

THE MOON AND MENSTRUATION:  
A TABOO SUBJECT

Selected extracts from Robert Briffault's  
*The Mothers*

Edited by Hilary Alton

A Radical Anthropology Group Publication

Published by the Radical Anthropology Group,  
c/o Anthropology Programme Leader,  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences, 4-6 University Way,  
London E 16 2RD  
Univerity of East London

ISBN 978-0-9567188-1-5



**THE MOON AND MENSTRUATION:  
A TABOO SUBJECT**



## Introduction

When my friend Max Pearson knew that he was dying, he gave me his most precious book for safekeeping. He knew I would value it: Robert Briffault's *The Mothers* was known to be a vast resource of ideas about the feminine origins of society, matriarchal societies, menstruation, lunar patterns and assorted anthropological insights.

However, it was many years later before I read it from cover to cover; I then realized not only that mine was an abridged version, but that it contained not a single reference. Despite that, Gordon Rattray's abridgement, published in 1959, was so intriguing that it set me off on a trail to find a copy of the original which had been published in 1927 in three fat volumes.

Naturally, the very first thing I did was to go on line to see if The British Library had a copy so that I could go there and make notes. To my great surprise it was not in the catalogue, even though it was a huge integrated one. This book really had sunk without trace. The only way I could read it would have been to become a member of The Psychology Society. (I have since discovered that the British Library do have three copies, but that day I simply couldn't find it anywhere.) Next I went to ABE books and to my delight found seven copies listed, all in the U.S.A. Before I could think too hard about the cost I ordered a first edition and was soon engrossed in the most wonderful treasure trove of very early references by travelers, priests, scientific observers and adventurers. Briffault's prodigious work has a vast bibliography which he had spent his life collecting, only writing it up in his final years. One reference I found comes from a Venetian who was sailing to unknown places and writing down his observations in 1590. At the other end of the scale, we find cutting edge science of the day and scholarly references from *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*.

Briffault gives the reader only a few clues as to what he really thinks, preferring to let conviction grow by piling up the examples in a rich array. In this booklet, I have selected passages from just one chapter – chapter 17 of Vol. 2. Here as elsewhere, Briffault's understanding of how universally the same beliefs and practices prevailed is clearly conveyed.

Modern scholars will view this work as dated and theoretically unconvincing. Yet the facts it documents are not disputed. My aim here is to give readers the opportunity to discover a mine of information which almost no one knows about.

It will help if we place Briffault in his time and context, as explained in the introduction to Gordon Rattray Taylor's abridged edition. In the 1850s, there was controversy as to whether the patriarchal family was the original unit of society. The bible was quoted to prove that clans and tribes had been built up by

aggregation of the family units. Bachofen published his 'Das Mutterrecht' in 1861, asserting that the original state of man had been one of sexual promiscuity, from which had emerged matriarchies, which had only later been replaced by or converted into patriarchies. This set off a series of attempts to account for the origins of human society. In 1891, the Finnish anthropologist Edward Westermarck published 'The History of Human Marriage'. He asserted that monkeys and apes have monogamy and that this was inherited by early humans as the normal pattern of marriage. Although his ideas are nowadays discredited, they were much to the taste of Christians and all traditional moralists. Thus his work enjoyed wide acclaim and was stocked by all libraries. Westermarck's view of marriage is still held by very many people if they are at all interested in the topic.

There is little doubt that Briffault felt incensed by this and that his main purpose in writing 'The Mothers', was to explode this fallacy. He certainly achieves this, producing a wealth of evidence to the contrary and so showing how Westermarck had manipulated his references and shown his bias. One might have expected Briffault to have been recognized as the winner of this argument, with belief in the universality of the nuclear family abandoned forever in a gale of laughter. In fact, Briffault's book was ignored and even now his scholarship is hardly known.

Briffault did not set out only to destroy: he wanted to establish an alternative theory. This was that a matriarchy existed everywhere before the establishment of patriarchy. He is not so much interested in inheritance through the female line as in evidence of a time when women had more power than men. Briffault identifies the crucial factor as whether or not postmarital residence was matrilineal. His enquiries led him to the view that residence everywhere was originally matrilineal, marriage having been a contract between groups allowing all the men in one group access to the women in another. In principle, if a man was married to a woman he was married to all her sisters. Finally, Briffault tries to show that the rise of patriarchy was associated with the historical transition from hunting to agriculture, bringing with it the emergence of private property.

The extracts which follow are taken from the chapter on menstruation and its close relationship to the moon. This breaks much new ground and is one of the most striking examples of the success of the technique of piling example upon example, to leave you with no other choice but to concur. Today, this method is frowned upon. Nevertheless, I think Briffault's scholarship speaks for itself. The extracts which follow are from Robert Briffault, *The Mothers*, Vol. 2 Chapter 16, pp. 352-439.

Hilary Alton. Lewisham, December 2010





## Tabu

.....a thing may be tabu because it is too holy, too sacred too good and pure to be touched; because it would be 'sacrilege' to do so. Or on the other hand it may be tabu because it is 'unclean', 'impure', and a breach of the tabu attaching to it would pollute, defile the offender and render him also unclean.

Tabus are observed from dread of the consequences of neglecting them and so may be an expression of extreme reverence or extreme horror.

But what chiefly calls for explanation is not so much the origin of any particular prohibition or tabu, as the origin of the notion of a prohibition, of a veto laid upon the natural inherited instincts of man.

The frequently-made assumption that they were imposed by the arbitrary authority of chiefs is an untenable view, for there is nothing more foreign to the character of primitive man than respect for arbitrary authority, and truly primitive societies are nothing if not equalitarian and democratic.

Although nothing exists in animal psychology exactly corresponding to a tabu... there is one only.... in which an interdict is normally imposed from without upon the most potent animal impulses.... In the mammalian female sexual congress is not functional or desirable during pregnancy and lactation, and the male is at such times invariably repelled. In the human female, though the period of sexual activity is more continuous, a further interruption appears in the form of definite menstruation.

The repulsing of the male by the female.... does not so much give rise to enhanced attraction because of a higher value set on a difficult prize, as because, like all characters exercising sexual attraction, it emphasises sex.

It is at the human level only, through the medium of language, that a prohibition can acquire the status of a recognized principle. And if I am right in considering that in the earliest human groups the influence and authority of the female were paramount, that order of prohibition must inevitably have been one of the first, or rather the very first to come into operation.

### **The Tabu on Menstrual and Puerperal Women.**

'One class of tabu is invariably present and occupies an even more fundamental place in uncultured communities than any other for their whole organization is

founded upon them. Those are the tabus referring to women and to sexual intercourse.... These are invariably the most strictly observed of all the tabus of primitive humanity. All over the world, not only among savages but also among peoples on a far higher cultural plane, the forms of tabu attaching to menstrual women are similar.

Among the Eskimo, women are regarded as dangerously contagious during menstruation and in the puerperal state. Special huts are erected for their use when they are menstruating; "the woman must live secluded for so many days, and it would be a great offence for her to enter any other hut during the time". They are subject to special dietary regulations and when the few kinds of food of which they are permitted to partake are unobtainable, they may have to go for a week without eating, although the family may be living in the midst of abundance.<sup>1</sup> They have their own cups and dishes which men must be careful not to use or touch.<sup>2</sup> On the island of Kadiak, off the coast of Alaska, Lisiansky noted that women during their menstrual period, had to retire to little huts or hovels built of reeds and grass which were about 4 feet long, 2½ feet wide and less than 3 feet high. There they remained during the whole of the period, and their food was reached out to them at the end of a stick.<sup>3</sup> Among the Tlingit when a girl first menstruated she was immediately shut up in an isolated hut which no one dare approach, and she had to conform scrupulously to the most exacting observances. She was not permitted to lie down during the whole period of her seclusion, but had to sleep propped up with logs. Her face was smeared with charcoal, her head wrapped in a mat, and she had to be careful not to expose herself to the rays of the sun. She was not even permitted to chew her own food; this was masticated for her by her relatives, and the bolus supplied to her with every precaution constituted her only nourishment.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>C. F. Hall, *Life with the Eskimaux*. 2 vols London, 1864. *Arctic Researches and Life Among the Eskimaux*, New York. 1865. pp 509 sq.

<sup>2</sup>Jacobsen J. A. *Captain Jacobsen's Reisan an der Nordwestküste Amerikas*, ed. By A. Worl

<sup>3</sup> Lisiansky, Urey, *A Voyage Round the World in the Years 1803-6*. London 1814. pp 200 sq. and married women.", Leipzig 1884. p245.

<sup>4</sup> Swanton, J. R., "Social condition, Beliefs, and linguistic Relationship of the Tlingit Indians". *Twenty-sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*. Washington, 1908, p.428; Boas, Franz. "First General Report of the Indians of British Columbia", *Report of the Fifty-ninth Meeting of The British Association for the Advancement of Science (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1889)* London 1890. pp 830 sq. Erman, Georg Adolph, "Ethnographische Wahrnehmungen und Erfahrungen an den Küsten des Berings-Meerer," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*. Vol 3. Berlin 1871. pp 318 sq. Krause, Aurel, *Die Klinkit Indianer, Ergebnisse einer Reise nach der Nord-westküste von America und der Beringstrasse (Auftrage der Bremmer Geographischen Gesellschaft)* Jena 1885. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 3, pp. 318 sq. Langsdorf, G.H. von. *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World During the Years 1785-88*. Trans. 3 vols. London 1799. Vol. 2 p. 133.

Among the Déné, “hardly any other being was the object of so much dread as a menstruating woman.”<sup>1</sup> “In the eyes of our Indians,” says Father Morice, “a woman affected thereby is the very incarnation of evil, a plague to be avoided at all costs, a being with whom all contact, however innocent, and indirect, entails exceedingly dreadful consequences”.<sup>2</sup> There is in every community a special hut to which women must resort for isolation during their menstrual period. “This is a rigidly observed law with both single. At the time of the first menstruation a girl remains isolated for two lunar months; she must not touch even her own food with her hands, and is provided with skewers for the purpose, and also with a small stick to scratch her head, for it would be dangerous for her to touch it.”<sup>3</sup> Among the Pima Indians, menstruating women retire for several days among the bushes, where they build themselves a rough shelter.<sup>4</sup> Similar precautions are observed among the Indians of British Columbia.<sup>5</sup>

The seclusion of women in a special hut or shelter during the period of their menstruation was practised by all North American tribes. Harmon found it among all the tribes with which he was acquainted.<sup>6</sup> Of the Canadian tribes, Sir Alexander Mackenzie says: “They have a custom reflecting the periodical state of a woman which is rigidly observed; at that time she must seclude herself from society. They are not even allowed in that situation to keep the same path as the men when travelling, and it is considered a great breach of decency for a woman so circumstanced to touch any utensils of manly occupation. Such a contact is supposed to defile them so that their subsequent use would be followed by certain mischief and misfortune.”<sup>7</sup> Among the Beaver Indians “a woman in her menses lodges alone, and never stirs from her lodge. When decamping she must walk behind, and drop, now and then, branches upon the road, to give notice to anyone who might happen to fall upon the same road in order to prevent

---

<sup>1</sup> Morice, A. G. “The Canadian Déné”, Annual Archeological Report, Toronto, 1905, p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> Morice, A. G. “The Great Déné Race”, *Anthropos*. Vols 1-4. Salzburg, 1906-10.

