

## PART I

### INTRODUCTION



## A Critical Appraisal of Theories of Menstrual Symbolism

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The topic of menstruation has long been a staple of anthropology, for this apparently ordinary biological event has been subject to extraordinary symbolic elaboration in a wide variety of cultures. The symbolic potency so often attributed to menstrual blood and the exotic-seeming stringency of rules for the conduct of menstruating women have placed menstruation in the foreground of anthropological studies of "taboo" and, more recently, of symbolic "pollution." Menstrual taboos have been seen by turn as evidence of primitive irrationality and of the supposed universal dominance of men over women in society. The widespread occurrence of menstrual taboos and their cross-cultural similarities has spurred a search for their universal origins, once identified with the very wellsprings of social organization (Durkheim 1897:50) and, more recently, of religious thought (Douglas 1966:6).

Yet for all of the significance attributed to menstrual symbolism by anthropologists and others, and for all of the fascination with which its origins and functions have been pursued, little has been firmly established. While menstruation itself has at least a degree of biological regularity, its symbolic voicings and valences are strikingly variable, both cross-culturally and within single cultures. It is perplexing, then, that the study of menstrual symbolism has been limited by a paucity of detail regarding such variations, by imbalances in ethnographic reporting, and by overly reductionistic theoretical frameworks.

Heretofore the majority of ethnographic reports of menstrual customs and beliefs have been restricted to terse statements on "the" meaning of menstrual blood—seen always as symbolically dangerous or otherwise defiling—and to normative accounts of the practices instituted to contain the perceived negative potency of the substance. These analyses have great predictability, for again and again they center on the concepts of *taboo* (supernaturally sanctioned law) and *pollution* (symbolic contamination). Repeated ethnographic reports of the taboos that are seen to constrain menstruous women because of the imputed malevolence of menstrual discharge have contributed in important ways to the development of powerful general theories of pollution. The availability of such theory, as well as ethnographic tradition, has assured the collection of more data on menstrual taboos and further elaboration of pollution theory through these data. The anthropological study of menstruation has thus tended toward redundancy.

During the past decade, however, in response to a fresh current of interest in the lives of women, new anthropological approaches to the topic of menstruation have begun to emerge. These have not yet resulted in new general theories of menstrual symbolism, its origins, or its functions. Rather, recent work demonstrates in broadly diverse ways the types of considerations that will now have to be accommodated by any general theory of menstruation as a cultural construct—if indeed such an all-encompassing theory remains desirable or possible. These considerations include the varying contexts of menstrual symbolism, the ambiguity of much of this symbolism, the possibility of intracultural diversity in its meanings, and the interface between biological and cultural systems in the making of human society. In taking up these general considerations, new specific lines of inquiry must also be opened to investigate specific systems of meaning in culture: intragender variations in these systems, the service of menstrual symbolism in the interest of women as well as men, and so on.

The essays that make up the present volume are, we hope,

representative of the scope and spirit of such new cultural-anthropological approaches to menstruation. In general, the authors of the following chapters neither deny the usefulness of all received theory nor suggest singular alternatives to it. Rather, they tend to acknowledge the relevance of earlier contributions while hazarding a long look beyond them. From the results they achieve it seems clear that to transcend the limitations in received theory demands a more balanced and comprehensive ethnographic base than that which has been available. For this reason, while being both theoretically informed and informative, most of the following essays are very much grounded in ethnographic specificity and, not coincidentally, most are based in recent field research. Much of this fieldwork has focused on women and much of it was undertaken by women. Together these two shifts away from what until recently has been the dominant fieldwork situation redress some of the limitations in previous ethnographic reports and theoretical formulations alike (see also Gregory 1984).

A second movement away from earlier styles in the study of menstruation is signaled by the openness of investigators to biocultural considerations in symbolic analyses. Though positing no form of biological determinism, many of the cultural anthropologists represented by the following studies acknowledge and analytically integrate the roles of human reproductive biology in the cultural construction of menstruation. In this regard the potential fruitfulness of interdisciplinary inquiry is considerable.

The acknowledgment of both the traditional male-focused structure of ethnological inquiry and the potential usefulness of biocultural perspectives raises unsettling issues regarding the past study of menstruation and, more generally, the present status of anthropological (and biological) knowledge. It is here that the study of menstruation, a seemingly limited topic, can reveal a profound and broad intellectual import. For the studies presented in this volume cumulatively suggest that the critical cross-cultural study of menstruation must now be taken to include the study of anthropology, and even

of biology, as themselves cultural—that is, symbolic—subsystems.

