

A CROSS CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ISSUE OF GENDER AND
CONTAMINATION IN URBAN LEGENDS

by

Kirstin Renee' Herndon

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The Wilkes Honors College
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences
with a Concentration in Anthropology

Wilkes Honors College of
Florida Atlantic University

Jupiter, Florida


May 2010

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Rachel Corr, and has been approved by the members of her/his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The Honors College and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences.

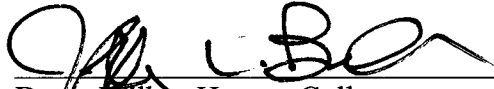
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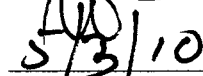
Dr. Rachel Corr



Dr. Michael Harrawood



Dean, Wilkes Honors College



Date

ABSTRACT

Author: Kirstin Renee' Herndon
Title: A Cross Cultural Perspective on the Issue of Gender and Contamination
in Urban Legends
Institution: Wilkes Honors College of Florida Atlantic University
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Rachel Corr
Degree: Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences
Concentration: Anthropology
Year: 2010

In his article, “The Kentucky Fried Rat: Legends and Modern Society”, Gary Alan Fine suggests that American society is a folk community in which urban legends play the role of negotiating changes in social structure and other aspects of daily life (Fine 2005). Fine's argument, however, is limiting in that it only considers urban legends within the United States and fails to encompass those from abroad. As such, this thesis expands Fine's original argument to a global scale by examining urban legends, cross-culturally, that involve instances of women being brutalized and objects or people being contaminated. Ultimately, the thematic elements and grotesque imagery that are used in these two categories of legends are a symbolic expression of tensions surrounding the movement of women out of the home and the increased global spread of urbanism.

I dedicate this Thesis Project to all of my friends and family members who believed that I was wasting my time during the countless hours I spent watching horror movies and reading scary stories as a child...

Most of all, I would like to thank my husband, son, parents, and professors for inspiring me to pursue my dreams and strive for academic success.

– KRH

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INTRODUCTION

The creation and passing down of folktales is a phenomenon that has persisted for centuries. As Mary Nicolini states, “Long before humans were literate, they told folk tales with each retelling, shaping, changing and adding something new, each storyteller revising to taste” (Nicolini 1989:81). The term folktale is broad and encompasses many kinds of stories, from legends and anecdotes, to myths and even fairy tales. Folktales “are part and parcel of the fabric of every human being” (Ragan 2006: xx); whether it is through written or oral means, practically every culture in the world participates in some kind of storytelling.

Sometimes referred to as “Modern Legends” or “Contemporary Legends”, urban legends are deemed a part of this storytelling tradition as well. The themes of these particular stories are said to allow people to “negotiate their current reality and to deal with changes in their personal environment” (Fine 2005: 222-3). These folktales are not only rooted in memories of the past, but are also quite relevant to the present day situations of people around the world. In fact, this relevance may have contributed to an increased interest in urban legends during recent years.

This phenomenon is highlighted by the recent popularity of blockbuster horror movies such as 1998's “Urban Legends”, starring Joshua Jackson and Jared Leto. Common themes, such as brutalized women or animals, unsanitary conditions/contamination, unexpected horrors, dangerous strangers, and many others, can be identified in the urban legends perpetuated by such American literature and horror

films, as well as those from around the globe. Two of the most prominent of themes in these urban legends are contamination and gender. Yet, while many of these tales from across cultures are quite similar in nature, with seemingly identical thematic elements and imagery, each is being told through a distinct socio-cultural context. As such, the focus of my research has been interpreting and analyzing these legends cross-culturally in search of potential reasons for these thematic similarities and overall global popularity.

My main argument in this work involves an analysis of specific urban legends and their imagery in relation to ideas about gender. I highlight the manner in which urban legends involving issues of gender and contamination reflect social tensions about the movement of women out of the home, and examine examples of such legends from countries around the world. However, the ways urban legends are perpetuated, and how they function within society, are also integral to understanding the value and popularity of urban legends in society at large. As such, I have included some general background information on urban legends, as well as a brief discussion of theoretical perspectives on urban legends and the manner in which this scholarship fits into the larger cannon of folklore studies.

Defining an Urban Legend

Urban legends have a few distinct characteristics that separate them from other forms of folktales and myths. One of the most striking distinctions from other written or published folktales is that a majority of urban legends are said to have been transmitted by word of mouth, as a form of oral narrative. Author Jan Van Brunvand categorizes urban legends as “narrative folklore”, and insists that this process of creating and re-

creating urban legends is:

the typical process of legend formation and transmission as it has existed from time immemorial and continues to operate today. It works about the same way whether the legendary plot concerns a dragon in a cave or a mouse in a Coke bottle

(Brunvand 1981:1).

Indeed, this ever-changing, narrative format facilitates the kind of anonymity for which urban legends are known. An urban legend, for instance, will often begin by the orator declaring that, “This didn’t happen to me, but it happened to a friend of a friend of mine...” (Nicolini 1989:81). This pseudo-connection to the story lends the tale some credibility, even though it generally fails to identify an exact location of the situation or person that the event has happened to.

Therefore, tracing the exact origin of an urban legend can be next to impossible because the Friend of a Friend, or “a more correct term would be FOAFRF (Friend of a friend’s relative’s friend)” (Nicolini 1989:81), phenomenon creates a very real story which, because it is simultaneously connected to and separated from its content and message, can allow people to believe a story that would have otherwise been questioned. While the fact that the storyteller supposedly knows the source of the legend adds some legitimacy to the story itself, the pseudo-anonymity simultaneously allows the storyteller to express particular values that may be intertwined in the plot without explicitly stating them or taking any kind of responsibility for what is being said. The content of the stories becomes completely subjective and transformative, unlike other kinds of written, published legends.