<sup>3</sup> Hamilton, Gavin, “Customs of the New Caledonian Women”, *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 7. London, 1878. Vol. vii pp. 206 sq. Cf. Petitot, E., *Autour du Grand Lac des Esclaves*. Paris. 1891 p.4

<sup>4</sup> Russel, Frank, “The Pima Indians”, *Twenty-sixth Annual Report of the American Bureau of Ethnology*. Washington. 1908. P. 183; cf. p. 185.

<sup>5</sup> Boas, Franz, “Third Report on the Indians of British Columbia”. Report of the sixty first meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Cardiff 1891) London 1892. P. 405.

<sup>6</sup> Harmon, Daniel Williams. *A Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interiour(sic) of North America*. Andover, 1820. pp.342 sq.

<sup>7</sup> Mackenzie, Sir Alexander. *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence through the Continent of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793*. London, 1801, p. cxxiii.

strangers from having sore legs and make them avoid this route.”<sup>1</sup> Again among the Mohawk Indians, “when a young woman finds herself come to a state of maturity, she retires to conceal herself with as much care as a criminal would take to keep out of the reach of justice, and when her mother or any other female relative perceives her absence she will inform her female neighbours and all will begin to search for the missing one. They are sometimes three or four days without finding her, all of which she passes in abstinence, and I really believe she would rather die than show herself before being found out.” When found she is given some provisions and a kettle in which to cook them; she must cook for herself and not presume to return to the camp for fifteen or twenty days. The utensils used by her are kept for subsequent occasions the same procedure being observed at every return of the menses. “The married women who come to a certain age have a little more indulgence when in this situation; they may sleep in the wigwam and may pass the whole day in it, but they must go and cook outside, and must not dare to touch the victuals of their husbands nor eat or drink out of the same vessel.”<sup>2</sup> Speaking more particularly of the Naudowessies, Captain Carver says: “The Indian women are remarkably decent during their menstrual illness. In every camp or town there is an apartment appropriated for their retirement at those times to which both single and married retreat and seclude themselves with the utmost strictness during the periods from all society. The men on these occasions most carefully avoid having any commerce with them, and the Naudowessies are so rigid in that observance that they will not suffer any belonging to them to fetch such things as are necessary, even fire, from these female lunar retreats, though the want is attended with the greatest inconvenience.”<sup>3</sup> “When a woman”, says La Potherie, “is stricken with the malady common to her sex, all the fires in the hut are extinguished, the hearth is cleaned and all the ashes are thrown outside, and a new fire is lit with a flint. She is obliged to dwell in a separate cabin and does not return home until after eight days. The first time that incommodity occurs a girl remains thirty days without seeing anyone except the women who look after her.”<sup>4</sup> “When a Delaware girl is out of order for the first time,” says Loskiel; “she must withdraw into a hut at some distance from the village. Her head is wrapped up for twelve days so that she can see nobody and she must submit to purges, vomits and fasting, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Keith, George, “Letters to the Hon. Roderic Mackenzie”, in L.R. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-ouest*. Vol.ii Quebec. 1890. p. 91

<sup>2</sup> Cameron D., “A Sketch of the Customs, Manners, way of living of the Natives in the Barren country about Nipigon, in L. R. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Campagne du Nord-ouest*. Quebec. 1889. Vol. ii, pp 250sq

<sup>3</sup> Carver, J., *Travels through the Interior Parts of North America*. London. 1781, pp. 224 sq.. 1781, pp. 224 sq.

<sup>4</sup> C.deC. Bacqueville de la Potherie, *Histoire de l’Amerique Septentrional*. Vol. ii pp 32.

abstain from all labour.”<sup>1</sup> Speaking of the more southerly plains tribes, Major Marston says: “The women of these nations are very particular to remove from their lodge to one erected for the particular purpose when their menstrual time approaches; no article of furniture which is used in the hut is ever used in any other, not even the steel and flint with which to strike fire. No Indian ever approaches the lodge when a woman occupies it.”<sup>2</sup>

“None of the subsisting Indian customs are more significant than those connected to the menstrual lodge. None exercises a more important influence on the circle of the wigwam.” The women, says Father Lafitau, “are treated as lepers.”<sup>3</sup> The same usages prevail amongst the natives of Central and South America. Among the Bribri Indians of Costa Rica a menstruating woman may not use any household utensil, but must make shift with banana leaves, which are afterwards carefully buried for it is believed that if any cow should happen to eat such a leaf, it would inevitably die. A woman is confined in a lonely hut where she is segregated from all communication except with her mother or other female attendant.<sup>4</sup>

In the Windward Islands Nuñez observed that “when women have their natural purgations, they provide food for themselves only, for no other person would eat of what they have touched.”<sup>5</sup> Among the Caribbean tribes a woman was confined in a hut in the forest, and isolated from a week to two months; she might not handle her own food.<sup>6</sup> The Mosquito Indian woman must quit the village for a week, and live in an isolated hut in the forest, and her food is brought to her because it would be dangerous for her to cook for herself.<sup>7</sup> Among the Macusi of Guiana, girls and women are, during menstruation, regarded as impure. They must do no work, nor must they go in the forest for they would be sure to be

---

<sup>1</sup> Loskiel, George Henry, *History of the Mission of the United Brethren among the Indians in North America*. London. 1794, p.56.

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Major Marston to Rev. Dr. Morse.”In Blair, Emma Helen, *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and the Great Lakes*. 2 vols. Cleveland, Ohio. 1911-12. Vol.ii, pp.170 sq.

<sup>3</sup> Lafitau, Joseph François, *Moeurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps*. 2vols. Paris. 1724 Vol. i, p.262.

<sup>4</sup> Pittier de Fabrega H., “Die Sprache der Bribri Indianer in Cost Rica.”*Sitzungsberichte der philosophischen historischen Classe der kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien*. Vol. cxxxviii Wien. 1898. p.20.

<sup>5</sup> Nuñez, Alvaro, “Relation.”In G, B, Ramusioi, *Navigazioni et Viaggi*, Vol. iii. Venitia. 1574. Vol. iii, fols. 323 sq.

<sup>6</sup>Bancroft H.H., *The Native Races of the Pacific States of North America*. 5 vols. New York 1875-76. Vol. i, pp.733 sq.

<sup>7</sup> Bell C. Napier, *Tangweera*, London. 1899. “Remarks on the Mosquito Territory, It’s Climate, People, Productions, etc.” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*. Vol. xxxii. London, 1862. p.254.

attacked by snakes. A girl at her first menstruation must remain all day in her hammock; at night she may rise and cook a little food for her-self. The vessels, which she has used, are broken directly after, and the sherds carefully buried.<sup>1</sup> Among the Guayquiry of the Orinoco, menstruous women were secluded and a girl before marriage had to fast for forty days. In explaining the practice to Father Gumilla, a Guayquiry chief said: "Our fathers observed that everything on which they happen to step when they are in the state of menstruation withers and dries up; and if any man trod where they have set their foot his legs began to swell. And, having sought and devised a remedy, they appointed that in order that women's bodies should not contain this poison, we should make them fast, as you have seen for forty days. For thus they are thoroughly dried up, and are no longer dangerous, at least not so much as they formerly were."<sup>2</sup> Among many Brazilian tribes a girl at her first menstruation, is suspended in a hammock under the roof of the hut, and subjected to the most severe fumigation as well as being starved.<sup>3</sup> The same method was employed by the Mundrucus and other tribes of the Amazon. "The Tucunas," says Bates, "have the singular custom, in common with the Collinos and the Manhes, of treating the young girls on their showing the first signs of womanhood, as if they had committed some crime." It not infrequently happens that the unfortunate girls die under the severity of the process of disinfection to which they are subjected.<sup>4</sup> The Arawaks explain that if proper measures are taken on the first menstruation, subsequent periods will only last a couple of days, whereas if any carelessness has been shown on the first occasion the menstrual period will last a week.<sup>5</sup> The tribes of the Uaupe river have special isolation huts for the use of menstruating women and confinements likewise take place with due regard to complete isolation.<sup>6</sup> Among the Guaranos, menstruating women are similarly secluded in menstrual huts, and their food brought and deposited near.<sup>7</sup> Among the Ticunas, the girls are shut up, when they menstruate, in a dark hut, all their hair is plucked out and they are subjected by the women to a severe flagellation.<sup>8</sup> Among the

---

<sup>1</sup> Schomburk, Richard, *Reisen in Britisch-Guiana in den Jahren 1840-44*. 3vols. Leipzig, 1847-48. vol.ii, pp. 325 sq., 313 sq.

<sup>2</sup> Gumilla, J., *El Orinoco Illustrado*. 2 vols. Madrid, 1745. vol.i p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Riuz de Montoya, Antonio, *Conquista espiritual hecha por les religiosos de la Compañia de Jesusú en las Provincias del Paraguay, Parana, Vruguy y Tape*. Madrid, 1639, p. 14.,

<sup>4</sup>Bates Henry Walter, *The Naturalist on the River Amazons*. 2 vols. London, 1863. vol, ii, pp. 405 sq.

<sup>5</sup> Coll, C, van, "Matrimonia indigenarum Surinamensiam." *Anthropos*. vol. ii. Salzburg 1907. Vol. ii, p.41.

<sup>6</sup> Coudreau, Henri, *La France equinoxiale*. 2 vols. Paris. 1887. vol ii, p. 171.

<sup>7</sup> Plassard, Louis, "Les Guaranos et le delta de l'Orinique." *Bulletin de la Société de Geographie*. 5e Série, vol xv. Paris, 1868, p.584.

<sup>8</sup>Marcy, Paul, *Voyages à travers l'Amérique du sud de l'océan Pacifique à l'océan Atlantique*. 2 vols. Paris, 1861. vol ii p.318.

