



Moon Time is a Blessing, not a Curse

History and ethnography of menstruation

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In today's society menstruation is perceived as something shameful and disgusting. It is a taboo. People do not feel comfortable talking about it. There are many factors that contribute to the negative feelings accumulated around the period. The most poignant is the fact that people have been separated from everything that is basic and primal, they have been cut away from nature. Most men fear the process of menstruation, as it is so alien and unknown. Most women perceive it as a necessary nuisance, and try to bear their suffering, isolated and alone. Women have given up one of the most powerful tools they are equipped with, their sacred power. Menstruation has been seen as a curse for hundreds of years but in reality, it is the greatest blessing and should be treated as such.

When one looks close at menstruation its sacredness becomes pretty apparent. A word 'blessing' comes from an old English word 'bleeding'. Women are the only females, except for a few animals that bleed a little around their ovulation to attract males, who regularly bleed. Blood is the most basic, instinctual, raw and earthy substance known to humanity. It is life itself. It is its essence. The red color of this liquid indicates strength; it is associated with power, fire and emotions. The pictographs were usually painted in red, and most of the cave symbols are of this color. The red ochre has been used for centuries in Paleolithic burials (Walker 639). Chinese people consider "red a sacred color associated with women, blood, sexual potency, and creative power" (Walker 639).

In times when people believed that a woman was able to create life without the man's semen, her "bleeding wound", and a life giving



blood, was treated as something mysterious and even godlike. People could not comprehend how a woman could survive losing so much blood in such a short period of time. A woman's bleeding played a significant part of people's life. It was a source of life. It was respected. Women were believed to be a part of Mother Earth, a giver and sustainer of life. They were perceived as a manifestation of Goddess and treated accordingly. People paid great attention to the cycles that occurred in nature and the menstruation was one of the most obvious cycles of human life.

The bleeding time had been a significant part of life in the times of the Goddess worship until the arrival of the new, male gods. Around five thousands years ago the men, who prayed to the fierce gods of war, dominated the earth. They believed that the power belonged to men because they were stronger and wiser than women. The old chapels had been destroyed and the female figures replaced by the new, representing the male gods. The female was pushed aside. Her body, a sacred vessel that held a great power was diminished to the role of a procreating machine. The women were pronounced devil's creatures and the menstruation, because of its incomprehensible complexity, was feared.

"The Talmud said if a menstruating woman walked between two men, one of them would surely die" (Walker 641). It was easier to separate the society from the unknown and mysterious. It was safer but as a result, women have been cut away from their sacred cycles, and from their bodies. They stopped paying attention to the messages about themselves and about the world around they were receiving monthly. The wisdom flowing with their blood was lost. For centuries they have been reassured that their period was a disgusting nuisance, and they started to believe that to be true.

Menstruation, once cherished, became a source of shame. From generation to generation the bleeding time was becoming a time of isolation and secrecy. All the knowledge about the sacredness of the fluid "from a woman's Mysterious Gateway" (Walker 638) has been forgotten. Women started to perceive it as a curse, a time that disables them and makes them less valuable. During those few days a month they could not do what they would normally do if they did not have "it". The power turned into disability. The



women, instead of being happy with their bodies, began to blame them, making themselves weak. The more they hated their cycles, the more pain and misery they experienced every month. Something that was such a big part of women's lives started to be a curse.

The more time passed, the more the women separated themselves from their blood. The lack of connection with Mother Earth caused irregularity of their periods, so they began to take hormones to force the balance into their bodies. The dependence on the drugs made women even more vulnerable. They gave away the control over their bodies to the pharmaceutical companies. The businesses have been developing fast. It has become an avalanche. The more hate there was towards their monthly blood, the more pain, the more money put into the hands of males owning the drug companies. Women were walking further and further away from the wisdom and appreciation of being a female.

The media contributed to the distortion of a healthy woman's image. The products' advertisements, which are supposed to 'facilitate' those hard days are numerous. The message is simple. The blood is wicked and it needs to be hidden. Women do not have to suffer the 'horrible symptoms' associated with the menstruation anymore. Nobody has to discover their shameful secret because products, such as tampons and deodorants, can help to completely forget about menstruation. There is no need to even think about menstruation. Women can go to the swimming pool, they can wear white clothes, and they can have freedom. But do the procedures of masking this natural process offer a real freedom, or they take it away? Do they help to regain the balance or they take woman further away from their mental and physical health?