The popularity of the Internet, however, is altering this once purely oral tradition, as more and more urban legends become the subject of Internet sites and blogs, and become textually documented in the cyber world. So, this raises a question: Are the cross cultural similarities in the themes and content a consequence of mere chance or a result of diffusion through such new technologies as the Internet, television, and other modes of transporting information in light of the growing forces of globalization? Or, perhaps, do people identify with some urban legends because their themes are somehow universal in nature, dealing with common social issues? The fact that urban legends often change with transmission yet retain similar characteristics seems to suggest that these themes must in some way have significance for different cultures around the world. As such, it also seems likely that this global appeal might be linked to issues or categories of cultural experience that many people, regardless of ethnicity, commonly deal with or can relate to.

Popular Scholarship and Folklore Studies

Although many contemporary scholars focus on these issues associated with the global spread of urban legends, the origins of the study of legend and folklore are quite different and vary greatly. Indeed, this variation in theoretical perspective and the manner in which folklore research is approached may be a result of the many different forms of stories, oral or written, that are encompassed by this field of study. According to authors such as Jan Van Brunvand and Gary Alan Fine, academic research on urban legends stems from a branch of anthropology known as Folklore Studies which incorporates

aspects of literary analysis with anthropological inquiry. It includes the analysis of legends, myth folklore, rumor, and fairytale alike, and also can include research on social significance or function, structural meanings, historical/cultural context, literary functions, etc.

Two prominent figures in the study of folklore are Vladimir Propp and Alan Dundes, both of whom have written extensively on the subject. Their work had a general focus on scientifically and methodically analyzing folk, myth, and legend in terms of their structural and symbolic meaning. However, in the last few decades there has been a shift in folklore studies, and specifically in the study of urban legends, to a focus on situating urban legends within their global context. Scholars like Gary Alan Fine argue for urban legends as having not only symbolic significance, but also having particular social functions, as well.

My discussion of urban legends draws on a variety of these theoretical perspectives, from the social sciences as well as from literary studies. It is important to note that although there are multiple sources for specific texts of urban legends, my analysis generally utilizes Jan Van Brunvand's collections of popular American and foreign urban legends. Brunvand's books give the reader a comprehensive overview of specific texts of urban legends that are gathered from across the United States, as well as abroad, and often provide multiple versions of a particular legend which are useful when analyzing patterns in imagery, themes, and symbolism. Specifically, I combine methods of literary analysis with theoretical perspectives from symbolic anthropology, feminist theory, and social theory. Ultimately, my analysis of urban legends expands the social

functionalist perspective of Gary Alan Fine to a global scale but also focuses on feminist issues, particularly the way that urban legends tend to express traditionalist gender values.

Social Anxiety and Urban Legends

In “The Kentucky Fried Rat: Legends and Modern Society”, Fine suggests that American society is a folk community in which urban legends play the role of negotiating changes in social structure and other aspects of daily life. He cites the changing American society and values after World War II, particularly the seven components of change named by sociologist Roland Warren, as a catalyst for the popularity of and reproduction of urban legends. In fact, in his conclusion, Fine writes that,

I have argued that understanding the relationship between social structure and communication content is a critical topic for folklorists. This relationship is mediated by individual perceptions and collective needs, and these mediating factors may be a particularly fruitful locus for investigation. Massive social structural changes do not just happen in isolation but produce a myriad of cultural effects, and the examination of this process will lead folklorists to the core of the meaning of modernity.

(Fine 2005:238)

In other words, the impacts of social changes are reflected in the art, literature, folklore, and other creations of the people who are influenced by the shift in ideas, traditions, and ways of life.

Although Fine's discussion relates to folklore in general, his analysis can also be

extended to include urban legends as well. The violent plotlines and grotesque imagery that these urban legends contain reflect particular collective experiences of societal change. Yet, the popularity of urban legends, specifically those legends that involve women and contamination, is not a phenomenon that is limited to the United States; it is rampant worldwide. Therefore, Fine's argument is limiting in that it fails to take into account the presence and rise of urbanization and the accompanying shift in gender roles outside of America.

Because urbanization is a worldwide issue, people of many countries have experienced the effects of urbanism and its impact on changing the role of women in society. As anthropologist Mary Douglas states,

No experience is too lowly to be taken up in ritual and given a lofty meaning. The more personal and intimate the source of ritual symbolism, the more telling its message. The more the symbol is drawn from the common fund of human experience, the more wide and certain its reception.
(Douglas 2002:141).

Indeed, because these legends are rooted in common experience, I will argue that they function as a ritualized symbolic expression of social tension cross-culturally.

Thus, an examination of the common themes of these legends, their similarly grotesque imagery, and their existence and popularity in such vastly different cultural contexts, may provide information regarding their function and importance in society at large. As such, my discussion of urban legends will concentrate both on examining these legends from a symbolic perspective and exploring the manner in which the legends function within today's changing global society. I will deconstruct and critically analyze two globally occurring genres of urban legends, those involving women as primary

characters and those that deal with contamination, and highlight the manner in which these particular genres of urban legends relate to global social issues regarding urbanism and the shifting of traditional gender roles.

In doing so, I will suggest that urban legends involving women as primary characters and those involving contamination are a ritualized, symbolic expression of collective social fears regarding the movement away from traditional values to those which are considered “modern”, specifically the changing role of women in society and the consequent dependence of families on manufacturers, restaurants, and other businesses for products that were once exclusively made inside the home. I will explicate the manner in which the extreme content and grotesque imagery of these legends are symbolic of common social fears regarding the movement away from traditional values.

Using examples from cross cultural urban legends about gender and contamination, I will expand upon Gary Allen Fine’s argument, enlarging it to include the global community – particularly, examining its relationship to the changing role of women in “modern” society. In doing so, I will highlight the global popularity of these urban legends, thereby presenting a more comprehensive understanding of the way that urban legends reflect and express the social realities and tensions brought about by the spread of urbanization and shifting gender values.