Araucanians of Chile, a menstruous woman was tabu; she was debarred from attending places of public amusement, and was not on any account to visit a sick person, lest her presence might give the 'coup de grace' to the invalid.<sup>1</sup> The women of Kamchatka.... are accounted impure and are segregated from their husbands during menstruation.<sup>2</sup> Among the Yukaghir a woman is tabu during menstruation and during childbirth, and must be careful not to touch any hunting or fishing implements.<sup>3</sup> A Koryak woman is unclean during menstruation and her touch would deprive a shaman's drum of its virtue.<sup>4</sup> Among the Samoyeds and the Ostyak, women, who at ordinary times do all the work, must not, at their menstrual periods, touch anything which is for the use of the men. They are segregated in an inner chamber of the 'yurta', and must be purified with fumigation from burnt reindeer hair before resuming their duties.... After they have erected a 'yurta', it must be fumigated before the men can enter it.<sup>5</sup> In the Caucasus, among the Chevsur, there is at some distance from every village a rough stone hut thatched with straw; thither every Chavsur woman betakes herself for two days when she is menstruating. She wears her oldest clothes and her provisions are brought to her and put down at some distance from the hut.<sup>6</sup>

The Hebrews attached the greatest importance to the primitive tabu. "If a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days; and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until even. And everything that she lieth upon in her separation shall be unclean; everything also that she sitteth upon shall be unclean; And whosoever toucheth her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even. And whosoever toucheth anything that she sat upon shall wash his clothes and bathe himself and be unclean till even..... And on the eighth day she shall take unto her two turtles, or two young pigeons, and bring them unto the priest, to the door of the Tabernacle of the congregation. And the priest shall offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering; and the priest shall make an atonement for her before the Lord for the issue of her uncleanness."<sup>7</sup> In ancient Arabia similar precautions were preserved and the menstruous woman was

---

<sup>1</sup> Guevara, Tomas, "Folklore Araucano." *Anales de la Universidad de Chile*. Vol., cxxvii. Santiago de Chile, 1911. pp. 20. sq.

<sup>2</sup> Steller, G. W., *Beschreibung von dem Lande Kamtschatka*. Frankfurt, Leipzig, 1774. p.347;

<sup>3</sup> Jochelson, Waldemar. *The Yukaghir and the Yukaghirized Tungus*. (Publications of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition. Vol. ix Part i). Leiden, New York, 1910. p.101.

<sup>4</sup> Id., *The Koryak*, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Pallas, P. S., *Voyages en different provinces de l'Empire de Russie et dans l'Asie septentrionale*. 5Vols. Paris. 1788-93. vol. iii. p.77.

<sup>6</sup> Radde, G. *Die Chewsûren und ihr Land*. Cassel. 1878. pp. 79 sqq., 240.

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus, xv. 10-22, 29, 30.

isolated in a special hut.<sup>1</sup> In ancient Persia the tabus on menstrual and puerperal women were extremely strict, and the Zoroastrian sacred books enter into minute details concerning them. The very glance from the eye of a menstruous woman was regarded as polluting whatever thing it fell on, “for a fiend so violent is that fiend of menstruation, where another fiend does not smite anything with a look, it smites with a look. Hence a menstruating woman must not look upon a fire, or upon water, or converse with any man.<sup>2</sup> Women in ancient Persia were confined to an isolated portion of the house, known as ‘dashtanistan’, during menstruation, and had to remain there until twenty-four hours after the cessation of the menses. No fire was to be kindled in the house during that period, and they were to remain at least fifteen paces away from any fire or any water; all wood was to be removed from the place and the floor strewn with dust. Her food had to be cooked separately; when it was handed to her, the attendant may not approach her closer than three paces, and before receiving it she was to wrap her hand in a cloth. After the period was over all the clothes which she had been wearing must be destroyed, and she must be purified by being washed with bull’s urine. Any attempt on the part of a man to break through these tabus is compared in the Zend-Avesta to the most unimaginable crimes, such as burning the corpse of one’s own son, and any man guilty of such infamy was publicly flogged.<sup>3</sup> The modern Parsis still observe most of the rules of their ancestors. A woman is strictly confined during her menstrual period to a special darkened apartment, and no fire and no living creature must be in her neighbourhood. Not long since there was in Parsis communities, public menstrual houses where women resorted at their periods. The women had to remain entirely silent and their food was handed to them with every precaution from a distance.<sup>4</sup>

The Hindus take as serious a view of the impurities of a menstrual woman as did the Persians. According to the ‘Laws of Manu’, a man becomes impure by touching “a menstruating woman, an outcast, a woman in childbed or a corpse.<sup>5</sup> A menstruating woman is impure for three days and three nights. “She shall not apply collyrium to her eyes, nor anoint her body nor bathe in water.... nor look at the planets, nor smile.”<sup>6</sup> On the first day of her course she is as impure as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Wellhausen, J., Prolegomena to the History of Israel. Transl. Edinburgh, 1885. Reste arabischen Heidentums, pp.170 sq.

<sup>2</sup> Shâyast Lâ-Shayâst in Pahlavi Texts translated by E.W. West, The Sacred Books of the East. Vol. v. Oxford. 1880. iii, 27. vol. v, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Zend-Avesta. Translated by James Darmesteter and L. H. Mills. Sacred Books of the East. Vols. iv, xxiii, xxxi. Oxford 1880-87. Vol. iv. pp. 185sq., 188 sq.

<sup>4</sup> Schmidt, Richard, Cukasaptati. Kiel, 1894. Liebe und Ehe im alten und modernen Indien. Berlin. 1904. p. 216.

<sup>5</sup> The Laws of Manu, v. 85 (The Sacred Books of the East, vol. xxv, p.183)

<sup>6</sup> Vashista, vol. 5-6 (the Sacred Books of the East, vol. vii, p. 32.)



Pariah; on the second day she must regard herself as impure as one who should have murdered a Brahman.<sup>1</sup> The wisdom, the energy, the strength, the sight and the vitality of a man who approaches a woman covered with menstrual excretions utterly perish.”<sup>2</sup>

The segregation of menstruating women is observed even more rigorously by the aboriginal races of India than by the Arya Hindus. Thus among the Gonds, there is a building out of sight of the village to which women in this condition retired. Their relatives brought them food and deposited it outside the hut..... It was believed that the greatest evils would befall anyone who looked upon a woman during her state of impurity.<sup>3</sup> Among the Gari, a low caste of Bengal, “every girl and woman as soon as she notices that her period has appeared, slinks away from her home and betakes herself to a small hut built of reeds in a secluded spot in the fields, before which a cloth hangs as a curtain. As long as her menstruation lasts she is fed by another person.<sup>4</sup> Among the Pulay caste, a menstruating woman is segregated for seven days in an isolated hut which even her mother dare not enter.<sup>5</sup>

The wild races of the Malay Peninsula have the same notion of the dangers attaching to the condition of women during menstruation and childbirth. Among the Orang Belenda and the Orang Laut .... the duty of carrying lighted sticks to kindle a new fire is entrusted in those nomadic tribes to the young girls, but those vestals are disqualified from that important function when menstruating. Women during their period are confined to a hut, no man would dare to come near, nor must they cook for a man or touch anything belonging to him, and the vessels which they use must be kept carefully separate.<sup>6</sup>

---

1. <sup>1</sup> Dubois, John Antoine, *Moeurs, institutions et cérémonies des peuples de l'Inde*. 2 vols. Paris. 1825. vol. ii

<sup>2</sup>The Laws of Manu iv, 41. (The Sacred books of the East. vol. v p.135.)

<sup>3</sup>Russel, R. V., *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*. 4 Vols. London, 1916. vol. iii, p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> Tavernier, Jean-Baptiste, *Les six voyages de Tavernier en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes*. 3 vols. Paris, 1692. vol. iii, p.180.

<sup>5</sup> Jagor, F., “Einege Sklaven-Kasten in Malabar.” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*. vol. x, Berlin, 1878, p. 237.

<sup>6</sup> Stevens, Hrolf Vaughan, “Mittheilungen aus dem Frauenleben der Ôrang Belendas, der Ôrang Lâut,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*. Vol. xxvii. Berlin, 1896. pp. 165, 168, 170 sq.

Among the Bushmen a menstruating woman is an object of terror, and the community is protected by her complete segregation.<sup>1</sup> Among the Kaffir of South Africa, women are entirely secluded for six days at their periods and by a curious regulation have to be particularly careful at that time not to touch cow dung. They are not permitted to speak above a whisper.<sup>2</sup> Among the Baila of Rhodesia a menstruating woman must not sit down in other people's company; on no account may she touch her husband's bed but must sleep on the floor; nor can she cook any food for him.<sup>3</sup> Among the Akikuyu, if a woman menstruates in a hut, even if it has just been built, it is at once pulled down and destroyed as unfit for human habitation.<sup>4</sup> "Among the Bakongo it was the custom for women and girls to live apart periodically, in a special house so as to isolate them from all converse and contact with men."<sup>5</sup> In Loango there is a hut in the middle of the village for the seclusion of women during menstruation, but not only are the men strictly forbidden to approach it at such a time, but all the neighboring huts are deserted by their inhabitants on such occasions.<sup>6</sup> In Angola, a woman during menstruation "is regarded as impure and remains concealed from all eyes. She must be shut up for six days without being seen by anyone."<sup>7</sup> In Ashanti, "During the menses the women of the capital retire to the plantations or crooms in the bush. The women of Ahanta, on the same occasion are prohibited from entering any inhabited place, and if they attempt to go into a house are heavily fined or punished. If the family is respectable they generally erect a temporary shed to shelter her. The poorer classes are forced to endure the inclemencies of the weather without retreat."<sup>8</sup> On the Goldcoast, "they have a custom worthy of remark, established from time immemorial among the negroes of this coast; it is that every village has a hut a distance of about a hundred yards which is called the 'burnamon', into which all women and girls without exception are obliged to retire, secluded from communication with anyone until their purgations have entirely ceased; after which they are free to return to their homes. The necessaries of life are brought to them as if they were stricken with the plague. And they would not on any account keep this infirmity hidden when it comes, for

---

<sup>1</sup> Bleek W. H. I. A Brief Account of Bushmen Folk-lore and other Texts. Cape town 1875. p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Macdonald, James, "Manners, Customs, Superstitions and Religions of South African Tribes", *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* . Vol. xx, London, 1891. pp. 116, 118.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, E. W. and Dale, A. M., *The Ila-speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia*. 2 vols. London. 1921. vol.ii, pp.26 sq.

<sup>4</sup> Hobley, C.W., "Further Researches into Kikuyu and Karba Religious Beliefs." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. Vol. xli. London, 1911. p. 409.