Although such implications have consequences for anthropological work far beyond the apparent confines of the topic at hand, these general implications are perhaps best demonstrated through concrete substantive studies. Thus the foci of the chapters that follow remain firmly fixed on menstruation and closely related phenomena, and within clearly defined cultural contexts. In order to locate these chapters within the spectrum of earlier studies to which they are responding, we turn first to a selective review of the received literature on menstruation.

### EXPLAINING MENSTRUAL TABOOS

A menstruating [Gisu] woman must keep herself from contact with many activities lest she spoil them: she may not brew beer nor pass by the homestead of a potter lest his pots crack during firing; she may not cook for her husband nor sleep with him lest she endanger both his virility and his general health. A menstruating woman endangers the success of rituals by her presence. . . . At first menstruation . . . she must be secluded at once from normal contacts, particularly from contact with men of the village, her agnates. During the time that she is menstruating she must not touch food with her hands: she eats with two sticks. (La Fontaine 1972:164–165)

For anthropologists and nonanthropologists alike, the most compelling aspect of the comparative study of menstruation has surely been the widespread existence of “menstrual taboos.” Again and again, ethnographers have reported that menstrual blood and menstruating women are viewed as dangerous and/or offensive among the peoples they have observed. Accordingly these perceived contaminants are reported to be kept at bay by broadly similar sets of injunctions and prohibitions, almost all of which have been interpreted to be oppressive to women. So striking has been the near universality and exoticism alike of these menstrual taboos and, perhaps, so resonant with the feelings of men and women in literate cultures that the ethnographic findings

themselves have entered into popular culture as truisms. Such truisms are promulgated today, in the wake of feminism, by a spate of popular books. Statements found in Paula Weideger's *Menstruation and Menopause* (1977) are typical of this group of writings:

The menstrual taboo is universal. (P. 85)

Generally, the object of a taboo may be a source of good or evil, but in the case of menstrual blood the ascriptions are almost universally evil. (P. 89)

The menstrual taboo exists as a method of protecting men from danger they are sure is real (the source of which is in women), and it is a means of keeping the fear of menstruating women under control. (P. 92)

These sorts of statements are interesting for a variety of reasons. They evidence the influence of cultural anthropology on popular culture in the West; they are concise summaries of suppositions that underlie much psychoanalytic and anthropological work, as well as being prominent in popular imagination; and, like so much popular wisdom, they are at once partially true and highly simplistic.

"The menstrual taboo" as such does not exist. Rather, what is found in close cross-cultural study is a wide range of distinct rules for conduct regarding menstruation that bespeak quite different, even opposite, purposes and meanings. Many menstrual taboos, rather than protecting society from a universally ascribed feminine evil, explicitly protect the perceived creative spirituality of menstruous women from the influence of others in a more neutral state, as well as protecting the latter in turn from the potent, positive spiritual force ascribed to such women. In other cultures menstrual customs, rather than subordinating women to men fearful of them, provide women with means of ensuring their own autonomy, influence, and social control. "The menstrual taboo," in short, is at once nearly universal and has meanings that are ambiguous and often multivalent.

This multivalence appears to be inherent in the very term *taboo* as analyzed by Steiner (1956). Probing the semantic

sphere of the Polynesian word *tabu* and its variants (compare Durkheim 1897:57), Steiner observed that the Polynesian root *ta* means "to mark" and that *pu* is an adverb of intensity, and he translated *tabu* (*tapu*) as "marked thoroughly" (1956:32). This etymology shows a lack of unilateral stress on either negative or positive dimensions, and Steiner accordingly suggested that concepts of "holy" and "forbidden" are inseparable in the many Polynesian languages. There is no polarity of meaning inherent in the term *tabu*, which, on the contrary, implies a fusion of two concepts that Western views tend to distinguish. Furthermore, the logical opposite of "tabu" is neither "sacred" nor "defiled" (both of which are encompassed within "tabu") but "profane," in the sense of "common" (Steiner 1956:36, 82). (For a critical discussion of anthropological usage of "tabu," including Steiner, see Keesing 1985.)