Every culture has its own attitudes towards the menstruation. Most of the time they indicate how women in general are perceived in a given culture. It is proved that in the cultures where natural processes of the female body, such as menstruation and menopause, are respected and held as sacred, women suffer less pain. They do not complain about the PMS syndrome, they are happy with their bodily functions and they find pride in being a woman. This would



indicate that the beliefs that surround women have a great impact on their well-being.

In the societies where the wisdom of the grandmothers is remembered, women know that their monthly flow is one of the greatest sources of power. It is magic that connects all women around the world. Every month each woman has a potential to bring forth a new life into this world. It does not necessarily have to be life in a form of a child. The new life can be an idea, a dream, a piece of art. It can be a decision to do something, or say something. The menstruation is a messenger and helper and should be treated as such. All the major ideas come to women during the bleeding time because they are more open then. Their wombs are open. They are withdrawing from the external world and are more focused on their feelings, and as a result more receptive.

The menstruation is a time when all the problems that are usually overlooked, neglected or pushed aside seem to be more pronounced. A voice of the intuition tries to point out the things that need to be looked at. It is extremely hard to hide anything during those days as everything that a woman has tried to push aside surfaces and demands her attention. These days, if treated with respect, can become a great ally, because they can help to get away from everything that is harmful, if it is a relationship or an environment, and regain a natural health.

Women, during their 'red days', have an access to the depths of their souls. If they were allowed to spend time undisturbed, listening to what their hearts have to tell them, they could learn a lot about their lives and human existence in general. The period gives an opportunity to be painfully honest with themselves. Some of the people, such as Tibetan lamas and Celts, believed that women during those days have mediumistic abilities; they are able to enter the spirit world, and talk to their ancestors. The smell of it is supposed to draw the spirits. The blood has always been seen as the biggest offering. Men all over the world have practiced the blood sacrifice ritual. Women offer blood naturally every month.



In the societies, such as Native American, where blood and menstruation was held as sacred, each time when a girl got her first period a big ceremony was prepared for her. It was a symbolic passage from childhood to adulthood. Every culture had their own way of performing the ritual but each of them celebrated that time in one way or the other. It was an event in which the whole village was participating. It was a holy time. At first usually a girl was secluded for a few days.

She was facing her own demons in solitude. Then, an older, post-menopausal woman was chosen to lead a girl through her Ceremony of Passage. Her role was to tell a girl some initiating stories and teach her a little bit about a woman's role in a society. All women in the village contributed in some way to that ceremony. Each of them offered a gift. It could be a piece of jewelry, a story or a song. From the day of the first menstruation a girl was a woman, mature enough to decide about her life and take on all responsibilities of a woman. She was ready to start her own family and have children. She was a giver of life.

Even today, in some cultures, the Ceremony of Passage is still performed. All of them include some type of a test of endurance. In the Navajo tradition, the girls participate in a run towards the rising sun. If a girl that is bleeding for the first time outruns everyone, she is believed to have a good life. She is a strong woman. Some of the tribes, like Nootka in Canada, have a different kind of an endurance ritual. A girl is taken in a boat into the middle of the lake and left there. If she manages to swim back she is a woman, ready to bear the pain, such as childbearing.

In the Apache tradition a girl who is menstruating for the first time is called a "Changing Woman", and after a ceremony she gains a name of a "White Painted Woman".

The dances and rituals of the initiation usually last for four days. For four days a 'new woman' is at the center of the village's life. The attitude of native cultures is so much different from the one 'modern women' have been accustomed to. There is no shame in menstruation but a beautiful celebration of life. A girl's first blood is seen as a blessing, and a powerful transition time. During



those few days a woman can gain strength and confidence that will stay with her for the rest of her life. The reaction of the parents and people around towards the first menstruation usually shapes the attitude for the rest of the woman's life. If the reaction is one of shame and guilt, which is usually the case in a dominant society, it is probable that a woman will not be happy with her body. It is extremely difficult to erase and transform it into something positive. Women should dive deep into the wisdom and rituals of the aboriginal societies because they knew that the menstruation was a natural and beautiful part of the Great Circle of Life.

The bleeding time, as a part of life, is strongly tied to the moon. The fluids in a human body, like all water on the earth, move along with the moon. They are conducted by it, like a big orchestra. The moon and blood wax and wane in unison. In the past, when people lived in accordance with the world around them, they were aware of this connection. There was no artificial light, the moon was the only giver of light at night, and as a result women's cycles were coordinated by the moon.