<sup>5</sup> Weeks, John. *Among the Primitive Bahongo*. London, 1914. p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> Pechuël-Loesche, Edward, "Indiscretions aus Loango." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Vol. x . Berlin, 1878 pp. 32

<sup>7</sup> Degrandpré, L. M., *Voyage à la côte occidentale d'Afrique, fait dans les années 1786 et 87* 2vols. Paris, 1801. p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Bowdich, T. E., *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantèe*. London, 1873. p. 252

it would be as much as their life is worth if it were discovered that they had prepared food for their husbands during that time.”<sup>1</sup> Even Queens reigning in their own right and royal princesses, leave their residences at their menstrual period, and, clad in miserable rags, betake themselves to an isolated hut in some lonely spot.<sup>2</sup> Among the Menankabau of Sumatra if a woman were to go near a rice crop while she is menstruating the crop would fail.<sup>3</sup> In the island of Wetar menstruous women were secluded in special huts.<sup>4</sup> Menstruating women are tabu in the Gilbert Islands, the Marshall Islands and New Guinea. ‘In New Caledonia..... In the neighbourhood of every village there is a hut specially reserved for women who have their monthly illness. Throughout Polynesia menstruating women were taboo and separated from men. Among some of the tribes of the western coast of Dutch New Guinea a menstruating woman is not allowed to use the staircase or ladder which leads to the platform on which the native houses are built; she is obliged to reach it by climbing up one of the poles.<sup>5</sup>In Hawaii every woman retires into the bush for three days at her periods; even queens are not exempted.<sup>6</sup> Further references are given for Tonga and Tahiti.

**[Editor’s note:** These examples all show the uniformity of thought and practice throughout the world. Briffault remarks that there are no known people who do not hold substantially the same views on menstruating women. He goes on to say that these tabus are not observed from any abstract principle, but from dread of the dire effects which contact with these women would produce. He then lists evidence from every continent of the catastrophic effects of contact with menstrual blood. Hunting implements fail, a single look can bring bad luck to the hunter or fisherman, sickness and death are caused, men are deprived of their manhood and children may be seized with violent vomiting. He ends with modern examples from Europe of how women wither the vine, turn wine sour, cannot make butter, would not attempt mayonnaise, and ‘in England it is well known that bacon cannot be cured by a menstruating woman.’ “It is a very prevalent belief amongst females both rich and poor”, writes a

---

<sup>1</sup> Loyer, Godefrey, *Relation du Voyage du Royaume d’Issyny, Côte d’Or, Paris de Guinée*. Paris 1714. p.168

<sup>2</sup> Pogge, Paul, *Im Reich des Muata Jamwo*. Berlin, 1880. p.243. and Connolly, R. M., “Social Life in Fanti-land.” *Journal of the Anthropological Society*. Vol. xxvi. London, 1897. p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> Toorne, J. L. van deer “Het animisme bij dem Minamkabauer der Padangsche Bovenlanden,” *Bijdragen tot de taal-land-en volenkunde van Nederlandische Indie* xxxix. Batavia, 1880 p.66.

<sup>4</sup> Riedel, J. G. F., *De sluik-en kroesharige rassen lusschen Selebes en Papua’s* Gravenhage, 1886. p.450

<sup>5</sup> Meyners d’Estrey,C., *La Papouaisie ou Nouvelle Guinée occidentale*, Rotterdam, 188. p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, *A voyage round the World from 1806 to 1812*. Edinburgh 1816. p.190.

medical man, “that in curing hams, women should not rub the legs of pork with the brine pickle at the time they are menstruating.”<sup>1</sup>

It can be seen that the traditional restrictions described here have become laden with additional measures which appear to ensure that the women are not in a position of any power – they are isolated, forbidden to speak, seen as unclean etc. However, Briffault points out that there is little evidence that any compulsion is needed to force the women to segregate themselves at such times and suggests that the wording of these accounts probably expresses the assumptions of the reporters that any ethical regulations must have been imposed by the men. He points out that “Compulsion of any kind is foreign to the character of primitive societies; the women in carrying out their arduous duties, never do so under compulsion, even where the men are most tyrannical. Indeed the most rigorous observance take place in societies such as Micronesia, and North America, where far from being tyrannized, the women exercise an almost despotic power over the men.”

“The women, it appears from most accounts, segregate themselves of their own accord; they isolate themselves without consulting the men and warn them not to approach them”. He gives some examples where these customs are abused by women and employed as a convenient pretext to exclude their husbands from their company, sometimes allowing their paramours to approach them before their husband. In some places the taboos on menstruating women are regarded as beneficial to themselves and as being necessary to the proper carrying out of their sexual functions.<sup>2]</sup>

The taboos attaching to women were not originally identified with such ideas as impurity and sometimes had the opposite meaning. In many primitive rites the sexual act is a sanctifying and purifying ritual and here taboo means primarily ‘dangerous’. Thus the ‘Institutes of Vishnu’ lay down that the crime of killing a menstruating woman is as great as the murder of a Brahman.<sup>3</sup> An example of its sanctifying and purifying influence is given. “Among the Ainu menstrual blood is chiefly regarded as a talisman. When a man sees some on the floor of a hut he wipes it up with a piece of paper and rubs it over his breast. He believes he will

---

<sup>1</sup>The British Medical Journal 1878. vol. I p. 324.

<sup>2</sup> Bogoras, Waldemar. The Chuckchee (Publications of the Jessup North Pacific Expedition, vol. vii). Leiden and New York 1904. p. 492.

<sup>3</sup> The Institutes of Vishnu, Transl. by J.Jolly; The Sacred books of the East. Vol. vii. Oxford 1880. xxxvi. I (ibid., vol. vii p. 134).

thereby secure success in all his enterprises.<sup>1</sup> “Among the Aborigines themselves, whose ‘horror’ of a woman’s blood is so pronounced, if a man is seriously ill, he is sometimes treated with blood from a woman’s vulva; her labora minora is scarified so as to make them bleed, and she rubs the blood all over his body, after which a coating of grease is applied.”<sup>2</sup> Again, among the Warundi of East Africa, the menstruating girl, who is almost everywhere segregated as if she were a leper, “is led all over the house, and obliged to touch everything as if her touch imparted a benediction instead of a curse.”<sup>3</sup> Among the Déné, who, it will be remembered, regard menstruating women with extravagant dread, if a child is not thriving, or several of his brothers and sisters have died, his mother will fasten round his neck a small piece of cloth soiled with menstrual blood.”<sup>4</sup>

In these instances the menstrual blood is regarded as scaring away evil spirits and thus like a powerful poison, acts as a disinfectant.

“The dreaded properties of the blood are often, on a similar principle turned to account for a useful purpose. Among the North American Indians, when the corn began to ripen, a woman would leave her isolation hut in the middle of the night and walk naked through the fields. By this means injurious insects and caterpillars were surely destroyed.”<sup>5</sup> The ancient Greeks had hit upon the same ingenious procedure as the American Indians. Demokritos stated that all insects and worms are destroyed in a field if a menstruating woman walks three times round it with flowing hair and bare feet.<sup>6</sup> Columella recommends the same method, which was evidently usual in Italy.<sup>7</sup> Indeed it is practiced by Italian peasants at the present day; in the district of Belluno a young girl runs naked round the field and caterpillars are thus destroyed. It is usual for a priest to assist in exorcising them, but this is doubtless not essential.<sup>8</sup> The same method was

---

<sup>1</sup> Pilsudski, Bronislaw. *Materials for the Study of the Ainu Language and Folklore*. Cracow, 1912. “Schwangerschaft, Entbindung und Fehlgeburt bei der Insel Sachalen”. *Anthropos*. vol v. Salzburg. 1910. p.774.

<sup>2</sup> Stirling, E.C. in *Report on the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia*. Part iv, “Anthropology”. London, Melbourne. 1896. p. 182.

<sup>3</sup> Baumann, Oscar, *Durch Massailand zur Nilquelle*. Berlin 1894. p.221. as cited by Sir J.G.Frazer, *The Golden Bough* vol. iii. p. 225.

<sup>4</sup> Schinz, Hans, *Deutsch-Sud-West-Afrika*. Oldenburg. Leipzig. 1891. p.167.

<sup>5</sup> Schoolcraft. H. R. *Algonic Researches*. New York. 1839. *Historical and Statistical Information, respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*. 6 Vols. Philadelphia, 1851-60. Vol. v. p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> Columella. *De re rustica*, in *Scriptores Rei Rusticae Veteres Latini*. Leipzig 1794-97. xi, 13. 64.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, x. 357 sqq. Cf. *Palladius, De re rustica*. i. 35.

<sup>8</sup> Bastanzi. G, “Superstizioni religiose nelle provincie di Treviso e di Belluno”. *Archivio per l’Anthropologia e la Etnologia*, xvii,p. 274.

employed in Nuremburg in the sixteenth century to get rid of garden pests;<sup>1</sup> and in Holland, at the present day, it is usual for a girl at her menstrual period to go round the cabbage patch in order that caterpillars may thus be got rid of.<sup>2</sup> The natives of Northern Rhodesia similarly believe that the presence of a menstruating woman will drive away or destroy the dreaded tsetse fly. They affirm that whole districts have been freed from the baneful insect owing to the number of women who are in the habit of passing through the country.”<sup>3</sup>

It will be seen from the foregoing instances how easily the dangerous; dreaded and maleficent character of a ‘sacred’, or ‘tabu’, person or thing may pass by a quite logical transition into the seemingly opposite notion of a ‘holy’, beneficent influence, which bestows benefits and blessings instead of perils and curses.

### **The Menstrual Tabu apparently regarded as the Type of Tabu Prohibitions**

Menstrual and puerperal tabus appear to be regarded by some as the very type of tabu of things sacred. The Polynesian word ‘tabu’ or ‘tapu’ is closely allied to the word ‘tupua’, which in Polynesian languages signifies ‘menstruation’.<sup>4</sup> Again the word ‘atua’, which has been adopted to translate ‘God’, and which is applied to all spirits, or dreaded and supernatural phenomena, has reference to menstruation in particular.<sup>5</sup> The Dakotan word corresponding to the term ‘tabu’ is ‘wakan’. In Rigg’s ‘Dakota-English Dictionary’ ‘wakan’ is defined thus: “spiritual, consecrated; wonderful, incomprehensible; said also of women at the menstrual period”. Another writer in the same work gives the alternative explanation: “Mysterious; incomprehensible in a peculiar state which, from not being understood it is dangerous to meddle with; hence the application of this word to women at the menstrual period.”<sup>6</sup> Among the Arabs the expressions ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ had reference to the condition of menstruating women and had originally no other meaning.<sup>7</sup> Among the Jews the medium of purification was known as “the water of separation”, the latter term being used in reference

---

<sup>1</sup> Lammert, Gottfried, Volksmedizin und medizinischer Aberglaube in Bayern und den angrenzenden Bezirken. Würzburg. 1869.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, Henry Havelock, Man and Woman. London. 1914. p.360.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, E. W. and Dale A.M., The Isla speaking peoples of Northern Rhodesia. 2 vols. London. 1921. Vol. ii. p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Tregear, E., The Maori-Polynesian Comparative Dictionary. Wellington. 1891. p. 557.

<sup>5</sup> Best, Elsdon. “Omens and Superstitious Beliefs of the Maoris”, Journal of the Polynesian Society. Vol. vii. Wellington. 1898. “The Lore of the Whare –Kohanga. Journal of the Polynesian Society, xiv, p.210.

