union with a snake probably formed the central ritual of the Eleusinian mysteries of the Great Mother. The Snake theme turns up in another rather unexpected place. The God of Mount Sinai, the name of which means Mountain of the Moon, was served by attendants called Levites. These Levites wore the lunar crescent as a headdress. Hommel states that the word Levi, meaning *to wreathe* or *be devoted,* is used in Minoan inscriptions in connection with the god Wadd who was God of Love and God of the Moon.

In myths and also in primitive beliefs it is very commonly stated that snakes hold congress with women and that women may become pregnant by them. It is also thought in some places that the bite of a snake is responsible for a girl's first menstruation, and that women are particularly liable to attract "serpent love" when menstruating. For this reason the women of some tribes will not go into the bush, or to a spring, when menstruating for fear of becoming pregnant by a snake, or in other cases, they may make pilgrimages for this very purpose to a spring believed to be inhabited by a sacred snake. Sometimes the snake in these beliefs is replaced by a fish, which is then surrounded by the same fears and taboos which are so characteristic in relation to the snake.[5] The Moon Goddess herself was sometimes represented as half fish, in which form she is perhaps the forerunner of our own mermaids. Ishtar, for instance, in the form of Derketo, was a sort of fish leviathan (figure 30). She was the great whale dragon who made the disastrous flood and lamented that her children were made like the fishes of the sea. The king's child, who fell out of the boat of Isis and was drowned, was called the Fisher,[6] a title which orthodox Christianity, as well as the Gnostics, applied to Christ, though sometimes, with a change of metaphor which is very common in mythology, he is called *Ichthyos,* the Fish. A medieval hymn calls him the "Little Fish which the Virgin caught in the fountain." Thus he is fisher and fish, a dual role which has to do with the hero function of the god, who, by partaking of the nature of both man and god can, through his passion, in some measure assimilate the human to the divine.

[5] J. A. MacCulloch, "Serpent Worship," Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York and Edinburgh, 1920), XI, 399.

[6] See Chapter 13, p. 174.

5

THE MOON CYCLE OF WOMEN

As we have seen, the belief that there is a peculiar connection between woman and the moon has been universally held from the earliest times. Her power to bear children, surely a most mysterious thing, was thought to be the gift of the moon, while the activities which were her particular charge, agriculture, making things grow, tending the fire, and cooking the food, depended for their success on the good offices of the moon. To primitive man, her monthly rhythm, corresponding as it does with the moon's cycle, must have seemed the obvious result of some mysterious bond between them.

Some of the North American Indians, for example, hold the moon to be really a woman, the First Woman; at her waning the moon has her "sickness," the word used for menstruation. Peasants in some parts of Europe are reported to believe that the moon menstruates and that she is "sickening" during the period of waning, while the red rain or heavenly blood, which old folklore asserts often falls from the skies, is "moon-blood."

In other languages, too, words for menstruation and for moon are either the same or are closely related. Our word menstruation signifies "moon change," *mens* being "moon." German peasants call the menstrual period simply "the moon"; in France it is called *le moment de la lune.* Briffault[1] has collected many other examples of this verbal connection. For instance, the Mandingo use the word *carro* for both moon and menstruation; in the Congo *njonde* has a similar double meaning. In the Torres Straits and in India the same word is used for menstrual blood and for moon. The Maori call menstruation *mata mata* which means moon sickness and they believe that a girl's first menstruation is due to the moon's having had connection with her during her sleep.

[1] Robert Briffault, *The Mothers* (New York and London, 1927), II, 430–32.

During menstruation women are almost universally put under certain restrictions which seem strange to us with our rational attitude in relation to physical occurrences. An examination of social customs reveals the fact, however, that in all parts of the world and among all peoples, with the single exception of the more highly educated white races—and even this exception needs some modification—women during menstruation are considered to be taboo. Taboo is a curious word. It means, variously, unclean, holy, or set apart, and we find that during the period of their sickness, women of many tribes are considered to be in a state so peculiar that any object they touch is defiled or loses its efficacy.[2] For this reason when a woman is menstruating she cannot remain with other people nor go about her usual occupations. She must isolate herself and remain alone. Sometimes she merely retires for those few days to a room set apart for the purpose. This room is usually dark and airless, for the light of the moon must not fall on a menstruating woman. In other cases a special house called the menstrual lodge is provided on the outskirts of the village where the women can retire, but sometimes even that amount of care is not granted to them and they must go to the bush and protect themselves as best they can from heat, storm, or cold in whatever rude shelters they can construct. In many tribes similar taboos surround women in childbirth, and often when their time draws near the women have to go away from the village, entirely unassisted, into the bush and fend for themselves. Food may be brought to them and left at a distance but in some cases the woman is not allowed to touch her own food but must either be fed with morsels passed to her on a stick or if she feeds herself she must wrap her hand in a cloth before touching the food. Sometimes it is even prohibited for her to touch her own person, in such cases she is provided with a stick for scratching her head. A remnant of this old taboo was still to be found in rural places in England at the beginning of the twentieth century where a woman in childbed was not supposed to comb her own hair lest some evil result. And at the end of her lying-in period, which was considered to be one month in duration, she needed to be released from her *taboo* condition by a religious ritual. A special service of the Churching of Women

