dangerous to herself as well as others (Newman 1964:263).

Although it is impossible to make any definitive statements at this time due to the paucity of relevant information, it is apparent that pollution beliefs cannot be viewed as a gender marker, nor reduced to a male/female opposition, for such an opposition has no overall relevance for an understanding of pollution beliefs in the Highlands. The ability to contaminate another is not transmitted solely along sex lines, nor does such a capacity reside in women alone. All females are not considered polluters. While a male/female distinction may be based ultimately on genitalia clearly pollution beliefs are not. Although in certain contexts there may be considerable overlap, essentially each must be seen to have its own context of relevance. For example a male/female distinction may be relevant for the division of labour or distribution of authority, while a polluting/non-polluting dichotomy may determine contact and association with other persons, and the preparation and distribution of food. Although behavioural taboos associated with pollution beliefs were previously presented in the literature as restrictions on the behaviour of females vis-a-vis males, new research by Faithorn (1976), suggests that the category of persons to whom the restrictions apply and the context in which the taboos operate may well differ in each case.

Viewing pollution beliefs within the context of male/female relations and intersexual opposition is unnecessarily restrictive. As a result attention has focused on females as polluting agents rather than on the substances themselves which, out of context, can be both dangerous and powerful. Consequently, with the exception of Buchbinder and Rappaport (1976) who include death and certain soft and moist foods in the class of polluting substance, little systematic attention has been directed towards identifying the full range of toxic substances, sexual as well as non-sexual in nature. Moreover, because attention has focused almost exclusively on females, and hence the negative aspects of pollution, we know relatively little about the efficacious use of such substances.³ In light of the preceding information, I suggest it is more profitable to view polluting substances as part of a general class of potentially powerful and dangerous substances not specifically tied to any one sex or gender. Although women, by virtue of their periodicity, and lack of control over it, may be regarded as potentially more dangerous than males much of the time, this should not obscure the very real threat posed by men. In the following section attention will be directed toward understanding the nature of polluting substances in the Highlands, their positive as well as their negative dimensions, and their association with cosmological beliefs.

The apparent contradiction between rules of holiness on the one hand and essentially non-religious ideas of contagion and taboo on the other has interested and confounded anthropologists for many years. Following Robertson Smith, Frazer (see Douglas 1966) relegated pollution beliefs to the realm of magic rather than religion; the seeming overlap between notions of uncleanness and those of holiness he attributed to the confusion and irrationality of "primitive" thinking.

In contrast Durkheim attempted to demonstrate the dual nature of holiness; far from belonging in a separate, less developed, and primitive category of magic, he believed that rules of defilement and uncleanness were an integral and necessary, albeit peculiar, aspect of the sacred (Douglas 1968).

More recently, Mary Douglas in her book Purity and Danger (1966), has attempted to grapple with this thorny problem. Douglas proposes to dissolve the distinction between religious behaviour and secular behaviour, between sacred contagion and secular contagion and defilement, by viewing polluting substances in all cultures as either anomalous with regard to basic cultural categories or as situated at the fringes of major conditions of individual or social existence. In essence, she maintains that polluting substances are "dirt out of place" - a contravention of order. Polluting behaviour, therefore, is a reaction to, or a reflection of, objects or ideas which are "out of place" and therefore serve to confuse and contradict cultural classifications (1966:35). All boundaries and margins become dangerous, Douglas contends, for it is here that any structure of ideas is at its most vulnerable (1966:121). The power and danger of polluting substances are located, not in any inherent qualities of the substances themselves, but rather in their ambiguous, marginal status, and in the act of traversing boundaries. Douglas (1966:146-148) accepts Meggitt's (1964) analysis of pollution beliefs among the Mae Enga as embodying a conflict between men and women, directly attributable to the nature of intergroup relations. By so doing, she reduces a complex phenomenon to a war between the sexes and a need to preserve boundaries intact.

