



Primitive menstrual myths

by Kerileng Moloantoa

Since time immemorial man has been both fascinated and perturbed by menstruation. His attitude to this natural function has tended to be ambivalent. On the one hand, there is the virtually universal belief that women in their periods are unclean, and consequently dangerous to themselves and to others; on the other, there is menstruation's association with the great mystery of fertility and life itself.

Among some people, e.g. the Australian Aborigines, there is evidence that men envy the reproductive power of women and seek to emulate it. Thus these Aborigines practise sub-incision of the penis and regularly induce genital bleeding, apparently in an attempt to simulate menstruation. Generally, however, man's attitude is one of mitigated fear.

The condition is also universally set about by taboos and strict rules of conduct. A widespread rule is that a man must abstain from intercourse or indeed any contact with a menstruating woman. Among the Luritja of Central Australia it is believed that a man who cohabits with a wife in this con-

dition will become thin and die, and among the Tswana, he will become afflicted with a virulent form of sickness. Among the Naga people of India such cohabitation will bring misfortune to the husband. On the other hand, the Reindeer Chuckchee of Siberia believe that the woman, not the man, is at risk and will become ill and barren.

The attitude of men to menstruation is commonly one of deep-seated fear and abhorrence. Among the South Australian tribes the boys and uninitiated young men were required to sleep away from the huts of adults to prevent contamination; in other groups boys are told that if they see a menstruous woman they will become grey-headed before their time and that their strength will fail prematurely.

Among the Murgin a man who has contact with a woman in her periods will be swallowed up by a mythical snake. It is common for a menstruating woman to be secluded away from the settlements, or for her to refrain from preparing food or cooking. In other groups she may not enter a yam garden for fear of harming the young plants, nor may she go to the beach lest she

cause the mussels to depart (Maori). The people of Mangavera believe that if a man enters the lodge in which a menstruating woman is secluded he will be struck blind. There are many specific rules governing how a woman in her periods must be treated in the Biblical book of Leviticus.

Women, therefore, must signal their special physical state. In the Gilbert Islands menstruating women wear mats round their bodies and must refrain from eating fish. Among other peoples the woman must live alone in a little house made especially for her. In Southern Nigeria she may not even enter the house of her husband. Perhaps one of the more extreme examples of the fear of menstruation is that of the Athapaskan Indians among whom a woman in her periods had to abstain from touching anything belonging to a man for fear of polluting it, and causing the hunters to fail in the chase. Dried fish and cold water formed her diet. Moreover, as the very sight of her was dangerous to society, a special skin bonnet, with fringes falling over her face down to her breast, hid her from the public gaze. even some time after

she had recovered her normal state. Examples could be multiplied, but what is clear is that menstruation is everywhere considered a highly dangerous and polluting condition and is countered by seclusion, fasting, avoidance of the opposite sex and food taboos. The wide dispersion of these taboos points to their great antiquity, in fact the fear of menstruation probably has its roots in the deep recesses of the human psyche.

The Bantu-speaking peoples of South Africa all fear menstruation. Among the Cape Nguni of the Transkei and Ciskei a woman in her periods is said to have **umlaza**. A woman has **umlaza** until she has washed and also after a miscarriage, in fact the pollution extends beyond the actual menstruation to other aspects of life.

Women during the age of child-bearing are forbidden to enter the cattle kraal and a menstruating woman will avoid walking through a herd of cattle for fear that sickness and harm will come to them. There is a rigid taboo against a woman's stepping over ox-yokes, trek-chains, spears and sticks for fear that they will break in use. If men or cattle cross the spoor of a woman who has **umlaza** they will become weak and might die.

No menstruating woman would ever touch her husband's spears and sticks and she will be careful not to walk in his footsteps lest he become polluted. Before crossing a river the woman should tell it that she is menstruating, taking some of the water into her mouth and spitting it out.

Among the Sotho-speakers a woman is 'hot' during her menstrual periods and if she has had an abortion she is 'hot' until she menstruates again. If her blood is 'hot' it is too 'strong' or 'heavy' for the man and the semen thickens in his body and cannot be ejaculated, settling in his hips and loins. The result is that his body starts to ache, his stomach swells and his intestines burn. Above all, his urethra becomes blocked so that he cannot urinate. As the Kgatla put it: 'The woman closes him', and if he is not successfully doctored, he will remain crippled and may perhaps die. He may also become impotent and sterile.