Steiner's discussion of taboo and its potential multivalence has rarely been considered by writers on menstrual taboos outside Polynesia. We suggest that the poverty in understanding the variable meanings of the menstrual taboo, both within and between cultures, has been in part the result of an emphasis on monocausal explanation. The very wide—if not universal (see Appell, chapter 4)—distribution of menstrual taboos has given rise to a linked set of cross-cultural questions, all entailing causal explanation: How can we account for the presence of menstrual taboos, both as universals and in a comparative sense? What are their origins? Can we predict what types of societies will be most likely to elaborate upon them in striking ways?

Despite the considerable cross-cultural variety in the "shape" and meaning of menstrual taboos, answers to such questions and related predictive hypotheses reflect a limited number of causal theories and explanatory approaches. The range of these may be suggested through considering a few of the many received studies that seem to us particularly exemplary: theories that view "the menstrual taboo" as both reflection and source of female oppression; as evidence of neurotic complexes; and as means for addressing any of several practical problems in social life.



## TABOO AS OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

Perhaps the most pervasive interpretation of menstrual taboos in both the popular and professional literature has been the one that equates the notion of "taboo" with "oppression" and hence menstrual taboos with the suppression of women in society. This perspective, however, seldom recognizes the fact that taboos surrounding the menstrual cycle may restrict the behavior of others more than that of the menstruating woman herself. Again, it is one that usually regards the isolation of menstruating women as, by definition, a sign of lower status. Finally, it is a perspective that often treats taboos as no more than rules prescribing certain behaviors rather than as parts of religious systems that may have wide cosmological ramifications. Such collapsing of distinct taboos and rules into a single category for analysis has often reflected, ironically, an underlying androcentrism in explanations of menstrual taboos as means for the suppression of women in society.

We may take as representative of the female oppression theory the work of F. W. Young (1965) and Young and Bacdayan (1965). In explaining how he classifies societies in terms of the status of women, Young (1965:155) writes that the "menstrual taboos that often apply to native women throughout their middle years may function as a mechanism for reducing the status of women in contrast to that of men." "May" as used here is deceptive. It obscures the fact that Young—like many others—*presupposes* a correlation between menstrual taboos and low female status, for if such a correlation did not exist, how could the taboos function as mechanisms to reduce status? Yet Young neither specifies how "low female status" might be defined nor tests the correlation he presupposes. Rather, in a work with Bacdayan (Young and Bacdayan 1965), he asserts that the menstrual taboos, taken as a single category of symbolic features, reflect both men's fear of women and weak solidarity among men themselves and are therefore imposed by men upon women in order to assure male dominance of society. This explanation—one that has entered into popular Western commentaries on

menstrual taboos (e.g., Delaney, Lupton, and Toth 1976)—depends for its strength on a disregard of certain crucial analytic distinctions.

It is necessary, for example, to distinguish between two varieties of menstrual taboos that are often lumped together, as they are in the work of Young and Bacdayan. Some taboos restrict the behavior of menstruating women themselves, whereas others restrict the behavior of other people in relation to such women. The threats that are culturally attributed to menstruation must likewise be analytically separated. We need to ask, for instance, if a taboo is violated, will the menstruating woman harm someone else or herself? If the former, a danger to others is indicated; if the latter, the *vulnerability* of the woman. Frazer pointed out long ago ([1950]1963:260) that these two kinds of dangers associated with taboos are quite separate, and we urge that they be treated as such.

Deborah Winslow (1980), for example, demonstrates the importance of this distinction in her analysis of menstrual taboos and menarche rituals among several groups in Sri Lanka. Among Buddhists in Sri Lanka, the experiences of menarche and menstruation are held to evidence women's *threat* to cosmic purity and, hence, to society. In contrast, among Sri Lankan Catholics they are signs of women's *vulnerability* to threats posed by cosmos and society. Although on the surface the rituals attending menarche among both Buddhists and Catholics are similar, the rituals mean quite different things to the people who participate in them, and these meanings rest on distinct cultural constructions of womanhood: dangerous among Buddhists; endangered among Catholics. Such distinct constructions in turn suggest an equally distinct social status for Buddhist and Catholic women.

In contrast to Winslow's attention to the specific (sub-)cultural contextualization of menstrual taboos and of their social functions, many writers taking cross-cultural approaches have ignored such contextualization and have thereby collapsed diverse categories of rules and taboos into a single concept of "menstrual taboo."