In her attempt to delineate the universal nature of pollution beliefs, Douglas has made some rather large assumptions that bear closer scrutiny. Her thesis rests on the assumption of a universal abhorrence of ambiguity. Indeed, she states that it is no less than part of the human condition to long for hard lines and clear concepts, and that such universal cultural intolerance of anomalies is expressed in avoidance behaviour (1966:162). "The very reaction to ambiguous behaviour expresses the expectation that all things shall normally conform to the principles which govern the world" (Douglas 1966:178). Yet surely this will not do? Ambiguity is not a by-product, or some form of deviation, within the system but integral to it, for only through ambiguity are we allowed the flexibility to "move" around in our social system and adapt to new and changing situations and ideas. Indeed, in parts of Melanesia such ambiguity appears to be positively cherished rather than frowned upon (see, for example, Scheffler, 1965). Douglas' insistence upon rigid cultural categories appears to be more appropriate to a Western mode of thought and training rather than a reflection or extension of universal perceptual processes. Her thesis of "dirt out of place" fails to account for the innumerable objects or ideas which, while clearly "out of place", or anomalous, and thus defying classification into any particular category, are not considered polluting. If, as Douglas (1966:35) maintains, shoes on the dining room table are dirty, hence polluting, because they are clearly out of place, then why not toys, or books, or hats?

Rather than utilize Douglas' model, I would like to offer an alternative explanation of the concept of pollution that is more appropriate to the New Guinea Highlands. First, I think it is important to point out that the idea of pollution as defilement or uncleanness may be overly dependent on Hindu beliefs, thus resulting in confusion about the nature of pollution in other geographic areas. Purity/impurity are central concepts in Hindu religious thought and serve to order the ritual and social hierarchy of traditional caste society in India. Notions concerning bodily and dietary purity can be found early in Sanskrit literature and have since undergone an elaborate development. Concepts of bodily and dietary purity led to the belief that a person was vulnerable to both internal and external pollution, and that one could be contaminated through contact with people considered impure because of their own bodily and dietary habits. By extension, certain occupations, as a result of their association with impure materials, are polluting and thus of a low rank. Therefore, pollution in India is a relative term describing the degree to which a caste partakes in practices not permitted to members of a ritually and socially superior caste group (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1977:90).

This emphasis on purity/impurity as the central characteristic of pollution beliefs has little relevance to the Highlands. The imposition of such a dichotomy obscures the nature of their pollution beliefs. Strathern comments that:

"Pollution" should perhaps refer strictly to the transference of ritual uncleanness, as when persons of lower status contaminate those of higher...; but its use has become accepted in Highlands ethnographies to describe the harmful consequences of contact between males and females under certain conditions... (1972:163, fn. 2).

But in fact the concept of purity and impurity has been applied in the Highlands within the context of male/female relations. Sexual segregation and male initiation ceremonies and secret cults have often been interpreted as empirical manifestations of a belief in male purity and female impurity. In contrast, I propose to regard what have commonly been referred to as "polluting substances" as part of a general class of potentially dangerous substances, which through their careless mismanagement or deliberate manipulation, can and do cause harm and even death to other people. The essential attribute of these substances resides in their power and danger and not in their purity, or lack of it. I do not contend that there is not a sense in which these substances may be considered dirty or unclean by natives, however this is not their essence. Furthermore, the impurity of such substances depends very much on context. I agree with Douglas (1966) that toxic substances are not by nature "polluting", but, in contrast to Douglas, I insist that their power and danger resides, not in their liminality, but within the substances themselves. Polluting substances are indeed marginal, as will soon become evident, however, their power does not lie therein. Toxic substances are potentially dangerous because they are what I have termed "Janus-faced".

Like the Latin god Janus they face or are associated with both life giving forces of growth and creation, and with forces of death and decay. Herein lies their power. And precisely because they are associated with life and death and have the capacity for great good and great harm, control and context becomes absolutely crucial. While Frazer (Douglas 1968:336) attributed the anomalous nature of polluting substances to the confusion of "primitive" mentality, attention to context resolves any confusion. In any case, whatever confusion existed, resided in the minds of anthropologists; native people do not appear to have the slightest difficulty in determining when materials are dangerous and when they are not. While death can never be completely averted, it may be controlled. However, because proper management and disposal of bodily substances lies with each individual, control can never be absolute. Separation and avoidance taboos may simply reflect common good sense, preventative medicine as it were, rather than any pervasive antagonism between men and women. And because women, due to their periodicity, may be regarded as potentially more dangerous more of the time than men, many behavioural taboos may at first examination appear to follow sex lines.