[2] For a general consideration of this subject see J. G. Frazer, "Balder the Beautiful," *The Golden Bough*, Part VII, I, 11-100, and Briffault, *op. cit.*, II, 365-412.

is provided for this purpose in the Anglican and Roman rituals, a survival of the old belief that a woman who has borne a child needs to be disinfected, not surgically, but religiously. This custom is related to the old superstition that until a woman has been to church to be purified of her "confinement," it is unlucky for her to go out of doors. As for the old menstrual taboo, traces of it can still be found in Europe where a menstruating woman may be forbidden to touch butter, wine, or meat, lest these foods be rendered quite unfit for human consumption, while the taboo against washing at such times remains in certain sections of society almost to the present day.

Among primitive peoples, however, the taboo extends to much greater lengths than this. When a woman is under a menstrual taboo she may not be approached by any man. Even her shadow is polluting so that if she walks abroad she may not use the ordinary trails, and anything that she touches is immediately destroyed. There is also a very widespread scruple among primitives against passing under an overhanging bough, for fear a woman may have climbed over or sat upon it and contaminated the spot with menstrual blood. Briffault suggests that a similar idea may underlie our own superstition against walking under a ladder. The usual reason given for the wisdom of observing this "taboo" is that something might be dropped upon you from above. In England I have repeatedly heard it said that a drop of *red* paint might fall upon you. I have never heard that there is any danger of green paint or white, it is always red. Now red paint is everywhere considered to be a substitute for blood. A red cross means taboo all the world over; it is the sign of *the* taboo, the blood of the woman. For the taboo on the menstruating woman is probably the first observed by man and the type and pattern of all taboos.

The uncleanness of the menstruating woman is considered amongst primitive peoples to be of the nature of an actual infection or contamination, a positive evil which may be conveyed to everything she comes in contact with. In many places not only is the food she has actually touched considered to be contaminated, but all food of the same kind is also rendered unfit for food. In some tribes, for instance, a woman may not eat fish during her periods, nor touch an ear of corn, lest the entire supply perish.

The evil effects of her touch reach beyond the realm of food:

sickness and disaster of all kinds may be caused by a chance encounter with her. For these reasons women are required to seclude themselves most strictly during their "dangerous" periods and to exercise the greatest caution in their contact with the outside world. The penalties imposed for carelessly exposing themselves at such times are naturally exceedingly severe. For it is believed that if a man "looks upon a menstruating woman his bones will soften, he will lose his manhood," will even die, while his weapons and implements will become useless, his nets will no longer catch fish, and his arrows will not kill deer. And, in addition, the power of the "war-bundle," which represents the warrior's commitment to the warlike undertaking and at the same time is a charm or amulet for its success, will be destroyed by such a contact, so fatal was the power of instinctive desire aroused by the woman's condition believed to be.

It was also believed that a menstruating woman had a polluting effect on fire. If by any chance she should come near it, it is extinguished, the ashes carried out, and a new fire kindled, notwithstanding the fact that to kindle a fire is a long and arduous task. Among the primitive peoples of the Malay Peninsula young girls who are, as it were, Vestal Virgins, are charged with the carrying and tending of the fire when the group is on the march. But if a girl should be menstruating she is excluded from this office.

Similar ideas regarding the pollution of fires prevail among the fire worshippers of the Orient; neither the Zoroastrians of Persia nor the Parsees of India will allow a menstruating woman to come near the sacred fire. The great lawgivers of ancient times, Zoroaster, Manu, and Moses, each incorporated prohibitions relating to menstruation into their systems. In the laws of Manu, the Hindu lawgiver, it is stated: "The wisdom, the energy, the strength, the might, and the vitality of a man who approaches a woman covered with menstrual excretions, utterly perish. If he avoids her while she is in that condition his wisdom, energy, strength, sight, and vitality will all increase." [3]

The regulations regarding menstruation seem to represent the first taboo imposed by primitive man, or should one not

[3] G. Buhler, "The Laws of Manu," *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford, 1879–1910), XXV, 135.

