

Culture

Chris KNIGHT, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. x + 581 pages

Jason R. MacLean



Volume 15, numéro 1, 1995

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083735ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083735ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

R. MacLean, J. (1995). Compte rendu de [Chris KNIGHT, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. x + 581 pages]. *Culture*, 15(1), 100–102. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083735ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1995

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

é
rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

and the relationship of prophecy with *ink'on* or "medicine power."

Throughout Part One Helm emphasizes classic anthropological generalizations that have been made for both Eastern and Western Subarctic populations. The themes of personal autonomy and individuality come into play repeatedly, both in the prophets' backgrounds and actions, and in Dogrib's responses to these. Helm does not choose to probe the traditional or post-contact background to these facets of personality. Some points of commonality emerge, of course. In particular, the three prophets as well as earlier prophets came to their prophecies through revealed knowledge of and experience in the Christian supernatural world (p.67). One might suppose that successful prophets at least sometimes are able to reconcile conflict between different religious frameworks, as suggested by Dené studies elsewhere. Helm rejects Dogrib prophets' messages as being syncretic of Christian and autochthonous beliefs, however, since in the Dogrib prophets' theologies "the world of *ink'on* and the Christian cosmos do not merge" (p.70).

Helm finds that the nature of Dogrib prophecy, revelation and preaching come more sharply into focus through comparison with *ink'on*. Accordingly, Part Two of the book deals with *ink'on* at length, illustrating the concept through numerous stories told by Helm's long term Dogrib consultant Vital Thomas as well as six other Dogrib. Prophecy and *ink'on* are not opposed as good/evil or true/false; *ink'on* is not false as a power, only as a source of Christian prophecy; those who would be prophets therefore have to cease having or using *ink'on*. But both *ink'on* and prophecy emphasize personal, individual, experiential dealings with non-human beings (pp. 68-9). On the other hand, "...*ink'on* adepts come to know something that *empowers* them to *compel* change in human beings or in circumstances that affect human beings" (p.69; emphasis original). The prophets' experiences with the Christian heaven and its divine beings "...*authorizes* them to *impel* change in others' *volition*, to bring others to *choose* to alter their thoughts and actions" (p.70; emphasis original). While *ink'on* is not inherently either good or evil, prophetic messages are inherently moral.

Helm's presentation of *ink'on* not only illuminates the nature of prophecy, but preserves as well a rich body of personal stories and perspectives

concerning the differing sources and uses of power which might otherwise have remained inaccessible to most. In the same spirit of preserving data which might otherwise disappear, Helm includes a chapter on Vital Thomas' autobiography, and finally an Appendix on Dogrib leadership. As a whole, Helm's meticulous presentation of Dogrib personal perspectives and first-hand texts provide the sort of rich ethnographic base that allows others to consider comparisons and causalities from a number of theoretical perspectives, if they choose.

Chris KNIGHT, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. x + 581 pages.

By Jason R. MacLean

Department of Archaeology, University of Calgary

Models concerning the evolution of proto-hominids into that of modern *Homo sapien sapiens* have a long and enduring history within the discipline of anthropology. Rooted firmly in this tradition, Chris Knight's *Blood Relations* proposes a radically new explanation of this phylogeny. Explicitly political, Knight forwards a social-historical reinterpretation of those events implicated in the process of hominidisation via, in a word, a social scientific "myth."

The time is circa four million years before present. The place is the East African Rift Valley, a "savannah-mosaic" ecosystem of woodlands, grasslands, lakes, estuaries, sea-inlets, islands, and rivers stretching from the Gulf of Aden to the southern Cape. Herein lies the earliest hominid fossils not to be found anywhere else in the world at sites such as Koobi Foro and Olduvai Gorge. Geoclimatically, the end of the Miocene epoch is drawing near, the Pliocene approaching rapidly. Proto-hominids had selected a lush biome yielding a veritable plethora of foodstuffs in which to evolve towards anatomical modernity. To that end, several evolutionary trajectories were traversed. Only one, however, realised its final destination.

The process of hominidisation during the Pliocene was anything but smooth. Social groups were constituted by some number of proto-hominids engaging in a restricted wandering foraging system not yet distinct from that of the rest of the extant primate order. Social life, while

sketchy, is believed to have been difficult, characterised by inter-personal dominance structures. Alpha males, Knight suggests, were the truly leisured sex, while disaffected males and, worse still, females experienced a sorry state of affairs.

Increasingly, natural selection Darwinian style began to favour those females who could, with other females, conceal their period of oestrus via a prolonged, synchronised menstrual cycle. Through the formation of gender solidarity, sexual intercourse was refused to the male collective unless a satisfactory offering of hunted meat was produced. Menstrual synchrony, the glue of the female gender solidarity, was made possible by several coincident phenomena. First, the biome inhabited by early hominids was a lake shore one, rather than a savannah-grassland one exclusively. Second, there is some correspondence between female menstrual cycles and lunar cycles. Tides, a lunar effect along shorelines, served as the initial cue for the onset of menstruation. During the full moon period, sexual intercourse with males was a solidarity taboo as males prepared in earnest to set forth upon the hunt.

Throughout hominidisation, some females synchronised better and more consistently than others and were thus selected as they received comparatively more male support. A mating system based on synchrony allowed females to establish themselves in a less mobile, increasingly sedentary manner closer to shelter, increasing neoteny and facilitating the evolution of big brains — necessary for symbolic manipulation, and thus, true culture.

The descendants of Lucy (*Australopithecus africanus*) followed the Awash to its source, encountering and occupying more inland shorelines. As brain size increased, some hominids move out of Africa near one million years ago and enter China. Still later, anatomically modern humans began evolving within the Afar/northern Rift Valley area, creating well known palaeoarchaeological sites such as Kibish, Laetoli, and Lake Turkana, all of which converge upon an antiquity of 130,000 years.