As an example, we take the work of William Stephens (1961). Stephens (pp. 393–394) identifies five classes of taboos: those against menstrual blood as itself dangerous; those that require the isolation of menstruous women; those that prohibit menstrual sex; those that prohibit menstruous women's cooking, especially for their husbands; and a general category of "other" taboos. However, having distinguished these categories, Stephens then conflates them in order to come up with a composite "score" for the relative presence or absence of menstrual taboos (*the "menstrual taboo,"* again) in a given culture. This score comprises the statistical base for testing various hypotheses, including one to the effect that menstrual taboos are not strong in societies in which women make significant economic contributions (Stephens 1962:121).

In fact, Stephens finds no correlation between the economic contributions of women and the presence of menstrual taboos. Yet this is not surprising in view of his conflation of taboo types. It would seem most likely that taboos against menstruating women working in farming, food processing, crafts, and so on (all lumped together in Stephens's "other" category) would be far more pertinent to the hypothesis than would, say, taboos against sexual intercourse during menstruation. The statistical conflation of distinct taboo types—in-sistence on "the menstrual taboo," however sophisticated—undermines the logical base of Stephens's and comparable cross-cultural studies.

As we will see later in this chapter, the assumption underlying Stephens's collapsing of rules and taboos is that these taboos serve to oppress women. Yet this assumption is problematic.

In cataloging the potential victims of menstrual pollution, accounts hinging on suppression of women unilaterally stress the effects of menstruation on men. Yet women themselves are often culturally defined as vulnerable to menstrual pollution, not only that of other women but of their own menstrual blood as well.<sup>1</sup>

One menstrual custom that has repeatedly caught the anthropological imagination and has often been singled out as indicative of low female status is that of "menstrual seclu-

sion": the isolation of menstruous women, often in special shelters, that seems once to have been widespread (Stephens 1967). Yet, as Rosaldo (1974:38) observed, "pollution beliefs can provide grounds for solidarity among women," and depending on the cultural context, menstrual seclusion "huts" can themselves be sanctuaries. We must consider the degree to which accounts of such seclusion have been inflected by the pride of missionaries and other colonialists in putting an end to what *they* perceived as an evil, rather than by the lived experiences of women in "menstrual huts."

We find, on close examination, that little is actually known of such episodes of seclusion. "Menstrual huts" have widely been among the first of indigenous features to be relinquished by native peoples upon contact with outsiders from the West (e.g., Balzer 1985; Buckley, chapter 8).<sup>2</sup> Reports that are available suggest wide cross-cultural variations in both seclusion practices and women's experiences of them. Price (1984) found that Saramaka women of Surinam mildly resent their mandatory seclusion yet maintain the practice, although others nearby have abandoned it, because they also find this ritual contribution to communal welfare somehow fulfilling. In contrast, most women of Mogmog Island in the Pacific atoll of Ulithi "enjoy this break from their normal labors and spend the time happily talking or weaving" (Patterson 1986:490). Their large *ipul*, or "women's house," is equipped with looms and serves as a community center for women, as viewed in a photograph by David Hiser (in Patterson, 490–491) showing three women and a child occupying an *ipul*.

While scattered reports such as these are suggestive, to our knowledge there have been no detailed studies of women secluded in menstrual huts, and a great many questions go largely unexamined in received ethnographies and cross-cultural studies. Are most secluded women in "solitary confinement," or is seclusion more often communal, as on Mogmog? Do women usually "resent" their seclusion, as in Price's (third person) accounts? Or do they, as in Patterson's, usually "enjoy this break from their normal labors"? Do they widely perceive it as a "break" from men as well? What do women

do during this time? Some, at least, talk and weave, meditate (Buckley, this volume), cook (Gottlieb, this volume)—do others just mope?

Although such questions are rarely answered in the ethnographic literature, we do find many suggestions that seclusion is not always onerous. Among the Djuka of Dutch Guiana (Kahn 1931:130), the Warao of Venezuela (Suárez 1968:2-6), the Kaska of western Canada (Honigmann 1954:124), and others, menstrual seclusion has been seen as bringing women sexual autonomy and opportunities for illicit love affairs. (The frequency of this claim suggests that not all men, either, view all menstrual taboos as binding.) Other accounts, such as those received by A. L. Kroeber from a Yurok Indian woman (see Buckley, this volume), suggest that menstrual seclusion is viewed by some women as a means toward spiritual and even economic ascendancy: that is, toward enhanced rather than lowered status.