rather say they form the first taboo which "the gods" imposed on primitive man? For menstruation is a perfectly natural function and one cannot but wonder why it was placed under a taboo when other natural functions are accepted quite openly and naïvely. Various reasons have been assigned in explanation. They include a supposed horror of blood, as such, on the part of primitive man, a supposition which can be discarded, for primitive man knows no such general horror although it is true that he surrounds blood with great precautions. But no taboo attaches to the person who bleeds if the bleeding is caused by a wound. The customs relating to a menstruating woman are in an entirely different category. They can perhaps be best understood when it is realized that to the primitive mind menstruation is due to a kind of infection, or to the result of possession by an evil spirit.

Where it is believed that an evil spirit has entered into the woman, the measures taken to expel it are very similar to those which we ourselves practice when we have been *infected* or possessed by some evil thing. Primitives attempt to drive out the evil spirit by purging and fasting; by flagellation and fumigation with smoke; by washing the body and the clothes of the afflicted individual; in some cases even her hair is pulled out or she is shaved. These well-meant efforts to drive out the evil are carried to such lengths at the first menstruation, that the girl may be almost killed. We, too, drive out or dispel a physical evil, such as a disease germ, a toxin, or a fever, by identical methods; while if the evil is psychological, that is spiritual, again we use these same methods, metaphorically, or indeed concretely as well. "Spare the rod and spoil the child" refers to one method of exorcising an evil temper. "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean" refers not to physical autointoxication but to moral evils. Fasting and castigation are the most usual penances prescribed to purify from sin, while the incense used in churches is not far in its significance from the fumigation of a sickroom, even though it has other meanings as well. Whenever primitive man senses and dreads a supernatural force, there we must look for a psychological factor, unknown to him and therefore perceived *in the object* to which it has been projected.

The question we must ask, however, is what is this "evil"

which has entered into the woman and how does it work? Amongst animals and in those human societies where the primitive course of nature still regulates the affairs of the tribe, the congress of the sexes is regulated by the needs and desires of the female, not by the desire of the male. Only at the time of heat will the female animal permit the male to have access to her. From the physiological standpoint menstruation in women must be considered as being equivalent to heat in animals and it might be expected that in line with the animal practice, this would be *the* time when no taboo would be imposed. But the contrary is the case. The female *animal,* far from rejecting the advances of the male at the season of heat, desires and seeks his company. No taboo restrains her in the exercise of her charms. All the males of the species from far and wide are attracted to her and are unable to attend to any other interest so long as she is in that condition. Whoever has kept a female dog will know how powerful is the "evil spirit" with which she is possessed. The males who seek her out forego sleep and food and neglect their "duties" in their own homes. They are indeed bewitched!

In human societies the whole tribal organization would be broken up if instinct were allowed to run riot in this way; the situation obviously had to be controlled before any advance in culture could be made. The will of primitive man is, even under the most favorable circumstances, unstable; if tribal undertakings are ever to be put through, women in the dangerous condition of menstruation must be kept out of their way. For the men of the tribe might dance all night to concentrate their attention on the coming hunt but if the party met a menstruating woman as they started out, weapons and determination would be thrown aside together. Anything which could so arouse their untamed desire must be considered an "evil." The men of the tribe would be compelled to protect themselves by segregating the dangerous female, and in this way protect themselves also from the devastating effect of their own sexuality. The welfare of the whole tribe thus demanded that women must remain in seclusion during their sickness.

According to the Talmud, if a woman at the beginning of her period passes between two men she thereby kills one of them; if she passes between them towards the end of her period she

only causes them to quarrel violently.[4] This warning is put into almost psychological terms!

This untamed desire on the part of the men naturally constituted a menace for the women. Certain primitive myths suggest that in self-defense against the excessive demands of the men, women imposed abstinence upon themselves, in spite of the fact that the period of greatest sexual desire, with them as with animals, is either immediately before or immediately after menstruation. This is the point of view expressed in an Australian myth reported by Spencer and Gillen in *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia.* "The Mara Tribe," they state, "has a legend according to which the menstrual period was brought on, in the first instance, because in the Alcheringa (the heroic age) a number of bandicoot men who were making ceremonies had too frequent intercourse with a lubra.[5] This brought on a great discharge and the woman said, 'I think I will not walk about a lubra any more, but a bandicoot,' and so she stuck grass all over herself, and went away and hid in a hole, so that the men could not find her, and ever since then women have had monthly periods," [6] and, one might add, have secluded themselves during the time of the flow.