Finally, anatomically modern humans moved out of Africa into the relative chill of central, and later western, Europe. Some distance from shores and tides, the moon itself provided the cues necessary to signal the appropriate time for menstruation and solidarity. Selection pressures culminate

in an explosive manner. Big-game hunting scheduled through generalised ovarian/menstrual synchrony in ice age hinterland conditions was achieved during the onset of the Upper Palaeolithic revolution. This new configuration proved irresistible and spread across the globe by 45-40,000 years before present.

To this revolution we owe our communicative/cooperative skills and a multitude of additional cultural traits, including domesticity, extended and formalised kinship, a division of labour by gender, menstrual taboos, and hunting and meat-cooking activities inextricably connected to a biological-material dialectic reference counterpoint. The impressive array of ethnographic evidence marshalled in *Blood Relations* is at least suggestive of this scenario.

The moral of the story, Knight implores, is that humanity proper in its initial condition was communistic, and can be as such once more. Thus, in addition to a novel framework for explaining the evolution of anatomically and culturally modern *Homo sapien sapiens*, Knight offers the possibility of an alternative socio-political state of affairs in the face of an eroding capitalistic-industrial paradigm.

However, a formidable array of difficulties are involved. First, there exists no evidence to support the presumed alpha-male defined proto-hominid social structure. Thus, the Marxist recasting of proto-hominid females as the first oppressed class is tenuous. In this light, social organisation as the Hegelian negation of individual biological limitations is an utterly problematic explanatory framework.

Second, Knight relies on the “meme” concept developed by Dawkins (1976: 206). Memes are defined as discrete cultural units of symbolic information, be they tips on how to flute a projectile point or the lyrics of a youngster’s favourite rhyme. Memic transmission, Knight asserts, is above and beyond any consideration of genes and biological evolution. Once humans developed true symbolic culture, 45-40,000 years before present, memes topple genes as the units, indeed the agents, of cultural evolution.

Thus, the validity of Knight’s conceptualization of what it means to be human rests upon the analytical transcendence of Darwinian evolutionary biology and adaptation. The revolution of cul-

ture was spirited by a female collective for purely economic motives. Men's reasons for complying and forming a somewhat uneasy alliance were sexual, not biological (Knight 1992: 124). Memes, then, are employed in a holistic manner to account for the possibility of this revolutionary event by serving as a late in the game substitution for genes.

The model thus forwarded is not a self-sustaining one, nor is it the most parsimonious. The logic of the "sex strike," as Knight has coined it, is understood more profitably from a Darwinian perspective. It is Knight, after all, who concedes that the corpus of sociobiology of the 1980s did much in the way of casting a more realistic, not to mention politically palatable, role for females within the evolutionary context. Females were – and still are – active agents, selectively discriminative in search of their own genetic goals (Knight, 1992: 8). Equally plausible then is the ubiquity of genetic interests within the calculus of both female and male, if you will, agency.

The principal analytic shortcoming of *Blood Relations* is the tacit acceptance of the gross dichotomy between biology and culture. While Dawkins (1976), Lumsden and Wilson (1981), and Barkow (1988) assert that genes and culture are intermixed inexorably, they maintain that they coeval nevertheless. Knight, much worse, espouses the hierarchical ordering of the two concepts *à la* Descartes (Dunphy, 1990), perhaps known best for his formulation of the mind-body split.

What is needed sorely is a new paradigm for the understanding of human behaviour which entails, in addition to integrating the various candidates for behavioural explanation (genetics, culture, environment, mind structure), explicating the manner in which all of the above are a unitary whole. To be sure, each of these competing sub-units are the offspring of the scientific method which has endeavoured to understand some large unit – in this case, human behaviour – by breaking it down into smaller, increasingly discernable units which are susceptible to further collapse. The ultimate exercise, then, is reconstruction rather than integration; the latter implies, incorrectly, mutual exclusivity and valid empirical differentiation.

Blood Relations is both a challenging and compelling argument. Its principal contribution is the much needed consideration of female agency within the human evolutionary context. Knight succeeds in this regard by drawing upon the

lessons of sociobiology and focusing explicitly on the most striking primate curiosity – the absence of oestrus amongst anatomically modern human females. More than a parochial thesis addressed to the human evolutionary specialist, *Blood Relations* is a challenge to the entire discipline of anthropology. In elaborating upon the increasing recognition that "facts" are fluid rather than fixed, Knight exposes the political agendas imbedded within extant anthropological models, concomitantly disclosing his own. Indeed, Knight's ancillary invitation into the sociology of knowledge ought to be accepted. However, for the reasons suggested above, its duration as an acceptable social scientific "myth" will be, in all likelihood, a short one.

References

- BARKOW, J.
1988 *Darwin, Sex and Status: Biological Approaches to Mind and Culture*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- DAWKINS, R.
1976 *The Selfish Gene*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- DUNPHY, W.
1990 *History of Western Philosophy*, New York: Collier Books.
- LUMSDEN, C. J. and E.O. WILSON
1981 *Genes, Mind, and Culture: the coevolutionary process*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Victoria S. LOCKWOOD, *Tahitian Transformation. Gender and Capitalist Development in a Rural Society*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993, 179 pages, maps, photographs, figure, tables.
- By Anna Paini
Dipartimento di scienze antropologiche, Torino, Italy
- Victoria Lockwood's concern in *Tahitian Transformation. Gender and Capitalist Development in a Rural Society* is the exploration of the diverse ways in which the market world system has impinged on a small scale rural economy. Lockwood argues that the wide range of variability in responses at the local level has been neglected by those captured by the world system macro-