CHAPTER ONE ~ Gender, Contamination, and Grotesque Imagery in Popular American Urban Legends

Women are common figures in some of the most disturbing and grotesque urban legends that have circulated throughout the world. Often in these legends, women find themselves in precarious situations that usually end badly – either in death or severe mutilation and horror. In particular, three situations are quite common to urban legends that center around issues of gender; there are legends about women who are someplace alone, parenting legends which focus on mistakes made by the mother, and legends where the woman enjoys sexual pleasure. Each of these sub-categories of urban legends criticize some aspect of the woman's actions in a given daily situation, ultimately punishing her for whatever she has done. Most importantly, this punishment, whether inflicted on the woman herself or on something or someone close to her, is always grotesque in nature. Because the horrifying, gory images in these legends appear in conjunction with a woman's actions, specifically those which defy traditionalist views of how a woman should conduct herself in social situations, these legends tend to support Gary Alan Fine's argument regarding American urban legends as an expression of tensions surrounding social change. These legends that punish women are representative of fears regarding societal shifts in gender roles.

Women Without Men

One situation that highlights traditionalist gender values and seems to be commonly encountered by female characters in American urban legends, is that the

female characters are out and about, functioning in the world alone without the assistance of a man. The act of being without a man seems to trigger horrific incidents in these urban legends. Indeed, one of the most popular college campus legends, commonly referred to as “The Roommate's Death”, emphasizes the potential danger women may encounter if they choose to be alone.

Although this specific version of the legend is not about one woman alone, the three female characters are still alone in the sense that they lack the supervision of any kind of male figure. In the collection of legends, *Too Good to Be True: The Colossal Book of Urban Legends*, Brunvand recounts the tale as follows:

...It was late at night and the girls decided that they were hungry, so two of the girls went downstairs to the kitchen. One of the girls went back to the room to rejoin the other girl, leaving one girl downstairs in the kitchen.

A little bit later on... the two girls in the room started wondering about the other girl 'cause she hadn't come back yet. So they went out on the landing and they heard something moving around downstairs. So they called down and nobody answered...

They were afraid to go downstairs so they locked themselves in their room and waited for morning. They actually waited for about an hour, when they decided to try it again. They were going to open the door when they heard a noise outside – like a scratching, so they got scared and didn't open the door. The scratching was like somebody dragging something down the steps...

They stayed in their room till early the next morning until the mailman came around and they hailed the mailman out the window. He came in and [they told him] during the night, they had heard a scratching on their door. The mailman came in the front door and went up the stairs, and told the girls to stay in their room, that everything was all right, but that they were to stay in their rooms..

(Brunvand 2001:432-433)

Indeed, it was a good thing that the women stayed in the bedroom, because when the mailman entered the house, he not only discovered the women upstairs, but also their friend who was mutilated beyond recognition in another room in the house.

This legend is interesting for two main reasons; it clearly illustrates the manner in which urban legends involving women tend to favor traditionalist perspectives. For instance, the mailman in this legend is a perfect example of the traditionalist ideal of the man as the powerful protector of women. One of the main tensions surrounding the issue of women's independence from men was the belief of women as being weak, or inferior to men, and thus unable to protect themselves when without the presence of a male. Likewise the female characters in this story are portrayed as being weak because of their inability to be brave and leave the room to find out what the noise was.

Additionally, the women's decision to ignore the mailman's advice and leave the room when he says everything is "all right" suggests that they are naive and truly believe that the mailman means everything is okay, or that they are just ignorant. The gradual separation of the girls from each other as well as the continual mention of the scratching and the fact that the noise continues to get louder and closer, are aspects of the legend that cause an increase in tension and suspense for the audience. The tension created by these storytelling techniques and its relationship to women being alone, suggests that is an oral expression of the collective social tension that can be caused by a shift in gender roles.

The manner in which the woman in the story is mutilated by a hatchet to her skull sends a message of caution to women who could put themselves in harms way if they

deviate from traditional social roles. Yet, even the women who survive the brutal attack are also scarred and mutilated by their exposure to seeing firsthand the grotesque nature of the murder. The legend seems to place the blame on them, for being too stupid to make decisions on their own, because if females had heeded the mailman's warning they would not have been exposed to the brutality of the horrifying scene. Thus, the disgusting imagery like the hatchet in the woman's skull expresses this potential danger, both in terms of the female defying social boundaries as well as the potential danger that comes with the transgression of accepted gender roles in society at large.

Another example of the expression of traditionalist gender expectations in urban legends involving lone women is a story commonly known as "The Killer in the Backseat". In, *Too Good to be True: The Colossal Book of Urban Legends*, Brunvand recounts this classic horror plotline in which a woman, who is of course by herself, encounters suspicious behavior around her at a gas station and ends up in a fight for her life. Brunvand writes,

...a woman pulls into a filling station to get gas and the gasoline attendant fills up the tank and asks her to step out of the car. And he says, 'There's a problem with your credit card.' ... And it turns out that there's some kind of maniacal ax murderer in the back seat.

(Brunvand 2001:97)

Because the woman in this legend is, once again, depicted as being alone, she is portrayed as being weak and even vulnerable to attack by other men. The legend suggests that a change in social structure that grants women independence is dangerous, perhaps even a threat to social stability, and the violence that takes place is an expression of this tension.

This legend favors the needy, domesticated female ideal which expressing the negative impacts that a shift in gender expectations might have. If the woman had listened to the gas station attendant, she might have lived. But, because she was defiant of traditional social expectations, she was brutally murdered. Indeed, as Mary Nicolini points out,

Stereotypes and generalizations abound in urban legends. Women are frequently weak and in need of protection, either by a strong male or fierce watchdog; they are also gullible and very susceptible to being fooled. Men are heroes and fools both. Humans in general are fallible and quick to jump to conclusions on very little evidence, and the family pet is always loyal to its (often grisly) end.