Until now attention has focused on the negative aspects of polluting substances. Closer examination of belief systems among Highlanders reveals that such substances may also be potentially beneficial and life giving, as well as having the potential for causing death and decay. Concepts of growth and fertility are very prominent in the symbolism and ideology of Highlands peoples. Menstrual blood is often explicitly connected with a girl's physical growth, as semen is with a boy's (see for example Allen 1967, Meigs 1976, and Herdt 1981). Belief in the procreative role of menstrual blood and semen is common throughout the Highlands. Among the Kafe, menstrual blood and semen, in proper context, are regarded as life producing forces (Faithorn 1975:139). Hageners believe that a child is formed from the joining of mother's womb blood (mema) with the father's semen (kopang) (Strathern 1972:43-44). The Hua share a similar theory of conception. When a sufficient amount of sperm has mixed with enough menstrual blood in the womb conception occurs (Meigs 1976:395). Mae Enga and Kyaka theories of conception echo this belief (Meggitt 1965:110, Bulmer 1965:139). Thus the positive, efficacious aspects of menstrual blood and semen are well known, and recognized among Highlanders. Improperly channeled, however, these very same substances can also cause death. Symptoms of pollution sickness, specifically concerning menstrual blood, are similar, almost identical in theme, throughout the Highlands and one is immediately struck by the very explicit association with death and decay. Sillitoe reports that among the Wola the symptoms of pollution sickness take the following form:

The outward signs of his condition are that his skin dries up and wrinkles, and takes on the dusty grey appearance of ash in a fireplace. He loses weight as his flesh wastes away, and his bones show through his skin. His hair drops out. In short the sickness saps his vitality, and he rots away with a sweaty stink in front of his relatives eyes (1979:85).

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Among the Mae Enga,

They believe that contact with it (menstrual blood) or a menstruating woman will, in the absence of counter-magic, sicken a man and cause persistent vomiting, corrupt his vital juices so that his skin darkens, and wrinkles as his flesh wastes, permanently dull his wits, and eventually lead to a slow decline and death (Meggitt 1964:207).

Faithorn reports similar symptoms of contamination with menstrual blood among the Kafe, "...the skin wrinkles, there is a significant weight loss, general weakness, and if the illness is untreated perhaps death" (1975:135). Significantly, Faithorn (1975:137) also notes similar symptoms for semen pollution. For the Maring, the effects of female pollution are similar to those cited above. There is a general wasting away, the presence of sores, spitting up of phlegm and bloating similar to the rotting of corpses, until finally the victim is overcome by decay (Buchbinder and Rappaport 1976:27). Hageners believe that blood not mixed with semen to form a child, but excreted in menstruation or childbirth, has turned rotten (*pokl*) and menstruating women are referred to by variants of "*r^eng kit kotimin*" - they cook bad food (Strathern 1972:166). Meigs' (1978) study of pollution beliefs among the Hua arrives at conclusions similar to mine. The Hua believe that polluting substances have both a positive and a negative aspect. For example, while semen, sweat, and vomit, are considered polluting and dangerous to certain categories of people, properly utilized they have health enhancing results. Thus semen given to females in the act of intercourse is regarded as beneficial: it increases the weight, vitality and general health of the female body. Similarly, sweat and vomit are deliberately rubbed on the bodies of real and classificatory sons to enhance their growth and vitality. Even a person's blood after death has the power to increase the strength and growth of particular categories of eaters (1978:308-309).

It is unfortunate that much of our information concerning the nature of polluting substances centers on menstrual blood. However, it is logical to assume that further research will reveal that the symptoms of contamination cited above, and the general nature of such substances are similar regardless of whether they exude from the male or female body, or are sexual or non-sexual in nature. Existing evidence suggests that relationship may also be an important factor in determining degree of danger. Certain categories of people appear to be more vulnerable, and the degree of danger greater for some than for others. There is no reason to suppose however that kinship is the only determining factor. The categories of people affected may vary from one context to another. While in certain contexts kinship may be a crucial factor, in other situations gender may be the distinguishing criterion. Faithorn (1976:92) states that among the Kafe menstrual restrictions apply to all menstruating women and govern their behaviour vis-a-vis all other persons. Food polluted by stepping over a net bag

is dangerous only to one's spouse, children and affinal kin. A man or woman may give the net bag to consanguineal kin who incur no danger from the ingestion of food carried in such a bag. Although men and women cannot alter the fact that they are, at certain times and in specific contexts, potentially dangerous to others, they can and do control the extent to which their bodily substances actually bring harm to another by observing, or not observing, the appropriate rules of conduct and through the careful, or careless, disposal of such material. It may be that where people perceive the least amount of control over these substances, (that is where the locus of tension among people is greatest), is where we will find the greatest number of rules constraining contact and the greatest fear and anxiety expressed over the danger of contamination. Perhaps among the Mae Enga it is husbands and wives as Meggitt (1964; 1976) contends. Buchbinder and Rappaport (1976) report that among the Maring the nexus of tension lies between brothers and sisters. Those categories of persons that are considered the most dangerous and the most vulnerable may reflect social structural tensions. However, we must be extremely wary of reducing and over-simplifying the problem. Meigs (1978) suggests that intent to harm may also be an important consideration.