Given this general danger surrounding menstruation, girls are taught to be extremely careful in their behaviour, especially in the disposal of clothing. They must also be aware of their newly-acquired fertility. Once a girl begins to menstruate her mother warns her that she is now capable of bearing a child and must therefore be careful in her relationship with boys.

Traditionally the following types of technique were used to control the flow:

Table 1

Type	How Disposed of
● cow dung rolled into a ball or tampon.	● broken up and mixed into the ash heap.
● grass woven into a pad (often soaked in water to soften it.)	● burned (some say this will burn the uterus).
● soft hide or skin as pad.	● washing, and hung up to dry in the shade.
● cloth (red among S. Sotho; black or dark among other groups).	● washing, burning.

Menstruation is also linked with the phases of the moon, and is in fact euphemistically termed 'The sickness of the moon'.

First menstruation was treated differently. The girl was secluded in a hut in the floor of which a hole was dug, over which the girl sat; or she sat on a pile of fresh cow dung.

In the rural areas there are a large number of customs to do with menstruation. Some of these are: never go into the cattle kraal or else the cattle will miscarry; never collect cow dung; after drawing water never look back; do not carry the water-pot on your head; don't allow men to drink from your water-pot; don't cross where cattle are grazing; don't wear borrowed skirts or belts (it will increase the flow); don't eat eggs or tripe; avoid being in a room with a newborn baby (for you may harm it); don't let a boy touch you or you won't stop bleeding; don't stand in doorways. In Bantu society there is a strong association between men and cattle and this emerges clearly from the above list.

To obtain some idea of menstruation practices in urban areas questionnaires were applied to a sample of 40 women from all parts of Sowetho. The women who were questioned came from all walks of life and over half were of superior education (2 nurses, 8 clerical workers, two teachers and 13 scholars and students). Just over half (24%) were Tswana or other Sotho and the rest were Zulu, Swazi and Tsonga. The average age of the menarche among them was thirteen years, and two-thirds had been instructed about menstruation by either mother or grandmother (in equal proportions), the rest learning about it from age mates or friends.

Most of the members of the sample knew at least something of the physiology of menstruation, but an interesting finding was the high proportion of women who used cotton wool or toilet paper as the main means of sanitary protection. These included women from all socio-economic and educational strata.

Out of the 40 respondents only 13 (32%) admitted to using branded products, and here the self-adhesive pad was the most popular. Four used the pad with loops, and these were all in the under 24 years age category. It is striking that the use of tampons was not mentioned.

The actual figures are as follows:

Cotton wool	13
Toilet paper	11
Cloth	3
S.A. pad	9
Pad + loops	4
	40

Women often recommended pads, but did not use them themselves probably for economic reasons. By far the most usual method of disposal was by flushing down the toilet or by burning.

There is no doubt that the proper disposal of sanitary devices is of great importance to Black women, not only for aesthetic reasons but because of the fear of witchcraft. Any body discharge or effluvia can be used to work harm on one if it gets into the hands of witches, and anyone may be a witch. Extreme care is always taken in dealing with the soiled article.

Today a number of taboos and other behaviour patterns are still prevalent. The most important are: if eggs are eaten the period will last for a month; it is dangerous to stand in a doorway for the period might stop and the girl may die from the 'locked up' blood; sexual intercourse during a period will make the bladder burst; bathing will make the flow stop; sweet things (e.g. cool drinks) will make the blood thick; washing the hair is dangerous; menstrual pains are an indication of witchcraft; the witchcraft can be transferred, and the pain cured, by giving the soiled pantie to a dog to eat. These ideas are still common-place today in the urban townships.

A booklet entitled 'On Becoming a Woman' is available, free of charge, from Kimberly-Clark SA (Pty) Ltd, P.O. Box 3955, Johannesburg 2000.

For further information circle No 204



Kerileng Moloantsoa is present a lecturer/social worker at Medunsa's Department of Family Medicine. She has a BA (Social Sciences) and a BA Honours degree in Sociology, both obtained at the University of South Africa. She has specialised in Social Pathology, Medical Sociology and Research Methodology.

In addition she has a Masters degree in Medical Sociology (University of Utrecht, Netherlands).

Other qualifications include a Diploma in Marriage Guidance and Counselling, and a Family Planning Information certificate.

She was employed at the University of Witwatersrand for the past ten years as a Research Assistant in the Department of Social Anthropology and also presented public lectures dealing with Social Anthropological and African topics from time to time.