(Nicolini 1989:81)

Thus, there is a fine line that must be walked by women characters in urban legends; they must not stray from their accepted social roles if they wish to escape violence.

This precarious situation of the female characters in these urban legends mirror the tension and ambiguous nature of gender roles as the result of urbanism. Furthermore, while conveying the tension that men feel as a result of shifts in gender roles through the grotesque images present in the tale, the content of these legends still tend to favor, and thus, reinforce the traditional gender roles themselves. A woman is damned if breaks social expectations by interacting with a strange man but is also damned, and ultimately killed, if she follows 'protocol' and does not.

Self Pleasure and Sex

Other gender legends contain explicitly anti-sex messages. In one particularly interesting legend, a drugged woman who attempts to find self-pleasure through

masturbation with a gear-shifter in a car finds a grisly end. The legend is as follows:

A boy slips some Spanish Fly (*Lytta vesicatoria*, or dried blister beetles, also known as cantharis, believed to be an aphrodisiac), into his date's drink while they are at a drive-in movie. But he has unwittingly over-dosed her with twice the amount required for good results. When he returns to the car from buying popcorn, he discovers that in her sexual eagerness, the girl has impaled herself on the gearshift lever, sometimes with fatal results

(Brunvand and Hickman 2001:172)

Like many of the other urban legends discussed earlier, the actions of the female character in this tale also contradicts the expected conduct of a woman. The legend suggests that the woman is probably not a virgin and is definitely not sexually restrained. From a traditionalist perspective, despite the fact that she was unwillingly drugged by a man, it is the woman's own sexual carelessness that put herself in that precarious position in the first place; thus the girl would be looked upon as being responsible. Her actions create tension with the established system of gendered expectations. Therefore, I argue that the grotesque imagery of her impalement exists as a symbol of the potential toxicity of these social changes and the tension such changes can cause.

Another example of this anti-sex genre of urban legend is often referred to by the same name as a legend discussed earlier, "The Roommate's Death". Although this version of the legend has a different context than the one involving sorority girls, both tales have a similar emphasis on the maintenance of traditional gender roles. In, this legend,

...This girl got off work and went back to the dorm where she lived. It was late and she and her roommate had an agreement that if either one had brought a guy back to the room, she would put a rubber band on the doorknob. Well

sure enough, the girl gets to her room and there is a rubber band on the doorknob.

The girl had had a tough night and wasn't in the best of moods. She wasn't about to hang around in the hallway half the night, so she unlocked the door and goes in. Well, she gets in the room and hears all this heavy breathing and rustling on her roommate's side of the room. The girl doesn't turn on the lights and being as quiet as possible slips out of her clothes, gets in bed and falls asleep.

The next morning the girl wakes up... sprawled on the bed [on her roommate's side of the room] is her roommate, gutted and torn apart. There's blood all over the wall and floor.. [and] printed neatly on the door is 'Aren't you glad you didn't turn on the lights'

(Brunvand 2001:358)

The imagery in this version of “The Roommate's Death” is also overtly grotesque. The image of the roommate “gutted and nearly torn apart” with “blood all over the wall and floor”, strengthens the anti-sex, traditionalist values perpetuated in this legend. Such imagery is indicative of the social tension caused by the idea of young women being sexually independent with the popularity of new modern ideals of femininity and womanhood.

Women are caught between old and new traditions, between their generation and that of their parents; they are encouraged by popular culture to be independent and sexual, while simultaneously being discouraged of those same actions by traditional values. As in the other gender-based legend, the rumor suggests that the act of having sex is somehow dangerous and even has the possibility of being deadly. This hyperbolic statement of what parents usually tell their kids, “Don't have sex”, is aimed at females. No harm comes to the roommate who is asleep soundly in her bed. The roommate represents the ideal female, pure and doing as she is expected. A deviation from such

values ends in the sexually-active girls untimely death.

As such, the gutted college student may represent what terms the “virgin-whore” complex that causes tension both for women who must live up to the standards as well as men who are threatened by them. Such new feminine ideals challenge traditional notions of gender and are thus expressed and negotiated through these grotesque urban legends. These kind of cautionary tale for women expresses a deep anxiety and concern regarding women as social roles and expectations shift as a result of urbanism and the modern “independent” woman.

Parenting Mistakes

Parenting mistakes are also a common theme in the urban legends that involve women as their main protagonists. In many of these tales, the mother is often depicted as homemaker and the primary care-giver for the children. However, instead of being the picture perfect wife and mother, the protagonist is portrayed as neglecting her parental duties in some way, a situation which is shown as having dire consequences for the children in the end. For instance, in the first example of this sort of urban legend, the mother is directly involved with and is ultimately depicted as being responsible for the horror and gore that ensues. Usually referred to as “Mother’s Double talk”, the legend plays out as follows:

The little boy in the story was usually two or three years old. Despite scoldings, he resisted toilet training until his exasperated mother warned: ‘If you don’t learn, I’m going to cut it off’.

She was overheard by the boy’s older sister. Then

one day, when the children's mother was away, the boy wet again, and the girl took up a pair of shears and cut it off, leaving him bleeding to death.

(Brunvand 1994:68)

Like some of the legends discussed earlier, this tale also has different versions. In a common English variation, the mother and her children are on a ship and when she becomes frustrated with the behavior of one of her children, she exclaims, "If you don't shut up, I'll throw you out the porthole" (Brunvand 1994:69). The daughter then, once again, carries out her mothers' wishes.

Regardless of which version of these urban legends are examined, there is one common occurrence; their women characters as portrayed as irresponsible mothers who fail at parenting because of their lack of control over their anger and frustration at their children. These women characters do not live up to the social expectations of a woman's role as mother because they put their own, independent, needs above that of their children. Again, these legends express this emphasis on particular "traditionalized" roles that women should have by showing what happens if the boundaries of the roles are tested; likewise, they also highlight common fears about the outcome of child-raising if the woman is not an ideal attentive and patient mother whose only concern is her children.