<sup>6</sup> Riggs, Stephen Return. Dakota- English Dictionary (Contributions to North American Ethnology. Vol. vii). Washington. 1890. pp507 sq.

<sup>7</sup> Wellhausen, J. Reste arabischen Heidentums. Berlin. 1897. p.170. The popular notion that ‘impure’ means physically unclean is erroneous. The two words are in Hebrew, as in most primitive languages, entirely different.

to the menstrual seclusion of women.<sup>1</sup> The tabu state is generally signified by marking a person or object with blood; red paint serves equally well, for the blood is not the cause of the tabu but the mark of it. The condition of a manslayer whom his deed has rendered 'sacred', or tabu is indicated by painting him red.<sup>2</sup> Among the Maori of New Zealand "the way of rendering anything 'tapu' was by making it red. When a person died his house was thus painted; when a tapu was laid in anything the chief erected a post and painted it with 'kura'; wherever a corpse rested some memorial was set up; oftentimes the nearest rock or tree served as a monument; but whatever object was selected it was sure to be red. If the corpse was conveyed by water, wherever they landed a similar token was left; and when it reached its destination the canoe was dragged on shore, painted red and abandoned. When a 'hahunga' took place the scraped bones of the chief thus ornamented and wrapped in a red-stained mat were deposited in a box smeared in the sacred colour and placed in a painted tomb."<sup>3</sup>

"The condition of women in a tabu state is commonly indicated by them painting themselves red. Thus among the Dieri and other Australian tribes, menstruating women were marked with red paint round the mouth.<sup>4</sup> Among the tribes of Victoria a menstruating woman is painted red from the waist upwards.<sup>5</sup> Among the Tapuya tribes of Brazil a menstruating woman is also painted red.<sup>6</sup> In some parts of the Gold Coast women painted themselves red when menstruating.<sup>7</sup> In India the condition of a menstruating woman is indicated by her wearing round her neck a handkerchief stained with menstrual blood.<sup>8</sup>

The sign of blood is commonly used in marriage ceremonies. The theory of patriarchal marriage is expressed with admirable explicitness by Brahmanic writers: "The wife", says the 'Baudhayana Dharma-sutra', "is pure to her husband

---

<sup>1</sup> Numbers, xix. 9 sqq.; cf. Leviticus, xii, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, Thomas and Calvert James. *Fiji and the Fijians*, London. 1870. ; Hearne, S. *Journey from Prince of Wales' Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean*. London. 1795. p.204. Cole, H. "Notes on the Wagogo of German East Africa", *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*. Vol. xxxii. London. 1902. p.314. Torday, E. and Joyce, T. A. "Notes on the Ethnography of the Ba-Yaka". *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*. Vol. xxxvi. London. 1906. pp. 50 sq.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, J., *Te Ika a Maui, or New Zealand and its Inhabitants*. London. 1870. p. 95. cf, Shortland, E. *Traditions and Superstitions of New Zealand*. London. 1856. p.92.

<sup>4</sup> Spencer, Sir Walter Baldwin and Gillen, F. J. *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*. London. 1899. p.472.

<sup>5</sup> Dawson, J. *The Australian Aborigines*. Melbourne. 1881. *The Aborigines of Victoria*. pp.ci sq.

<sup>6</sup> Dapper, Olfert. *Die unbehante Neue Welt, oder Beschreibung des Weltteils Amerika*. Amsterdam. 1673. p. 566.

<sup>7</sup> De Grandpré, L. M. *Voyage à la Côte d'Afrique, fait dans les années 1786 et 1787*. 2 Vols. Paris. 1801. vol. i. p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> Monteiro, Rose. *Delagoa Bay, its Natives and Natural History*. London. 1891. p. 79.

and impure to every stranger.”<sup>1</sup> To marry a woman is therefore to make her tabu to everyone else except oneself. Accordingly she is marked with blood or red paint. Marking the bride with ‘sindur’ is the essential of the marriage ceremony through out modern India.<sup>2</sup> The parting of a bride’s hair is commonly stained with vermilion.<sup>3</sup> He goes on to give examples of many other cultures where the bride is marked with red or blood, listing China, Borneo, the Congo, the Solomon Islands, Australia and the Caribbean.

**[Editor’s note:** It is common for men who are embarking on a perilous undertaking or who fear malign influences to paint themselves red. Briffault quotes Pliny telling us about Ethiopian nobles, and Herodotus who noted the same customs among the Lybians and the Arabs. He reminds us how cups of red ochre have been found in Egyptian tombs of the first dynasty and how among the early Romans, triumphant war chiefs were painted red.]

“The idea no doubt was to scare away evil and envious spirits by making a man tabu with the sign of blood.” Mothers among the Tlinkit Indians, in order to safeguard their children from evil influences and cause them to grow strong, paint their noses red.<sup>4</sup> The door-posts of houses are marked with blood or red paint especially in times of danger and epidemics. The practice is observed in West Africa,<sup>5</sup> among the Dyaks of Borneo,<sup>6</sup> in Bengal,<sup>7</sup> as it was in ancient Peru,<sup>8</sup> and among the Jews.<sup>9</sup> In Ceram the house in which a menstruous woman is segregated was painted red.<sup>10</sup>

All objects which are sacred or ‘tabu’ are commonly smeared with blood or red paint. He gives references for sacred stones in India, Madagascar and Burma being either smeared with blood or painted red; sacred trees among the Esthonians and the statues of Gods in India, being treated in the same way. On the day of the new moon the Banyoro waylay a man and cut his throat in order to

---

<sup>1</sup> Baudhayana Dharma-sutra. i. 5. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Dalton, E.T., Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal. Calcutta. 1872. pp.131, 160, 216, 220, 252, 273,317, 321.

<sup>3</sup> Crookes, W. The Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India. 2 vols. Westminster. 1896. vol. ii. p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Swanton, J.R., “Social Conditions Beliefs and Linguistic Relationship of the Tlingit Indians”. Twenty-sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology. Washington. 1908. p.429.

<sup>5</sup> Kingsley, Mary. Travels in West Africa. London. 1897. p.454.

<sup>6</sup> Gomes, E. H. Seventeen Years Among The Sea Dyaks of Borneo. London. 1911. p.201.

<sup>7</sup> Dalton, E.T., Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal. Calcutta. 1872. pp.115,270,272.

<sup>8</sup> Payne, E. J., History of the New World Called America. 2 vols. Oxford. 1892-9.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus, xi. 13, 16; Numbers, iii. 13 ; viii,17.

<sup>10</sup> Riedel, J.G.F., De Sluik-en kroesharig rassen tusschen Selebes en Papua. ‘s Gravenhage. 1886. p.139.



smear with his blood the royal fetiches.<sup>1</sup> Pausanias tells us that the Greeks painted the statues of Dionysos red and Pliny that the Romans applied a coat of red paint to the face of Jupiter just before their festivals. Likewise the natives of West Africa and the Congo paint their idols red on the first day of the new moon.<sup>2</sup> The Australian blacks pour blood over their sacred stones and paint their 'churingas' with red ochre. They paint themselves red after the performance of the intichiuma rites. They moreover volunteer the strangely significant information that this red paint is really the menstrual blood of women. The deposits of red ochre which are found in various parts of the country are associated with women's blood. Near the Stuart's Hole on the Finke River, there is a red ochre pit which has evidently been used for a long time; and tradition says that in the Altcheringa two kangaroo women came from Ilpilla, and at this spot caused blood to flow from the vulva in large quantities and so formed the deposit of red ochre. Travelling away westwards they did the same thing in other places. In much the same way it is related of the dancing women of Unthippa women that, at a place called Wankima, in the Eastern part of the Arunta district, they were so exhausted with dancing that their organs fell out and gave rise to the large deposits of red ochre found there.<sup>3</sup> The Bushmen and Hottentots appear to have similar ideas, the red ochre with which they paint themselves at their ritual dances is called 'gorob', after 'Gorob' or 'Gorib', one of their principle deities, which there is little doubt, is a form of the moon. In a Hottentot song addressed to the spirit of rain, she is thus addressed: "Thou who has painted the body red like Goro; thou who dost not drop the menses".<sup>4</sup> The Bushmen and Hottentots thus appear to associate, like the Australian aborigines, their ceremonial red paint with menstrual blood.

### **Some other Tabus probably connected with the Menstrual Prohibition**

The foregoing facts and considerations, taken together, point to the conclusion that the veto imposed by women upon the masculine impulses during their periodic unfitness for sexual functions was the earliest formulated prohibition imposed upon the operation of natural instincts, and embodied in human tradition.... In primitive societies those sexual restrictions, although seldom conceived in the same manner as sexual morality amongst ourselves, play an important part connected with every act and avocation of primitive man. The hunter, the fisherman, the warrior, the agriculturalist, the magician, regard

---

<sup>1</sup> Roscoe, John. The Bakitara of Banyoro. ( The First Part of the Report of the Mackie Ethnological Expedition to Central Africa) Cambridge 1923. p.108.

<sup>2</sup> Merolla da Sorrento, J., "A Voyage to Congo and Several Other Countries". Transl. in Pinkerton, Voyages and Travels. Vol. xvi. London. 1814. p. 273.

<sup>3</sup> Spencer W. B and Gillen F. J. The Native Tribes of Central Australia. London. 1899. p. 463.

<sup>4</sup> Hahn, Theophilus, Tsuni-Goam, the Supreme Being of the Khoi Khoi. London. 1881. p. 60. cf. p.104.

abstention from intercourse and contact with women as essential to the success of their undertakings; their weapons, nets and instruments must be likewise protected from the risk of losing their virtue and efficacy by contact with women.

Other taboos which can be shown to be related to the menstrual taboo and which are still observed can be found.

The superstition that it is unlucky to step under a ladder can be shown to have a connection with the taboo on menstruating women. Rather than a precaution against the fall of a paint pot it is a survival of a very widespread scruple against passing under anything at all, which in itself is connected to the menstrual taboo. For example, "The Australian blacks have a dread of passing under a leaning tree, or even under the rails of a fence. The reason they give is that a woman may have been upon the tree or fence, and some blood from here may have fallen on it and might fall on them. In Ugi, one of the Solomon Islands, a man will never, if he can help it, pass under a tree which has fallen across the path, for the reason that a woman may have stepped over it before him. Among the Karams of Burma, going under a house, especially if there are females within, is avoided, as is passing under trees..... The Siamese think it unlucky to pass under a rope on which women's clothes are hung.... Probably in all such cases the rule is based on a fear of being brought into contact with blood, especially the blood of women. From a like fear a Maori will never lean his back against the wall of a native house,"<sup>1</sup> for Maori women are in the habit of thrusting their soiled diapers between the house boards. For similar reasons a Maori would never permit a girl or woman to step over his legs when he was sitting down, for if she did, his power of running and overtaking an enemy would be entirely lost.<sup>2</sup> The Baganda have the same notion, which is indeed a very common one.<sup>3</sup> The same fears which Sir James Frazer mentions account for the horror which would fill the Oraons of Chota Nagpur if they were to see a woman climbing on the thatched roof of a hut. In the olden days a woman found guilty of such an act would have been punished by having her ears cut off.<sup>4</sup> As in other cases the dread which attaches to a woman who may be menstruating does not arise from her 'impure' but her 'sacred' character, for the Maori believe that the spirit or god passing over their store houses would have exactly the same baneful influence, and that all their food would rot.<sup>5</sup> The facts mentioned by Sir James Frazer are not adduced by him in elucidation of our superstition about walking under a ladder, but of the rule observed in Rome that the Flamen Dialis might not walk under a trellised vine,

---

<sup>1</sup> Frazer, Sir James, George., *The Golden Bough*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. 12 vols. London. 1907-15. vol. iii. p. 354, 250.