While each culture defines what is polluting, it is a fact that the functions of the human body are almost universally considered polluting, although not all functions are considered polluting in all cultures. Associated with this category symbolically or by metaphorical extension may be various persons, animals, natural objects and so on. What follows is a possible explanation for why that is so. I must stress that the analysis that follows is still in the initial stages of formulation, partially due to the dearth of relevant information. However I offer it as an interpretation of the concept of pollution in the New Guinea Highlands. I do not contend that it is the only way of interpreting such beliefs, nor that it is in any absolute sense "right", however I do contend that, given the data at hand, it is at least as likely an explanation as any other. I suggest that the powerful substances alluded to in this paper have both a positive, health enhancing and negative, debilitating aspect because they are extensions of a person's self and as such contain within themselves a person's soul, their spiritual or vital essence. The concept of a spirit or animating force residing within an individual is not foreign to Highland belief systems. Specifically, the Etoro believe that every adult male (female too?) possesses a limited amount of life force which resides in the body as a whole, but particularly in semen (Kelly 1976:40). Similarly the Hua believe vital essence or nu to reside in all bodily fluids, emissions, and secretions.

Nu is considered the source of life, vitality, sexuality, and youth. The loss or contamination of one's vital essence is cause for grave concern; illness, aging, and even death may follow (Meigs 1978:305). Humans, pigs, and certain other animals are believed by the Siane to have a spiritual essence called oinya. A person's oinya may be located variously in one's blood, hair, sexual organs, breath or shadow (Salisbury 1965:56). As a final example, the Mae Enga believe that people, pigs, dogs, cassowaries, and opossums possess an individual spirit or breath (Meggitt 1965:110). Vital fluids such as

indeed. But it is limited, and can be diminished as well as augmented, hence, the common fear of too much sexual intercourse sapping a person's vital juices. Polluting substances may be viewed as extensions of a person's self, containing one's vital essence. Substances have, in a sense, a life of their own and must, therefore, be carefully controlled. In their positive, health enhancing aspect contact with, or ingestion of, such substances are efficacious and help to infuse and augment one's own supply of vital essence. In their negative aspect, their association with death and decay may serve to diminish or drain a person's vital essence. The ultimate result of such a process is death. Again, context and control become absolutely crucial. Such potential power makes polluting substances dangerous if improperly handled; hence, the manipulation of such substances by sorcerers to bring harm to another person. Victims of pollution sickness are said to lose their vitality and strength; their vital juices are corrupted or drained away (Meggitt 1964, Sillitoe 1979). Throughout the Highlands one finds reference to sexual intercourse being debilitating. This may be related more to the fact that in intercourse a man gives semen, part of his animating force, to a woman, thereby diminishing his own supply, rather than to the malevolent influence of females per se.

The idea of an animating force appears to be associated with a larger process of cosmological ideas relating life and death. Rather than viewing life and death as opposed principles, as we in the West are wont to do, in the New Guinea Highlands death and life are seen as being inextricably linked just as they are in polluting substances. Pollution beliefs become a reflection of a spiritual principle linking life and death, fertility and decay. In Maring world view fertility and death are viewed as flip sides of the same coin for out of decay comes new life which must eventually end in death and decay (Buchbinder and Rappaport 1976:27). Kelly is explicit in his insistence that Etoro thought and cosmology are ordered by the fundamental precept that life and death are complementary, reciprocal aspects of a larger process whereby spiritual life force may be transmitted from one person to another (1976:36). What we seem to be dealing with here is a question of control and balance. Accretion at one point in the system is followed by depletion elsewhere. The Siane express an idea of balance, at least within themselves. Too much oinya or vital essence within the body makes the belly "too hot", thereby producing undesirable anger. However too little oinya produces coldness and indicates the individual may die. Too much oinya is cured by bloodletting and the cooling of, too little oinya is remedied by the application of heat, whether in the form of hot liquids, "hot" foods, or the use of red clay. Sickness can also be caused by bad blood through the introduction of foreign oko (the material form of oinya) into the body; such a condition is cured by bloodletting (Salisbury 1965:56). So-called purification rites, imitative menstruation, nosebleeding, and so on that often follow contact with dangerous substances may reflect a need to redress a perceived imbalance, and not intersexual hostility and the need for men to protect themselves from the malevolent influence of women. Grey (in Strathern 1972:302, ftn. 2), suggests that among the Laiagam Enga the regular performance of purificatory rituals emphasizes a redress in balance between sexual powers and not the purification of males from

Strathern 1972:302, ftn. 2), suggests that among the Laiagam Enga the regular performance of purificatory rituals emphasizes a redress in balance between sexual powers and not the purification of males from female contact. Redressing a perceived imbalance can occur both on an empirical level, within oneself, and also on the cosmological level, perhaps through the propitiation of ancestors in an attempt to somehow control and keep in balance the forces within the universe.