Another situation in which women's role as parent is questioned is in the legends where mothers call upon babysitters to assist in their household duties. There are quite a few urban legends which involve babysitters, most of which are especially gruesome in nature. One legend, referred to by Brunvand in the book, *The Baby Train: And Other Lusty Urban Legends*, as "The Stuck Baby" is one of the least gruesome of these legends,

yet it is still horrifying nonetheless. In this legend,

...A young couple were catching a flight to begin a trip of several days, and they hired a sitter to take care of the baby during their absence.

When it was time to leave for the airport, the babysitter has not arrived, so they telephoned her home and learned she was on the way. They put the baby in its high chair, left the back door open for the sitter, and rushed to the airport.

When the sitter arrived, the wind had blown the door shut, and it had locked. She thought the parents either must have taken the baby with them or left it with someone else, so she returned home.

When the couple got back, they found their baby starved to death in its high chair.

(Brunvand 1994:73)

Although this legend does include a man in the overall plot of the legend, the blame for the baby's death would most likely still fall on the woman. The couple would not need the services of a sitter, had the mother chosen to stay home with the children herself. Thus, the very need for a babysitter alone challenges the traditional norm as woman as child-caregiver. In the traditionalist view, a woman should be able to care for her family without outside assistance, and certainly shouldn't be taking a vacation for pleasure. Indeed, if the woman was at home with the baby like she was supposed to be, the death would have never occurred, but because the woman wanted freedom from this role, in the legend, the baby dies.

Contamination Legends: Fast Food Horrors and Beauty Blunders

Contamination legends, which often utilize bloody imagery that mirror that of the women-centered legends, can also be linked specifically to these kinds of social concerns

regarding womens' changing societal roles and the consequent shifting of gender expectations. For instance, while the classic contamination legend involves an unsuspecting victim and some kind of horrific and random form of poisoning, infestation, transfer of disease, etc; most of these stories also feature women as the main characters who endure the horrific side-effects of the contamination. Despite the different contexts and methods of contamination, each of the following urban legends contain some aspect of heinous or grotesque imagery.

One of the most famous American contamination legends is called, "The Kentucky Fried Rat". As described by Gary Alan Fine, a customer gets a disgusting surprise with her fast food dinner which ends up in her untimely death. The tale states that:

Before going to the movies, a young man and his date stopped at a fast-food chain fried chicken stand, purchasing a bucket of fried chicken to eat at the show. The girl complained that one of her pieces of chicken was rather rough and "rubbery." Toward the end of the film she became violently ill. The boyfriend was so concerned at her sudden and intense condition that he drove her to the nearest emergency hospital. The examining physician said that she appeared to have been poisoned, and he asked the young man if he knew of any possible cause. The boy raced out to the car and began burrowing through the half-consumed bucket of chicken and discovered an odd-shaped piece, half eaten. He broke off the batter and realized it was the remains of a rat, poisoned and fried along with the chicken. The girl, receiving a fatal amount of strychnine from the rat's body, died.

(Fine 2005:229-30)

This legends' symbolic connection between contaminated chicken and social tensions surrounding changing gender roles may not be explicit as those expressed by female-

centered urban legends, but nonetheless the connection is there.

The grotesque imagery in “The Kentucky Fried Rat” is directly related to concerns about the preparation and safety of food. Prior to the spread of urbanization food was generally prepared by women family members in the home and thus there was not a reliance on third party companies, like Kentucky Fried Chicken, for food. However, with urbanization came the movement of women into the workforce, which inevitably resulted in less time for the working women in society to prepare food for their families. It is fear regarding this movement into unknown social territory, from women in the home to outside the home, that is expressed by the imagery of a battered, half-eaten, fried rat.

In a variation of this legend, a wife attempts to trick her husband into believing that the chicken she presented him for dinner was home-made, when it was actually bought from a fast food restaurant. As Brunvand states, by attempting to “pass off commercial fried chicken as her own cooking by serving it to her husband by candlelight... the meal is a travesty of "home cooking," and the wife, of course, in the dim light, gets the piece of fried rat in return for her duplicity” (Brunvand 1981:84). While this particular legend could be argued purely as a critique of sanitation methods used by large corporations, as Brunvand suggests, its also symbolic of fears and societal tensions surrounding changing gender roles and their impact on family structure and food consumption.

Another form of contamination legend involves some kind of bodily infestation by a rodent, insect, etc. The following legend, recounted by Jan Van Brunvand, features

another instance of females being punished in disgusting manner for violating social expectations. The legend goes as follows:

A girl managed to wrap her hair into a perfect beehive. Proud of her accomplishment, she kept spraying it and spraying it, never bothering to wash it again. Bugs began to live in her hair. After about six months, they ate through to her brain and killed her..."

(Brunvand 1981:76).

Like the previous fast food legends, this example certainly serves as a social critique regarding appropriate methods of consumption. However, this beehive story does this on a much more personalized level; instead of just alluding to the woman being at fault for her deadly situation, this legend explicitly blames the woman's vanity for her infestation and subsequent death. The woman's focus on maintaining her hair transcends the boundaries of social norms that dictate cleanliness and hygiene; instead of being concerned about being clean, the woman is obsessed with her outward appearance. The contamination of the woman's hair is, thus, symbolic of the dangers women face in terms of violating social expectations about beauty and hygiene.

Whether the urban legend concerns contamination or gender issues, both genres of these folktales convey and reinforces a variety of social fears and traditionalist social expectations. As stated in Brunvand's book, *Too Good to be True: The Colossal Book of Urban Legends*, "the overburdened mother in the beginning of these tales has become a free woman at the end. Thus, these legends pit a mother's desire for freedom against her sense of maternal anxiety" (Brunvand 2001:69). Like the independent woman who ventures into the world without a man, from the first set of urban legends discussed, these mothers choose freedom, and tragedy ensues.