<sup>2</sup> White, John., *Maori Superstitions*. Auckland. 1856. p.28.

<sup>3</sup> Roscoe, John., *The Baganda*. London. 1911. p.49.

<sup>4</sup> Sarat Chandra Roy. *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*. p. 273.

<sup>5</sup> White John, *Maori Superstitions*. op.cit., p.21

for the juice of the grape, which is commonly regarded as the equivalent of blood, might have fallen on him, and thus placed him in a state of tabu. The Jews were, like all primitive peoples, extremely careful to dispose of their cut hair and nail clippings, so that they might not, as parts of their own bodies, be subjected to evil influences, which would inevitably affect them. The specific reason which they gave for these precautions was that it might chance that a menstruating woman should step over them.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Sabbath**

As a further example of the relation of which we are speaking we may consider another, and much more important tabu which is still observed amongst ourselves, and which we derive from the ancient Hebrews, namely the keeping holy or tabu, of the Sabbath day.

We have seen that it is an almost universal rule that a menstruating woman may not set her hand to any work. The tabu extends not infrequently to the woman's husband, who is thrown out of employment by his wife's condition.<sup>2</sup> Among the Habe, a tribe of the French Sudan, a man whose wife is menstruating would not dare to undertake a journey or go hunting or sow a field; indeed it would be of little use his attempting to do anything of the kind for such undertaking could not possibly prosper.<sup>3</sup>

General abstinence from all kind of work is commonly observed by almost every primitive community on occasions which are accounted inauspicious, such as an eclipse, an epidemic sickness, or the pollution caused by the death of some important personage.<sup>4</sup>

Besides those tabu days, there exist among many peoples, regular tabu days which recur at fixed intervals. An old resident in Ashanti calculated that there were only about one hundred and fifty or one hundred and sixty days in the year during which any business of importance could be safely undertaken in the dusky kingdom.<sup>5</sup> The ancient Greeks were almost as bad as the natives of Ashanti in this respect; Hesiod's poem on 'Works' has as its object to lay down in what

---

<sup>1</sup> Hershon Paul Isaac. *A Talmudic Miscellany*. London. 1880. p.49, citing Hishna Moedh Katan, fol. 18.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Stseeli Indians of British Columbia. (C. Hill Tout. "Ethnological Report on the Stseelis", *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, xxxiv, p. 320.); *Natives of Torres Straits* ( Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits, vol. v, p. 207).

<sup>3</sup> Desplagnes A.M.L., *Le Plateau Central Nigérien. Une Mission Archéologique et Ethnologique au Soudan Française*. Paris. 1907. p. 227.

<sup>4</sup> Webster Hutton, *Rest Days*. New York. 1916. especially pp. 8 sqq., 62sqq.

<sup>5</sup> Dupuis Joseph, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee*. London. 1824. p.213 n, Cf. Beecham John, *Ashanti and the Gold Coast*. London. 1841.

days it is safe to undertake any work on a farm. The chief purpose of a calendar amongst the ancient Egyptians appears to have been to mark the lucky and the unlucky days and the Babylonian calendar had primarily the same purpose. The calendar of unlucky days, which among most people assume the form of established tabu or holy days, is almost invariably regulated by the phases of the moon. The day of the new moon is most generally looked upon as particularly unsuited to any undertaking. To this day the day of the full moon is very frequently added. "According to the rules of astrology," observes Aubrey, "it is not good to undertake any business of importance in the new moon, and not better just at the full moon."<sup>1</sup> In order to be on the safe side, two more lucky days should be added, the four days corresponding to the recognizable phases of the moon being thus marked out as being specially unlucky. With a large number of African people the day of the new moon is observed as a day of general abstention from work. Thus the Zulus abstain on new-moon days from work of any kind, "thinking that if anything is sown on those days they can never reap the benefits thereof."<sup>2</sup> So also among the Bechuana, on the day of the new moon, "all must cease from work and keep what is called in England a holiday."<sup>3</sup> They believe that, "if they should set about their labour at such a season, the millet would remain in the ground without sprouting, or that the ear would fail to fill, or that it would be destroyed by rust."<sup>4</sup> Among the Baziba, a tribe dwelling to the south-west of Lake Victoria the day of the new moon is "a recognized day of rest."<sup>5</sup> The Baganda hold imposing ceremonies at the new moon and it is recognized custom to dispense on such days with all unnecessary work; firewood must not be cut and care is taken to prepare all food for the festival beforehand so that the women should not have to do any cooking on the holy day.<sup>6</sup> The Banyoro observe similarly the day of the new moon. When Speke called on the King of Unuro he found the palace shut up and no one about. It was indeed their Sunday although it was a Moon-day, and no sort of business could be done.<sup>7</sup> The Warega of the Upper Congo hold that nothing they could do or undertake at the time of the new moon could come to good.<sup>8</sup> In Ashanti there is a regular weekly tabu day on which it is believed no work would prosper; "the

---

<sup>1</sup> Aubrey John, *Remains of Gentilisme and Judaisme*. Ed. by J. Britten. London. 1881. p.85.

<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant Farewell in Owen W.F.W. *Narrative of Voyages to Explore the Shores of Africa, Arabia and Madagascar*. 2 vols. London. 1833. p.397. Cf. D. Kidd *The Essential Kaffir*, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> Campbell John, *Travels in South Africa*. London. 1815. p.414.

<sup>4</sup> Stow G.W. *The Native Races of South Africa*. London. 1905 Cf. Livingstone David. *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*. London. 1857. p.255.

<sup>5</sup> Cunningham J.F. *Uganda and its Peoples*. London. 1905. p.294.

<sup>6</sup> Roscoe John. *The Baganda*. London. 1911. p.207, 299, 428; Id., "Further Notes on the Manners and Customs of the Baganda." *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, xxxii. p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Speke, J. H. *Journal of the Discovery of the Nile*. Edinburgh. 1863. p. 523.

<sup>8</sup> Delhaise.C. *Les Warega*. Bruxelles. 1909. p.279.

fishermen would expect that, were they to go out on that day the fetich would be angry and spoil their fishing.”<sup>1</sup> In southern Nigeria every eighth day is sacred to the goddess Nimm, and is called the ‘Women’s day.’<sup>2</sup>

The two great monthly festivals of ancient Hindu religion, on which after preparatory fastings and abstinences, the sacrifices of the ‘soma’ or moon plant, was celebrated, took place on the days of the new moon and of the full moon.<sup>3</sup> On these occasions a Brahman might not trim his hair or his beard, nor cut his nails; he might not set out on any journey, nor sell any goods, and he was to speak as little as possible.<sup>4</sup> Those observances became in later Brahmanical religion extended, on the principle of greater thoroughness, to the first days of the intermediate phases of the moon, and the observance of the tabu days thus became a weekly one. It is worthy of note that, in contrast to the observance of the Sabbath in English and Scottish households, where it was a strict rule that all secular literature be put aside and that no reading should be indulged in except that of the Holy Scriptures, Brahmanical religious thought considered that the four monthly tabu days, or ‘parvans’ were the very days on which the sacred books should on no account be read. This was because Sacred Scriptures should not be exposed to the risk of pollution by being read on the Sabbath. It could not profit a man to read them on those days. “The new-moon day,” the laws of ‘Manu’ enjoin, “destroys the teacher, the fourteenth day the pupil, the eighth and full-moon day destroys all remembrance of the Veda; therefore avoid reading on those days.”<sup>5</sup>

The four monthly Sabbaths of Vedic and Brahmanical religion were adopted by Buddhism, though their institution was of course ascribed to the Founder.<sup>6</sup> In Siam, where the observances of the four monthly Sabbaths was probably also instituted by Buddhist missionaries, “their Sunday, called by them ‘Vampra’, is always the fourth day of the moon; in each month they have two great ones, at the new and full moon, and two less solemn on the seventh and twenty-first.”<sup>7</sup>

Among the Dayaks of Borneo the influences of the moon are particularly dreaded, and the month is elaborately parceled out into inauspicious or evil days,

---

<sup>1</sup> Beecham John, *Ashantee and the Gold Coast*. London. 1841. p.185.

<sup>2</sup> Talbot, P.Aumary. *In the Shadow of the Bush*. London. 1912. p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> *Rig-Veda*, i, 9, I. 94. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Grihya-sutra*, I, 5. 1-26. *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol.xxx, p.25.

<sup>5</sup> *The Laws of Manu*, iv, 113. (*The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. xxv.) p.147.

<sup>6</sup> Childers R.C. *A Dictionary of the Pali Language*. London. 1875. s.v., ‘uposhato’; Kern H., *Der Buddhismus und seine Geschichte in Indien*. Trans. from the Dutch. 2 vols. Leipzig. 1882-84. vol.ii. p.256.