We may not be certain, then, that menstrual seclusion in separate shelters arises from the desire of men to suppress women in society. The possibility should not be ruled out that women themselves may have been responsible for originating the custom in many societies, as Martin suggests in chapter 7 (compare Leacock 1978:270). There is also a possibility that such seclusion, when practiced, may sometimes in effect be voluntary, a cultural option to be exercised by women in their own interests rather than those of men. We know this to be the case for other menstrual taboos in certain instances. For example, according to Barrett (1976:172), Pomo Indian women observed only quasi-voluntarily menstrual taboos relating to the making of baskets. There were culturally defined means for opting out of these taboos if the woman desired to continue working on her baskets during her period. Such voluntarism in following prescribed menstrual customs suggests that Pomo women, at least, found the taboos against work somehow desirable.

To assume that prohibiting women from working—or, in the case of menstrual seclusion, from having contact with men—is always a form of suppressive discrimination against

women is rather limited. As Gottlieb and Martin argue (this volume, chapters 2 and 7), taboos against women working, cooking, having sex, and so on can as easily be interpreted as boons to women as means of suppressing them.

In much of the literature, when women have been described as being prohibited from contact with something in the male domain—a man's hunting gear, say—it has been interpreted as an indication of male dominance manifested by women's exclusion from prestigious activities. Conversely, however, when it is forbidden for men to have contact with something in the female domain—such as menstrual blood—it has been interpreted in an opposite manner, as a sign of female inferiority. The two kinds of actions, or taboos, would seem parallel, yet the anthropological interpretation of them has been binary. Thus the desirability and benefits of some menstrual taboos for women, the possibility that these taboos enhance rather than suppress women's influence and power, have generally been ignored by investigators (but see Lawrence, this volume).

We are not arguing here the reverse of current explanations: that rather than originating in an urge to suppress women and increase male solidarity, menstrual taboos uniformly arose to empower women and enhance female solidarity. Instead we are arguing that the social functions of menstrual taboos are culturally variable and specific. If one society views these taboos as a means of subordinating women (e.g., Delaney, this volume), a second as giving women access to gender-exclusive ritual powers (e.g., Lamp, this volume), and a third ambivalently, as both containing and enhancing the power of women (e.g., Buckley, this volume), can we legitimately lump all three together as societies practicing menstrual taboos toward the suppression of women?

We are suggesting, then, that "female oppression" models of menstrual taboos, in their simpler forms at least, are inadequate. As Schlegel has written, "It may be that some cultures have used menstruation to explain and justify the inferior status of women; but that is a culture-specific trait

and cannot be generalized to all cultures having menstrual taboos" (1972:93). To assume that the presence of menstrual taboos is a universal indicator of relative female "status"—however that may be defined—is tautological and, moreover, simply does not fit specific ethnographic cases.

### TABOO AS NEUROSIS

The theory that menstrual taboos by definition oppress women has been adopted by at least some of another group of writers, those utilizing a psychoanalytic approach. In contrast to the more purely anthropological version of the taboo-as-oppression theory, however, psychoanalytic explanations do have the capacity to deal with menstrual taboos as symbolic representations (rather than as purely functional sociological mechanisms); hence these taboos are seen as subject to unlimited transformations and aptly expressed within a religious context. Based on a theory of (putatively) universal unconscious content and process, psychoanalytic theory aims at once to account for the near-universality of menstrual taboos and their inter- and intracultural diversity. Cultures, here, may be understood as analogous to dreams. In both forms single motivating themes (e.g., "castration anxiety") are voiced, according to psychoanalysts, through virtually unlimited numbers of symbolic associations, by projection, condensation, identification, and other processes first postulated by Freud (1955).

Freud himself wrote little on either menstruation or menstrual taboos (see Skultans 1970:646). Neglecting these topics entirely in his essay, "Female Sexuality" (1931), he dealt with them in a single footnote in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930:36). Here Freud located the origins of menstrual taboos in the "organic repression" of a sexual attraction felt by men toward women during their periods. While this theory has had little influence upon the anthropology of menstruation, the more general connection drawn in psychoanalytic theory between contemporary Western neuroses and "primitive" belief systems has had considerable