The grotesque imagery in these genres of urban legends is symbolic of social fears regarding the potential damaging power of changes in gender roles and expectations. When women leave their role in the home, then that shift in social roles results in increased consumerism as families will have to look outside the home for basic items like clothing, food, etc. Therefore, the use of these objects as commonly contaminated objects in urban legends is symbolic of the tensions surrounding their acquisition of such items in the absence of women in their normal role as domestic servant. Ultimately, these urban legends express such societal tensions while also attempting to reinforce the traditional values which are being challenged.

CHAPTER TWO ~ Purity and Pollution: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Although many urban legends about women and contamination are set and retold in the United States of America, they are also themes that are quite persistent abroad as well. From the poisoned meal, to the brutalized babysitter, urban legends around the world are strikingly similar in terms of their general plotlines. Yet, urban legends stand for much more; the cross-cultural popularity and persistence of these urban legends seems to point to a shared anxiety regarding social changes that involve women. Indeed, as conditions around the world are changing; more women everywhere have the opportunity to work outside the home and more people are becoming consumers of goods from the global market. Thus, as urbanism has spread, and women's movements have increased and disseminated into other parts of the world, so have these legends.

Indeed, the worldwide existence of these urban legends, involving either contamination or brutality against women, is perhaps an indicator that different cultures around the world have experienced, at one time or another, a similar shift from traditional to “modern” beliefs in terms of gender roles. This tension, while highlighted in the grotesque imagery expressed by urban legends is also evident in the cultural categories that the themes in these legends reveal; these legends articulate clear tensions surrounding the concept of pollution. As social norms related to gender fluctuate, and shift with the times, people everywhere must learn to cope with these altered and ever-changing social boundaries. Consequently, we see this emphasis on ideas of pollution reflected in urban legends from around the world.

Shifting Belief Systems and Douglas' Concept of Pollution

Anthropologist Mary Douglas has done much research on the subject of pollution, publishing her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, in 1966. In this work, Douglas observes that the crossing or contamination of boundaries – whether they are social, bodily, spacial, etc – is symbolic of a form of pollution. She states that,

As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment.

(Douglas 2002:2)

Accordingly, the shifting of gender conventions is dangerous because the phenomenon threatens the established, traditionalized social boundaries. For Douglas, purity is linked to order, and pollution is linked to disorder. From this perspective, the shifting of social roles is not only social contamination, but it equates to social disorder.

The threat of social disorder tends to be expressed through both literal and symbolic contamination in urban legends, but varies from story to story. However, as Douglas states, "the ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors. These danger-beliefs are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness" (Douglas 2002:3). Thus, all these categories of urban legends, regardless of the method of pollution, are a form of reflexive exercise for those people who believe and transmit

them. Ultimately, the contamination and gender legends act as cautionary tales about potential issues that arise when social roles are shifted, thus trying to convince people to obey current social rules; yet, they also act as a mirror of personal fears regarding the movement away from traditional values and systems of social beliefs.

Cross-Cultural Legends: Hygiene and Gender Conventions

As previously mentioned, this movement away from traditional social values is not a purely American social issue. Urbanization is occurring across the world with the spread of industrialization and recent growth of global economic markets. Many well known American urban legends have foreign counterparts that express similar fears about contamination of household items and shifting social roles for women through the use of grotesque imagery. Worldwide, these categories of urban legends address and express cultural categories relating to pollution, much like those that have been described by Douglas.

The main difference between legends from the United States and those from abroad, is that they use culturally specific items and situations in which the shifting of boundaries, whether symbolic or literal, takes place. For instance, a common example of a contamination legend which demonstrates this similarity of thematic element and grotesque content in multiple cultural contexts is called the “Contaminated Comforter”. As explained by Jan Harold Brunvand in *The Baby Train: and Other Lusty Urban Legends*, this urban legend from the Netherlands is distinctly Low-country because of its focus on a “typical European item, one of those large fluffy down comforters used over

there as bed coverings” (Brunvand 1994: 237). In this tale, a woman tries to figure out why her comforter keeps slipping off of her bed only to find that the feathers in her comforter are bloody and covered with maggots. As the Brunvand states,

Since down comforters are less common in the United States, this story is not told here, to my knowledge. But we do have plenty of other contamination legends, some of them involving snake-infested sweaters, coats and even electrical blankets” (Brunvand 1994:238).

Indeed, while the legend’s details may be specific to the Netherlands or other European countries rather than the United States, it revolves around a general theme of pollution and also includes an explicit aspect of grotesque imagery that accompanies it.

Even more interesting, is that current American urban legends have European counterparts that can be traced back to medieval times. For instance, there is an urban legend from thirteenth century England, which mirrors the plot line of the “Beehive Hairdo” described in Chapter One. Like the beehive legend, this urban legend cautions women against vanity. Instead of bugs, however, this woman is attacked by spiders. The legend begins with a woman,

...who took so long over the adornment of her hair that she used to arrive at church barely before the end of Mass." One day "the devil descended upon her head in the form of a spider, gripping with its legs," until she well-nigh died of fright. Nothing would remove the offending insect, neither prayer, nor exorcism, nor holy water, until the local abbot displayed the holy sacrament before it...

(Brunvand 1981:78)

In this case, the pollution is represented by the spider attack and consequent invasion of the woman's hair. Thus, by offending popular social belief systems about the value of beauty the medieval woman, like the vain young girl with the beehive, symbolically

penetrates social boundaries and as such finds herself in a precarious situation.