<sup>7</sup> Turpin F.H. *Histoire Civile et Naturelle du Royaume de Siam*. 2 vol. Paris, 1771. vol.i p. 45.

and days which are regarded as comparatively safe.<sup>1</sup> Among the Sea Dayaks “at certain seasons of the moon, just before and just after the full, the Dayaks do not work at their farms.”<sup>2</sup> The Land Dayaks are equally handicapped in their occupations, almost every occurrence is looked upon with suspicion, and, if considered hopelessly unlucky a general tabu, or ‘pamali’ is proclaimed and all work must cease. Those tabu days are, of course, dependent on the dreaded influences of the moon. “At full moon and the third day after it (called ‘bubuk’), no farm work may be done unless it is wished that the paddy should be devoured by blight and mildew. In some tribes the unlucky days are those of the new and full moon, and its first and third quarters.”<sup>3</sup>

As we might expect, the observance of tabu days attained its most perfect form in Polynesia. In Hawaii there were four regular tabu days in each month, except during the four ‘makahiki’ months of the year which were specially devoted to ceremonies in honour of the god Lono.<sup>4</sup> In Samoa the Sabbath observances of no work being allowed, were carried out in a similar manner, but there was only one regular Sabbath in the month, namely at the appearance of the new moon.<sup>5</sup> The four monthly tabu days were dedicated respectively to the Hawaiian gods, Ku, Hua, Kaloa and Kane. But as Dr. Hutton Webster remarks, “that these Sabbaths had originally no connection with any divinity and arose in consequence of superstitious beliefs in lunar phenomena is a highly probable conclusion, when we recall the numerous tabus attaching to the phases of the moon.”<sup>6</sup>

The tabu or sacred character of these days of abstention from work is in the direct consequence of their supposed unlucky and unpropitious nature and of the malign and dangerous influences which are supposed to be abroad; and there is no more constant and universally recognized cause for that unpropitious character of particular days than certain phases of the moon. Ideas as to which phases are fraught with most danger vary with different peoples, but the new moon and next to it the full moon, and every transition from one phase to another, are usually looked upon as the periods of the most accentuated danger. But also there is little doubt that the original ground for the dangerous and

---

<sup>1</sup> Nieuvenhuis A. W., In Central Borneo; Reis van Pontinac naar Samarinda. 2 vols. Leiden. 1900. vol. i. p. 415, vol. ii. p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> Brooke Charles, Ten Years in Sarawak. 2 vols. London. 1848. vol. i. p.149.

<sup>3</sup> Roth H. Ling, The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo. 2 vols. London. 1896. vol.i. p. 401.

<sup>4</sup> Malo David., Hawaiian Antiquities, translated from the Hawaiian by Dr. N. B. Emerson. Honolulu. 1903. p.56. W. D. Alexander, A brief History of the Hawaiian People p. 50; S. Dibble History of the Sandwich Islands p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Turner George, A Hundred Years Ago and Long Before. London. 1884. p. 60, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Webster Hutton, Rest Days. New York. 1908. p. 88.

maleficent character universally ascribed to the moon is its direct association with the sexual functions of women.

The correspondence between the cycle of sexual functions in women, and of menstruation in particular, with the cycle of lunar changes has forced itself upon the notice of even the rudest and most primitive of peoples. The periodicity of those functions is naturally reckoned by women, in every part of the world, by the changes of the moon, and their whole life is thus regulated by that body. Menstruation, that is 'moon-change', is commonly spoken of by all peoples as 'the moon'. The peasants in Germany usually refer to women's periods simply as 'the moon',<sup>1</sup> and in France it is called 'la moment de la lune.'<sup>2</sup> The Mandigo call menstruation 'carro', that is 'the moon'; the Susus call it 'kaikai' which also means 'moon'.<sup>3</sup> In the Congo menstruation is spoken of as 'ngonde', that is 'the moon'.<sup>4</sup> In Torres Straits the same word means both 'moon' and 'menstrual blood'.<sup>5</sup> In India menstruation is called 'the moon'. I have heard of a judge in a native court in India being puzzled by the statement that a female witness was unable to attend the court because of the moon. In British East Africa it is believed by all natives that menstruation is caused by the new moon.<sup>6</sup> Similar ideas are universal. Thus for example the Papuans "believe the moon changes to be the cause of menstruation."<sup>7</sup> They say that a girl's first menstruation is due to the moon having connection with her during her sleep.<sup>8</sup> "The moon" says Dr. Seligman, "is considered responsible for the menses."<sup>9</sup> The Maori speak of menstruation as 'moon sickness,' 'mate marama'. An old Maori woman gave me the following explanations: "The reason of the sickness being 'mate marama' is because it affects women when the moon appears. It never affects them when the moon is lost to view, that is during the dark nights of the moon. Some women are affected when the moon is just seen, and others at various stages of its growth, some when the 'turu' or full moon appears. A woman is always affected at the

---

<sup>1</sup> Höfler M., *Deutsches Krankheitsnamen-Buch*. München, 1899. p. 420.

<sup>2</sup> Icard S., *La Femme pendant la période menstruelle*. p. 261.

<sup>3</sup> Winterbottom Thomas, *An Account of the Native Africans in the Neighbourhood of Sierra Leone*. 2 vols. London. 1803. vol.ii. p. 206.

<sup>4</sup> Bentley G. *Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language*, s.v.

<sup>5</sup> Seligman. C. G., *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits*, London. 1906. vol. v. p.206.

<sup>6</sup> Hobley C, W. "British East Africa. Anthropological Studies in Kavironde and Nandi." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. Vol.xxxv. London. 1903. xxxiii, p.285.

<sup>7</sup> Beardmore E, "The Natives of Mowat, Daudai, New Guinea", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* Vol. xix. London. 1890. p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> Haddon A.C. *Report of the Cambridge Anthropological Institute to the Torres Straits*. London. 1906. vol. v. p. 206.

<sup>9</sup> Seligman C.G. "The Medicine, Surgery, and Midwifery of the Sinaugolo," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*. Vol. xxxii. London. 1902. xxxii, p.303.

same stage of each moon, the time of her affliction does not vary." And another Maori stated: "The moon is the permanent husband, or true husband, of all women, because women 'paheke' (menstruate) when the moon appears. According to our ancestors and elders the marriage of man and wife is a matter of no moment; the moon is the real husband."<sup>1</sup> We shall see that the conceptions thus clearly expressed are by no means peculiar to the Maori, but pervade primitive human thought. Among the Fuegians, the moon is likewise associated with all female functions. The Fuegians call the moon "The Lord of the Women."<sup>2</sup>

We shall see, I think that there can be little doubt that the primary link in that varied and extensive chain of associations is constituted by the synchronism between the periodical changes of the moon and the periodicity of the sexual functions of women. The moon is regarded by all peoples in the lower phases of culture as a male. This is doubtless on account of the notion that menstruation is due to sexual intercourse of the Moon-god with women. In later stages the sex of the lunar power is usually changed and the moon, the 'Lord of the Women', becomes the chief Goddess in mythological pantheons, the Great Mother. Every great female deity, every Great Mother – Isis, Ishtar, Demeter, Artemis, Aphrodite, 'The Queen of Heaven' – has the attributes of the moon and is a moon goddess. The cult of moon deities, whether male or female, is everywhere the special cult of women. Thus among the Ibo of Nigeria, as we have seen, the periodical Sabbath observed on the day of the new moon is called 'The Women's Day'. In the Congo special prayers and rites are observed by the women at the new moon.<sup>3</sup> The Wemba women whiten their faces when the new moon appears.<sup>4</sup> The Aleutian women have special rites and dances in the moonlight at the full moon.<sup>5</sup> These feminine lunar observances and cults are conspicuous in the more advanced religions of Western Asia, Egypt, and Europe. Relics of them were lately found in our midst. Thus in Yorkshire and the northern countries according to Aubrey, "Women doe worship the new moon on their bare knees, kneeling upon an earth-fast stone".<sup>6</sup> In Ireland, on first seeing the new moon, they fall on their knees saying, "Oh Moon! Leave us as well as you found us."<sup>7</sup> In

---

<sup>1</sup> Best Elsdon., "The Lore of the Whare-Kohanga," *Journal of the Polynesian Society.* Vol. xiv. Wellington. 1905. xiv, p.211. Cf. id., "Notes on Maori Mythology," *ibid.*, viii. p.101.

<sup>2</sup> Cojazzi A., *Los Indios del Archipelago Fueguino* (Reprint from *Revista Chilena Historia y Geographia.*) Santiago de Chile, 1914. p.24.

<sup>3</sup> Merolla da Sorrento J., "A Voyage to Congo and Several Other Countries." Transl. in Pinkerton, *Voyages and Travels.* Vol. xvi, London. 1814. p. 273.

<sup>4</sup> Gouldsbury Cullen and Sheane Hubert. *The Great Plateau of Northern Rhodesia.* London. 1911. p.255.

<sup>5</sup> Dall W. H., *Alaska and its Resources.* London. 1870. p.389.

<sup>6</sup> Aubrey John., *Remains of Gentilisme and Judaisma.* Ed. by J. Britten. London. 1881. p.83.

<sup>7</sup> Wilde Lady Jane., *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland.* 2 vols. London. 1887. p.205.



Bombay, Muslim girls stay at home at the new moon, as it is considered dangerous for them to go out at such time.<sup>1</sup>

The Jewish Sabbath was, in the form in which we know it, similar to that of the Babylonians.<sup>2</sup> The name 'Shabattu', 'shabuttam', or 'sapattu', was that of the Babylonian tabu days, and is explained in cuneiform vocabulary as, "a day of abstinence", or "of propitiation".<sup>3</sup> The Babylonian tabu days are also referred to as the "evil days". In the calendar of Elul II, on a tablet in the British Museum, "every month is divided into four weeks and the seventh days or 'Sabbaths' are marked out as days on which no work should be undertaken".<sup>4</sup> All other days are set down as 'favourable'; the term evil day is applied to the seventh, fourteenth, twenty first and twenty eighth days of the lunar month. It appears probable that in earlier times, only two days a month, the day of the new moon and that of the full moon, were observed as Sabbaths, and originally perhaps only one. We know from cuneiform tablets of the fourth dynasty of Ur, dating from the third millennium B.C. that at that period the day of the new moon and the fifteenth day of the month were the chief days for sacrificial observances in Sumer.<sup>5</sup> As with the ancient Hindus, the Dayaks and the Polynesians the monthly or fortnightly observance of tabu days joined the early Semites in extending them to the first day of each of the four phases of the moon.

In the Babylonian calendar directions for the observance of the four 'evil days' are given. The deities under whose auspices the Babylonian 'evil days' were observed and who had to be propitiated were Marduk and Ishtar. The deity really concerned was the moon-goddess Ishtar; the Babylonian 'shabattu' was her 'evil day'.

---

<sup>1</sup> Crooke W., Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folk-lore of Northern India, 2vols. Westminster. 1896. vol. i. p. 16. For further examples, see below, p. 639.

<sup>2</sup> There is no evidence to warrant that the Jewish Sabbath was derived or borrowed, from the Babylonian institution, and it is an exceedingly improbable one. The observance of lunar feasts was one of the oldest and most general of institutions of all Semites, and there is considerable evidence that they were observed by the Jewish tribes long before they left the Arabian Peninsula (cf. below, vol. iii, p. 106.) The most that one is warranted in saying is that the Jewish observance in later time was probably influenced to a considerable degree by the Babylonian institution; the weekly celebration of the tabu day, and possibly the name 'Sabbath', may have been adopted by the Hebrews from their Babylonian neighbours. Vol. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Rawlinson, Sir Henry Creswicke. The Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia. London. 1861. vol. ii, Pl. 32, No. 1; H.Zimmern in E. Schrader, Die Keilenschriften und das Alte Testament, p. 502. The phrase by which the word 'shabattu' is explained in the lexicographic tablet - "ûm nûkh libbi" - has been variously interpreted by different scholars. It appears to contain the idea of 'respite' or 'ceasing'; but a doubt may arise as to whether the 'respite' refers to human labour or the anger of the gods.