In certain instances women, even in primitive tribes, have been known to make use of the taboo deliberately, to exclude an unwanted husband, a trick which could easily be played in communities where the count of time is very inexact. And in the beginning it is altogether possible that women may have segregated themselves during menstruation of their own accord, for their physical condition gives them an acknowledged right to isolate themselves without consulting the men, and that in societies where otherwise they may be practically slaves and are always liable to sexual demands.

The development of a menstrual taboo was, indeed, an absolute necessity for primitive peoples if their cultural evolution were to proceed. Without such a safeguard, it would seem well-nigh impossible for either men or women to have developed any specifically human value, or to have released themselves from

[4] J. Meyel, *Die Medizin der Talmudisten,* p. 15.

[5] "Bandicoot" and "lubra" are the totem names of intermarrying clans, but men of the bandicoot totem may not marry a bandicoot woman.

[6] W. B. Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (London, 1904), p. 602.

the complete domination of animal instinct. Today, a more objective and scientific understanding has freed us from the taboos and fears which for primitive man surrounded menstruation. But it is well to remember that these ancient customs were instituted, however gropingly and however unconsciously, to combat a real psychological danger; namely that at certain times the feminine instinctive nature of woman was liable to prove the undoing of men. If we are not to be precipitated again into the chaos from which primitive man extricated himself by his superstitions and taboos, we must become more conscious of the emotional factors concerned, a consciousness which can only be gained through a greater psychological understanding.

In the instances quoted above the taboos were mostly intended to protect the community from the destructive effect of the woman's mana, but on certain occasions the magic power of menstrual blood was used for other purposes. There are many records of its being used as a potent healing charm resorted to in extreme illness. In other cases the destructive effect of the menstruating woman may be used in a positive way, as, for instance, when a girl in that condition is made to run naked round a harvest field infested with caterpillars, which, it is firmly believed, will all be killed and the harvest saved. In these cases the destructive power is turned against the evil, while the crops are protected from harm.

The ancient Hindus considered menstruation to be an evidence that a woman was peculiarly under the influence of the moon. There is a Vedic text to this effect which reads: "The blood of the woman is a form of Agni and therefore no one should despise it." Menstruation is here connected with fire, for Agni is the fire-god and is closely related to the light of the moon. In this text the menstrual blood is definitely stated to be sacred, because it is a manifestation of him.

In India, the Mother Goddess is thought to menstruate regularly; during these times the statues of the Goddess are secluded and bloodstained cloths are displayed as evidence that she has had her sickness. These cloths are very highly prized as "medicine" for most illnesses. In the same way Ishtar, the moon goddess of Babylon, was thought to be menstruating at the full moon, when the sabattu, or evil day, of Ishtar was observed. The word *sabattu* comes from Sa-bat and means

Heart-rest; it is the day of rest which the moon takes when full, for at that time it is neither increasing nor decreasing. On this day, which is the direct forerunner of the Sabbath, it was considered unlucky to do any work or to eat cooked food or to go on a journey. These are the things that are prohibited to the menstruating woman. On the day of the moon's menstruation everyone, whether man or woman, was subject to similar restrictions, for the taboo of the menstruating woman was on all. The Sabbath was at first observed only once a month, later it was kept at each quarter of the moon's phases.

In the Fourth Dynasty of Ur (the third millennium B.C.) it is recorded that taboo days were observed at the new and the full moon, when no cooked food could be eaten (that is, anything which had been touched by fire was prohibited), no journey could be taken and no work could be done. Similar directions were given for the observance of the four "evil days" in the Babylonian calendar. They run as follows: "An evil day. The Shepherd of the Great People shall not eat flesh cooked upon coals, or bread from the oven [or 'anything touched by fire']. He shall not change his garment, nor put on clean raiment, nor offer sacrifice. The king shall not ride in his chariot. He shall not deliver judgment. The priest shall not give oracles in the secret place. The physician shall not lay his hands upon the sick. The day is inauspicious for all affairs whatsoever. At night the king shall bring his offering before Marduk and Ishtar."[7] The Babylonian "sabattu" was the "evil day" of the moon goddess Ishtar, when it is not unlikely that she was thought to be actually menstruating.

The sabbaths of the Jews were closely related, in their origin, to the Babylonian sabbaths, and the Christian weekly day of rest is directly connected with the Jewish sabbath, even though it is observed on a different day of the week. This historical fact all can readily concede, but it is strange to us to think that the prohibitions connected with "sabbath observance" are, in their far-off origins, menstrual taboos connected with the belief that the moon is herself a woman having a monthly period and sickness.

[7] A. H. Sayce, "A Babylonian Saints' Calendar," *Records of the Past* (London, 1876), VII, 157.