Another urban legend from outside the U.S that deals with issues of contamination and pollution is strikingly similar to the “Kentucky Fried Rat” legend analyzed in Chapter One. This particular version comes from Germany, and like the American legend, capitalizes on a fear of consuming products that are prepared by someone from outside of the immediate household. As Brunvand explains,

In Germany the legend usually concerns a small privately-owned foreign restaurant (often Yugoslavian), and the food contamination is both intentional and malicious. In the United States the food in the story is contaminated accidentally by employees of "an impersonal corporate chain." Thus, the German stories warn against supposed unsanitary and dishonest foreign workers, while the American tradition criticizes the impersonality and carelessness of big business.

(Brunvand 1981: 84)

Interestingly, in this story, there are two levels of social pollution. First, this legend addresses the commonly held idea that women should be the one in the household to handle food for the family. However, this legend also intimates a mistrust of establishments that are foreign, not only being from outside the family, but also being from a different country – a literal crossing of geographical boundaries. Thus, this story expresses a literal pollution of the fast food, but furthermore suggests a symbolic transgression of social boundaries governing the hierarchy of people who can handle food.

Similar stories even come from as far away as Sweden. In fact, Brunvand describes an interesting story about a man traveling to the island of Rhodes who was poisoned by a meal that he consumes while on the vacation. According to Brunvand, the man,

“had the bad luck to get a bone stuck in his throat. His doctor in Sweden removed the bone, which he recognized at once as a bone from a rat rather than a chicken. A subsequent investigation uncovered a freezer full of rats in the back room of the Rhodes restaurant.”

(Brunvand 1981:84).

While this legend shares many similarities with the Kentucky Fried Rat, it is more explicit in its treatment of the issue of boundaries. Like in the previous legend, by crossing geographical boundaries, the man opens himself up to the possible danger of being poisoned.

Tension surrounding sanitation and hygiene is clearly at the core of the previous contamination legends, both from America as well as abroad. In each legend, the movement of people from their expected social role results in some ghastly punishment for the characters in the legend. These legends suggest that by allowing outsiders into one's home to babysit, or by allowing strangers to prepare food for one's family, people make themselves vulnerable to pollution in a variety of ways because of the betrayal of traditionally respected social boundaries.

Another legend of interest originates from Nigeria and is very similar to the babysitter legends that have been popularized in the United States and are discussed in Chapter One. According to Brunvand,

...The same gruesome tale about an untrustworthy baby-sitter has also circulated in a fully-localized form in Africa, as reported in 1979 by my folklore student Atim Eyere of Calabar, Nigeria. In 1976, Mrs. Eyere remembered, this terrible story swept through the government office where she was working: A certain lady who was working in the Ministry of Agriculture called her baby-sitter by telephone to see how her baby was doing. When her baby-sitter told her that the baby was still in bed, she asked her to take him

out of bed and sit him up. The words [that the woman spoke] "Efik-men eyen oro k'etem", could mean two things, either "sit the baby up" or "cook the baby." So the baby-sitter, being a novice, took this baby and put him in the oven and roasted him. When the mother returned from work, she met the baby-sitter's eyes reddened like the setting sun. The mother said, "Come on, don't be so miserable about nothing. Please bring me my baby." The baby-sitter, very silent, moved reluctantly to the oven and opened it, and behold the baby was stiff dead in the oven! "Wasn't that what you wanted?" With that she stepped out in a hurry, back to her house, leaving the mother of the baby with wild eyes, crying "My son? Dead?"

(Brunvand 1981:68)

Just as in the American babysitter legends, because the mother chooses to cross outside the safe boundary of the home and cause disorder by having a non-family member care for her baby, the child meets an unfortunate and horrifying death.

Another non-Euro-American urban legend comes from Peru and has been studied by anthropologist Mary Weismantel. The pishtaco is a vampire-like boogeyman of sorts, who "roams the countryside and plunders fat from Indian bodies, disemboweling and dismembering and raping the Indians as he does so" (Weismantel 2001:xiii). The grotesque and cautionary aspects of this legend is very reminiscent of that used in the urban legends discussed earlier. Weismantel asserts that the use of such grotesque imagery in these legends is an expression of societal strain. She states that, "[the pishtaco] represents the historical destruction of indigenous peoples and their vicious cultural, economic, and sexual exploitation" (Weismantel 2001:xiii). The image of the pishtaco coming to steal the fat of indigenous women and children mirrors the social situation that these people encountered with the takeover of their culture by colonial officials. Indeed, the pishtaco legend involves a fear of outside agents altering the

commonly accepted social structure which is very similar to Mary Douglas' concept of boundaries and pollution.

While the societal changes causing the tension expressed in the pishtaco legend is related to a fear of invasion by colonial officials, a very literal breakdown of social boundaries, the legend from Africa expresses fears similar to those in America which deal with women's increased absence from the home. Regardless, in both cases, fears regarding societal pollution are conveyed through the use of highly symbolic grotesque imagery.

Urbanism and Social Pollution

By examining these categories of urban legends in a cross-cultural context, it is evident that stark similarities exist in terms of the content themes and issues highlighted by these globally relevant folktales. While these legends are most definitely expressions of tension surrounding shifts in belief systems and social boundaries, I argue that they are even more so symbolic of a common fear of social pollution and a common understanding of the concept of pollution itself. They reveal similarities in the manner in which people of different cultures understand pollution, thus suggesting a shared social experience, and perhaps even fears, related to the transgression of boundaries – whether spatial, physical, geographic, literal, or symbolic. Ultimately, the contamination and gender legends that I have examined convey an explicit fear of social disorder and thus a fear of the potential dangers posed by a movement away from traditional to modern systems of consumption, family structure and beliefs as well.