<sup>4</sup> Smith George., Assyrian Discoveries. London. 1883. p.12.

<sup>5</sup> Radan Hugo., Early Babylonian History. New York. 1900. p.314.

It is not unlikely that on her 'evil day' the goddess was thought to be actually menstruating. Thus in Bengal "it is currently believed that at the first burst of rain, Mother Earth prepared herself for being fertilized by menstruating. During that time there is an entire cessation of all ploughing, sowing and other farm work".<sup>1</sup> The menstruation of the Earth-goddess is thus observed by the Bengali as a Sabbath. Again in Travancore, "there is a very important periodic ceremony performed in the temple. This is known as 'trippukharattu', or purification ceremony, in connection with the menstruation of the goddess, which is believed to take place about eight or ten times a year. The cloth wrapped round the metal image of the goddess is found to be discoloured with red spots, exactly as in the case of menstruation. The discoloured cloth is sent up to the ladies of the Vanijpuzha or Talavur Patti houses for examination and once it has been passed, the image is removed to a separate shed and the principle shrine closed for the period. There is great demand among the people for the discoloured cloth, which passes as a holy relic. It is only after the purification ceremony is performed on the fourth day that the goddess is taken back to the shrine".<sup>2</sup> Another menstruating goddess is the Parvati found at Chunganur. Here "there is a temple to Siva. In it there is an image of Parvati, his consort. Parvati menstruates and periodically a red spot appears on the cloth worn by the image. When this happens the temple is closed for three days and no worship is allowed."<sup>3</sup>

It is firmly believed, even in some parts of Europe, that the moon regularly menstruates. For instance, when the moon is on the wane, the peasants of Bavaria, say that she is 'sickening', using the same expression as they employ in reference to a menstruating woman.<sup>4</sup> It has very commonly been believed since the days of Homer,<sup>5</sup> that drops of blood or a rain of blood, not infrequently fall from heaven<sup>6</sup> and that heavenly blood is commonly spoken of among the rural populations of Europe as 'moon-blood'. In Switzerland "the peasants do not look upon the 'moon-blood' as a figurative expression but as an actual physical fact, in the same way as they look upon the moon itself as a real living being. Hence the moon is spoken of as 'sickening' ('luna deficiens' or, according to Rabham, 'laborans') as of an evil influence.<sup>7</sup> In Ashanti, the day of the new moon is called

---

<sup>1</sup> Gait E.A., in *Census of India*, 1901., vol. i. "India". p.189.

<sup>2</sup> Nagam Aiya V., *The Travancore State Manual*. 3 vols. Trivandrum. 1906. vol.ii, p.89.

<sup>3</sup> Sunkuni Wariya, "A Variant of the Bloody Cloth", *The Indian Antiquary*. vol. xviii. Bombay. 1889. p.159.

<sup>4</sup> Schmeller J.A., *Bayerisches Wörterbuch*. Ed. by G.K. Fromman. 2 vols. München, 1872-78. vol.i cols. 1373; Höfler M., *Deutsches Krankheitsnamen-Buch*. München. 1899. p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Homer. *Iliad*, xi. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Tissandier Gaston., *L'océan aérien*. Paris. s.d. p. 219.

<sup>7</sup> Rochholtz E.L., *Deutsche Glaube und Brauch im Speigel den heidnische Vorzeit*. 2 vols. Berlin. 1867. p. 219.

'the day of blood', and the Yoruba believe that if they were to work the fields that day the corn and rice would turn blood red.<sup>1</sup> The Jewish Sabbath was primarily a new-moon and full-moon observance, extended later as in so many other instances to each phase of the moon.<sup>2</sup> We shall in a subsequent chapter have an opportunity of noting how intimately ancient Hebrew religion was associated, in its origin, with lunar cults. Although the traces of that early association were as far as possible carefully obliterated by the editors of the Sacred Scriptures, the connection of the Sabbath with the phases of the moon is freely recognized and constantly referred to in the Old Testament. Thus when the Shummanite woman wished to consult the prophet Elisha, her husband asked: "Wherefore wilt thou go to him today? It is not new-moon or Sabbath."<sup>3</sup> And Amos represents the Jewish profiteers as impatient of the restrictions placed on business by the tabu days, and as exclaiming: "When will the new-moon be gone, that we may sell grain? and the Sabbath that we may set forth wheat, making the epha small and the shekel great?"<sup>4</sup> Isaiah, at a time when it was still a matter of some uncertainty what practices belonged to the pure religion of Yaweh and which were foreign corruptions, denounced in one breath both "new-moon and Sabbath."<sup>5</sup> The two are thus constantly associated<sup>6</sup> and in other passages the day of the new moon is referred to as the day of rest in opposition to days of business.<sup>7</sup> That association down to the present time has never been effaced in Jewish thought. It is considered to be "a very pious act to bless the moon at the close of the Sabbath."<sup>8</sup>

As with the moon feast of the Aleuts, of the Ibo of Nigeria, and of most primitive peoples, the observance of the Hebrew Sabbath was regarded as the particular concern of the women. Inveighing against the corrupt practices of the Hebrew women, Hosea, speaking in the name of Yaweh, exclaims: "I will cause all her mirth to cease, her feast days, her new moons, and her Sabbaths and all of her solemn feasts."<sup>9</sup> That character of the Sabbath as a special women's festival is several times referred to in Talmudic literature. The Sabbath itself is spoken of by the epithet of 'the queen' or the 'bride'.<sup>10</sup> In the tractate (treatise) Kikur Sh'lh,

---

<sup>1</sup> Ellis Alfred Burden., *The Yoruba Speaking Peoples of the Slave Coast of West Africa*. London. 1894. p.146.

<sup>2</sup> Jastrow Morris., "The Original Character of the Hebrew Sabbath". *The American Journal of Theology*. Vol.ii. Chicago. 1898.p. 313; Driver S.R. *The Book of Genesis*. London. 1906. p. 35. Cheyne T,K. *Traditions and Beliefs of Ancient Israel*. p. 70; Webster H. *Rest Days*. p. 242.

<sup>3</sup> II Kings, iv. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Amos viii. 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah, i. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Hosea, ii. II.

<sup>7</sup> Psalms, lxxxii. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Hershon Paul Isaac., *A Talmudic Miscellany*. London. 1880. p. 342.

<sup>9</sup> Hosea, ii. II.

<sup>10</sup> Hirsch E.G., art., "Sabbath." *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*. Vol.x. Chicago., s.d. p.589.

it is set out that “God has given the first day of the month as a festival more for women than for men.”<sup>1</sup> To this day it is customary for the women to abstain from work on the day of the new moon, though this does not apply to men.<sup>2</sup> The Jewish institution, which already enjoyed considerable popularity in Roman society, where oriental religious observances had become fashionable,<sup>3</sup> was adopted by the Christian Church.<sup>4</sup> But the Greeks and Romans had been from time immemorial familiar with the observance of certain restrictions on tabu days, especially on the day of the new moon. When the trial of the bow of Odysseus was proposed to the suitors, they objected that it was the day of the new moon, and that it was therefore unbeseeming to hold a contest on that day.<sup>5</sup> The Greek lunar tabu days never extended, as did those of Babylonia and Palestine, to the four phases of the moon, but were mostly confined to the first, which was known as New-Moon Day, or ‘Noumenia’. Although there was no general stoppage of business, most public activities except those of a religious character, were intermitted on that day, and it was considered unsuitable for farm work.<sup>6</sup> A less solemn monthly festival known as Dichomenia was held on the day of the full moon.<sup>7</sup> The Romans observed the Kalends, or days of the new moon in a similar manner. The day was devoted to religious ceremonies, and in old-fashioned households it was customary that the paterfamilias should remain home on those days and offer prayers to the family gods.<sup>8</sup> The introduction of the Hebrew usage by the Christian Church did not, therefore, bring any violent

---

<sup>1</sup> Hershon Paul Isaac., op.cit. p. 342.

<sup>2</sup> Allen John., *Modern Judaism*. London. 1830. p. 390. P. I. Hershon, loc.cit. Cf. M. Friedmann in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*. iii (1891) p. 712. Abrahams Israel., *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*. London. 1896. p.374; Löwe F., *Schulchan Aruch, oder die vier jüdischen Gesetzbücher*. Transl. 4 vols. Hamburg. 1837-40. vol. i. p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, ii. 39; Philo. *De Vito Moysis*. ii. 137. Cf. Horace. *Sat.*, i. 9. 69; Juvenal, *Sat.*, xiv, 96-106. Persius. v. 179; Martial, iv, 4. 7; Augustine, *De Civite Dei*, vi, II; Dill Samuel., *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*. London. 1911. p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, Christianity, from the Gospels onwards, rejected the Jewish Sabbath as completely as it did Jewish circumcision. It established a special weekly feast day of its own, the Sun-Day (*Dies Solis*) as a day of rejoicing associated with the Resurrection. This became confounded with the Jewish Sabbath. The Puritan Sabbath of England and Scotland is, historically, un-Christian.

<sup>5</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, xxi. 258. Cf. xiv. 158; xx. 156, 276.

<sup>6</sup> Hesiod, *Erga*; Plutarch, *Quaest. Rom.*, 5. Id., *De vitando aere alieno*, 2; Demosthenes, *Adv. Aristogiton*, i. 99; Athenaeus, xii. 76; Aristophanes, *Nubes*, 615; *Vespae*, 96; *Acharnenses*, 999; Theophrastus, xiv; Lucian, *Icaromenippus*, 13; *Lexiphanes*. 6; Porphyry, *De abstinentia*, ii, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Hesiod, *Erga*, 819; *Hymni Homerici*, xxxii. II; Plutarch, *De gloria Atheniensis*, vii; *Dion* xxiii.

<sup>8</sup> Wissowa Georg., *Religion und Kultus der Römer*. München. 1902. p.369; Ovid, *Fasti* i, 47; Plutarch, *Quaest Rom.*, 24; Vergil, *Bucolica*, i. 43; Horace, *Carmina*, iii. 23. I.

change or startling novelty in the customs and ideas of the citizens of the Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup>

It will be seen that, although our enquiry into the connection between the keeping holy of the Sabbath day and the tabu on menstruating women, may have taken us somewhat far afield, that connection is direct and close: and the observances which, in the usages of our own country in the present day, bears most clearly the character of a primitive tabu, is immediately dependent upon what we have reason to believe was the first tabu, or moral prohibition, imposed in human tradition upon the animal instincts of primitive mankind.

---

<sup>1</sup> In the second century two Sundays only in the month were observed by the Christians. (Eusibius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, iii. 37.)