Food taboos may also be symbolically related to this striving for balance and control. Certain foods become taboo to specific categories of people at particular times. Menstruating Kafe women refrain from eating sugar cane and drinking water lest they bleed too excessively in the future (Faithorn 1975:133-134). Among the Hua, men try to be more like women and conversely, women try to be more like men. To this end males eat "female" foods to gain the faster rate of growth and greater invulnerability thought to be characteristic of women. Women, on the other hand, refrain from eating plants with red juice for fear of excessive menstruation and concentrate on foods associated with the dry, hard, slow-growing, qualities of men in an attempt to achieve some of the characteristics associated with men (Meigs 1976:400).

Further inquiry into food symbolism may give us additional information about the nature of pollution beliefs. An investigation of colour symbolism as it relates to pollution may also prove fruitful. Analysis of oppositions such as hot/cold, wet/dry could also shed further light on the subject. Clearly we have only begun to scratch the surface as far as understanding the nature of pollution beliefs among particular people. More research is needed before we can even begin to formulate a theory of pollution that is cross-culturally relevant. However there is some evidence in the literature to suggest that the interpretation offered in this paper may have wider relevance than the Highlands alone or even Melanesia as a whole.⁴

In summary, I have illustrated that anthropologists have tended to use the concept of pollution rather narrowly in the Highlands, restricting it to the context of male/female relations. I have demonstrated that pollution beliefs are relevant to other behavioural patterns than just those between men and women. We cannot assume that men and women necessarily interact with one another in ways patterned only, or even for the most part, along sex lines. By viewing pollution beliefs as a spiritual principle that reflects cosmological ideas about the nature of life and death, and the universe itself, we gain a more complete understanding of the place of such beliefs and their attendant behavioural restrictions in the lives of the people concerned.

NOTES

1. I am not satisfied with the use of the word "pollution", however, unable to come up with another term that successfully captures both the negative and positive dimensions of so called "polluting" substances, I am forced to use it. I would stress, however, the need to formulate a word devoid of the implications and connotations that go along with this term.
2. The te is an elaborate system of ceremonial exchanges involving the circulation of traditionally defined valuables, for example, pigs, pork, shells, and plumes, that is found, with variations, throughout the Highlands.
3. Faithorn (1976) believes that attention has primarily centred on male purity/female impurity in the interpretation of pollution beliefs because of the generally negative way Highlands females are portrayed in the literature. Although research on women has increased over the last few decades, with few exceptions the female domain is not well represented. Investigation of predominantly female spheres of action, even by women ethnographers, presents very real and unique problems. The lingua franca of anthropologists in New Guinea is Tok Pisin. The fact that women are often more isolated and restricted in movement than males and not always fully conversant in Tok Pisin has led to a reliance on male informants for research material concerning both male and female domains. Moreover, it is often difficult to elicit certain kinds of information from women, and sex and gender play a role in the kind of information received. The culturally defined gender a female ethnographer adopts, or is assigned, may not coincide with her biology. If female ethnographers are perceived by natives, particularly women, as male in gender, then they will elicit substantially the same kind of information as male ethnographers.
4. For example, in his book on the Malekula of the New Hebrides, "Deacon was told that in Espiritu Santo...the placenta and blood are cooked into a pudding which is eaten by the father of the newborn child" (1934:253, ftn.). It is my impression that the positive aspects of "polluting" substances in India have not been well researched, particularly with the idea in mind that the positive, as well as the negative, aspects may be integral to a full understanding of "polluting" substances. Research appears to concentrate on the negative dimensions, with the efficacious use of "polluting" substances treated primarily as an anomaly. Yet Yahlman notes in his essay "On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar" that "polluting" substances also have an auspicious aspect, although he does not dwell on it. For example he states that in one sense semen is concentrated pollution, yet in another sense it is power and life itself (1963:30).