CHAPTER THREE ~ Urban Legends as Social Performance: Ritual Expression of Social Conventions and Facilitation of Communitas

Urbanization and the movement of women out of the home and into the workforce has had a great influence on the gender conscious content and imagery expressed through urban legends. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues for gender as being a social construct which is constantly being redefined and perpetuated through social performance (Butler 1990). Indeed, I view these cross cultural urban legends involving women and contamination as an example of such gender performances; they simultaneously reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and express the tensions and fears people worldwide have about the modernist movement towards the acceptance of differing gender roles and expectations. As Gary Fine states, “The supposed factuality of legends is justification for their telling (whether or not they are believed), although their criticism of contemporary values may provide the unconscious rationale” (Fine 2005:227). Ultimately, these categories of urban legends function as a mediator that expresses and critiques changing gender roles which have resulted from the global spread of urbanization.

Urban Legends and Communitas

By functioning as a mediator between during times of social transitions, the act of creating and transmitting urban legends becomes a ritualized social drama. As Judith Butler states, “Ritual theorists like Victor Turner focus on a notion of social drama of various kinds as a means for settling internal conflicts within a culture and regenerating

social cohesion” (Butler 1988:86). Therefore, through their symbolic expression of social anxiety in the form of modern folktales, such legends ultimately contribute to a larger social dialogue surrounding appropriate gender roles in the face of an increasingly urbanized world.

In *The Anthropology of Performance*, Victor Turner discusses the meaning of the word ritual and comes to define a ritual as “a transformative performance revealing major classifications, categories, and contradictions of cultural processes” (Turner 1988:75). Likewise, the repeated transmission of these kinds of urban legends acts to reinforce and transform cultural concepts like gender. In sharing these urban legends, people are able to share world perspectives as well and understand, and better relate, to the way that people from other cultures view concepts like gender, contamination, and purity. Ultimately, by examining urban legends from around the world, anthropologists have the ability to uncover similarities between different cultures in terms of their social roles, classifications, and processes.

Therefore, I also argue that the act of sharing urban legends often causes a phenomenon that is termed by Victor Turner, as 'communitas', or a “generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously been fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties” (Turner 1988:96). By telling these stories, people are able to identify similarities in social experience. The common themes and imagery allow a sense of unity between people who have heard particular legends. Their popularity worldwide, is most likely linked to this communitas that is communicated through the urban legends' gruesome imagery.

Across the world, gender and contamination legends represent collective social tension, and through their re-telling, allow society to negotiate shifts in gender-based value systems. The ambiguous state of social beliefs about gender, that has resulted from the global spread of industrialization and urbanization, necessitates a symbolic expression of this common social tension. In fact, Turner references this kind of ambiguity in his discussion of Mary Douglas' book, *Purity and Danger*. Turner states that Douglas,

recently argued, that which cannot be clearly classified in terms of traditional criteria of classification, or falls between classification boundaries, is almost everywhere regarded as 'polluting' and 'dangerous'

(Turner 1969:109).

Likewise, women in these urban legends push the boundaries of gender roles and as such are seen as dangerous and polluting. It is this breaking of boundaries which results in the gruesome imagery which manifests in urban legends involving women and contamination.

CONCLUSION ~ Global Relevance and Popularity of Gender and Contamination Legends

Being a fan of literature and pop-culture, I have always been fascinated by the persistence of urban legends and the manner in which they seem to transform with the times and remain relevant despite shifting global currents of information and belief systems. Once I began my career as an anthropology student in college, however, I began to see more connections between urban legends I had grown up with and those from other countries – a phenomenon I never realized had existed.

Initially, I attributed the popularity of gender and contamination legends to the spread of the Internet, and other modes of information technology, around the globe. And while this is a plausible argument, I feel that the connections between similar themes and grotesque imagery in urban legends around the world is linked to a commonality in experience and social fears. There has to be some other reason for why these legends have persisted for years and have even shifted with social changes, yet retain these same themes of contamination, pollution, and gender that underly the plotlines of the legends themselves.

Global Relevance

Indeed, whether from the United States or abroad, these stories have such strikingly similar thematic elements and grotesque imagery that they are both fairly recognizable and meaningful cross-culturally. Each of the legends discussed convey some form of changing social values that can be linked to urbanism. As Gary Alan Fine

suggested, urban legends have a tendency to reflect common fears regarding changes in society that people have little personal control over, and the ambiguity in social boundaries that institutions such as industrialization create. These female-centered and contamination themed urban legends are in many ways ritualized and regularly prove their social value by the fact that they have and probably will continue to be retold over and over for generations. By examining these legends of contamination and brutality against women, the global influence of social processes like urbanization becomes evident.

It is extremely important to study urban legends both as literature and as legitimate cultural artifacts. Urban legends can provide cultural anthropologists with valuable insight into social norms and expectations, as well as the way these norms are communicated and negotiated within society. Indeed, Jan Van Brunvand has observed that,

Legend study is a most revealing area of such research because the stories that people believe to be true hold an important place in their world view. "If it's true, it's important" is an axiom to be trusted, whether or not the lore really is true or not. Simply becoming aware of this modern folklore which we all possess to some degree is a revelation in itself, but going beyond this to compare the tales, isolate their consistent themes, and relate them to the rest of the culture can yield rich insights into the state of our current civilization.

(Brunvand 1981:2)

Specifically, the most grotesque of urban legends which I have described here seem to all relate to an increase in social tension related to changing gender expectations. The insights I have gained through my own research on urban legends involving contamination suggests that there is a shared concept of the importance of boundaries.

Boundaries keep order in our world and are thus a means for organizing our lives. Once such roles breakdown, there arises disorder and potential unknown and even dangerous situations.

Thus, as global urbanization increases throughout the years, so will social expectations shift with the times. Consequently, the age-old social tension between what are perceived to be trusted, traditional beliefs, and dangerously new, modern beliefs will continue. As symbolic performances of this tension, these gender and contamination urban legends highlight the similarity in the ways people negotiate societal stressors, and the cross-cultural nature of particular thematic elements that convey such tensions.

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