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CONDUCTED BY HUGO EHRENFEST, M.D., ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Collective Review

The Views of Primitive Peoples Concerning Menstruation

(A Review of Literature)

BY JONATHAN WRIGHT, M.D., PLEASANTVILLE, N. Y.

AMONG all primitive nations, including the ancient Hebrews, we find an elaborate code of rules in regard to the conduct and treatment of women on arriving at the age of puberty, during pregnancy and the menstrual periods, and at childbirth. Among the Cherokees the presence of a woman under any of these conditions, or even the presence of any one who has come from a house where such a woman resides, is considered to neutralize all the effects of the doctor's treatment. For this reason all women, excepting those of the household, are excluded. A man is forbidden to enter, because he may have had intercourse with a tabooed woman, or may have come in contact with her in some other way; and children also are shut out, because they may have come from a cabin where dwells a woman subject to exclusion.

Among the Assiniboine, two taboos are still rigorously enforced. A menstruating woman must not step over any one's legs or body, and a certain medicine bundle must not be kept in the same lodge with her. If a woman menstruates, she immediately tells her husband, who then places the bundle outside his tent. If she is approaching a lodge and does not know whether a medicine bundle is kept inside, she pauses at the door to inform the inmates of her condition, so that the medicine can be removed. It is said that if the bundle were not taken out, a woman would continue to menstruate indefinitely.¹ In the social life of the Blackfoot Indians, "there is no special taboo upon a menstruating woman requiring her to live apart but she is not supposed to come near the sick. The belief is that in such a case something would strike the patient 'like a bullet and make him worse.' Further, at this time women are supposed to keep away from places where medicines are at work. These restrictions also apply to immediate associations with men and to women lax in virtue."² Among the Crow Indians the only regulation that seems to persist is that menstruating women must not come near medicine bundles. These must be removed from the lodge until she recovers. In former times the women were obliged to ride inferior horses when in this condition, and were not permitted to approach a wounded man or warriors setting out on a war party.³

Among the Thompson and the Ten'a⁴ Indians the only fresh meat she could eat was that of the female mountain-sheep. Among the Arapaho, "women do not spend several days in solitude during men-

stration as is the case among the Sioux, the Utes, and many other neighboring tribes. They sit quietly, keeping away from other people, especially from women and young men, but they eat with other people, and cook for them. They wrap their clothes tightly about the waist, they change their clothes every day, and wash themselves. There is no practice or ceremony connected with a girl's first menstruation. The menstruating woman is not allowed to enter the mesal tent, and if a man who has had intercourse with a menstruating woman takes part in this ceremony, he is found out by the smell. Sickly people and menstruating women are not allowed to enter a tent in which there is a sick person; the smell of the discharge would enter the body of the patient and make him worse. A woman just delivered also refrains from going into the tent of a sick person. Medicine-women after delivery go into the sweat-house, the steam-bath, to cleanse themselves."⁵

It is probable that some of the taboos imposed upon menstruating women or men who have had commerce with them have their origin in the odor, as for instance in hunting; not only by lustration, but, as Dr. Goddard has told me, by smoke of fragrant herbs such men must purify themselves before going on the hunt. This allows the conjecture that experience taught the hunter, skilled in getting to leeward of the game, that the scent puts them at disadvantage. It is only occasionally, however, that one gets a hint which suggests a rational explanation of a taboo of primitive man.

Speaking of the isolation of woman during menstruation, among the Indian tribes of the United States, Schoolcraft⁶ says: "The temporary abstraction of the female is always known to the lodge-circle. The lodge of separation is generally made of branches, rolls of bark, and light materials. In the summer, nothing further is demanded, and no fire is required. When the weather renders a fire desirable, a very small one is lighted from dry sticks. The amusement of the inmate, in the interval, is to prepare flags for mats, to pick up sticks for fire, or other light labors. The leading idea evinced by the custom is that of a deeply seated superstitious fear or dread of contact with any person within the camp. Everything which is touched by her hands during this period, is deemed ceremoniously unclean. She takes with her, in her seclusion, a spoon, a dish, and a small axe. If her step crosses the path of a hunter or warrior, it communicates a talismanic influence—the magical and medical charms of his pursuits are destroyed—the secret power of the Meda has been counteracted—in fine, his panoply of medaic and totemic influence is, for the time, paralyzed. The warrior's luck has been crossed for that day. Merely to touch a cup, with the marks of uncleanness, is equally malign. This superstition does not alone exert a malign influence, or spell on the human species, its ominous power, or charm, is equally effective on the animal creation, at least on those species which are known to depredate on their little fields and gardens. To cast a protective spell around these and secure the fields against vermin, insects, the sciurus and other species, as well as to protect the crops against blight, the mother of the family chooses a suitable hour at night, when the children are at rest and the sky is overcast, and having completely divested herself of her garments, trails her machecota behind her, and performs the circuit of the little field."

The information being copious from which to select, in regard to the North American Indians, though less so for other continents, nevertheless it is sufficiently recorded to demonstrate the prevalence of primitive thought on the subject in independent ethnic centers. Bosman⁷ said of Africa: "Menstruous women are here deemed so unclean that they are not permitted so much as to enter their husbands' houses, or to touch anything, either to dress the domestic diet or clean the house, or indeed on any other account; nor are they permitted so much as to look into, much less enter several houses, but, during this natural uncleanness, are obliged to reside in a separate house, though, as soon as that is over and they have washed themselves, they are restored to their former state." They disclaimed knowledge of any reason for the custom, but said it was traditional with them. Of Australia, Howitt⁸ says: "There is a regulation relating to camps in the Wakelbura tribe which forbids the women coming into the encampment by the same path as the men. Any violation of this rule would in a large camp be punished with death. The reason for this is the dread with which they regard the menstrual period of women. During such a time, a woman is kept entirely away from the camp, half a mile at least. A woman in such a condition has boughs of some tree of her totem tied round her loins, and is constantly watched and guarded, for it is thought that should any male be so unfortunate as to see a woman in such a condition, he would die. If such a woman were to let herself be seen by a man, she would probably be put to death. When the woman has recovered, she is painted red and white, her head covered with feathers, and returns to the camp." Lumholz⁹ confirms this, saying: "As far as I know, the Australians everywhere regard their women as unclean in such circumstances. In some parts of the continent they are isolated in huts by themselves, and no one will touch a dish which they use; among other tribes a woman in this condition is not permitted to walk over the net which the men are making." As we shall see, these ideas to a considerable degree associated themselves somewhat with the idea of the process of parturition and the postpartum period,—in many tribes extended to the end of lactation which was itself much prolonged.*

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*To be continued.