The natural time for a healthy woman to bleed is during the dark phase of the moon. Today it is not so defined as there are many factors that distract the natural cycle. The artificial light, the food with hormones, and various pills interfere with the balance. As a result sometimes a woman bleeds even during the full moon, which can be, if used properly, a very powerful time, too. During the full moon the female energy is directed outwards, as oppose to the dark phase, when a woman is focused inwards. The menstruation during a full moon gives an opportunity to express oneself externally and some great art can be produced during those days. If only women were able to tune into their cycles and listen to them they could accomplish some extraordinary things.

If a woman lives close to nature, however, her menstruation will occur during the dark phase of the moon. The bleeding is a natural way of cleansing a woman's body off all the tissue that is not needed any more, that has performed its tasks. Just like the moon retrieves to a dark and quiet place to get ready for a new cycle, a woman, in order to be healthy, should retrieve to her sac-



red space, where she would look closely at her life and regenerate her strength for a new month. Sacred space can be any place that feels comfortable and peaceful, a place where woman would not be disturbed. The best solution would be to take a few days off from all activities. It is almost impossible, however, in the society today to dedicate a few days to relaxation. People who are not 'producing', not 'doing' are thought to be useless.

It is understandable that women are more emotional and 'overreacting' around the time of their menstruation, as subconsciously they know that they are not doing what they are supposed to do. They would be much happier if they could spend some time without the demands from the external world. They would be able to tap the sources of a new life and get new, powerful insights.

The ideas conceived during the bleeding days are growing together with the moon and reach their peak at the full moon. The full moon is a natural time for a woman to ovulate. It is the climax of menstruation. All the dreams that have lived inside of a woman for fourteen days are opening now; they reach out to manifest themselves in the outside world. Then, slowly, a woman is waning to go back to her bleeding time again. Sometimes, when the dreams could not be realized and the ideas could not be exposed a woman feels disappointed and irritated.

A woman's body has been designed in a way that it reminds her about her need for solitude. Sometimes the pains and cramps are so unbearable that it is not possible to do anything else, but lay down. There is no escape, a body forces to look inside of one's soul. The more the period is despised and evaded, the bigger the pain. The pain can be used constructively, it can signify that the time has come to get away from the 'worldly matters' and spend some time in solitude. The cramps, in themselves are like an initiation ritual. They push a woman to her limits and expose her biggest demons. Each time a woman survives the pain of her cramps she becomes stronger. Pain is also a way of opening a heart, because when it is unbearable the only way of escaping it is listening to what it has to say. It is one of life's paradoxes.



Sometimes the cramps indicate that there is some health problem and if a woman could listen to its messages more closely, she and people around her would be much happier and healthier. When one is happy one makes everyone around cheerful and more positive. Instead of killing the pain with the pills, it should be listened to and acted upon accordingly.

Native American women knew that menstruation was a time when they should slow down. During their bleeding time they did not participate in the life of the village but retreated to their sacred place to spend for four or five days there. The menstrual hut was called a moon lodge because of the connection between the period and the moon, and was usually situated outside of a village. The name for the menstruation in Native American tradition is moon time. The moon lodges were opened just to women, and all significant events in a woman's life, such as childbirth took place in there.

Most of the women menstruated at the same time (even today women who are close to each other, or who live together, after a few months start bleeding at the same time), which was a real blessing as they could spend those few days together, sharing their everyday stories, as well as the old myths, gossiping, doing craft together, and simply resting. They did not have to think about cooking, as the old women in a village brought food to them. They did not have to worry about their children, as there were many aunts and uncles who were more than willing to take care of them. The bleeding was empowering for women. Each month they received some sacred songs, new ideas and stories and left the moon lodge wiser. Sometimes their visions were messages for the whole village. Just like a Vision Quest ceremony, performed by a young boy entering his manhood, a woman had her Vision Quest every month. The average time a woman spent in the menstrual hut was four days, which was the equivalent of the men's Vision Quest's time.

In many traditions menstruating women are excluded from the various ceremonies they would normally be allowed to partici-



pate, especially if there are men involved in them. It is not because of the uncleanness, however, but because of the great power the bleeding women hold at that time. There is a possibility that too many doors to the other worlds and dimensions could be opened and harm other participant. Whenever there is a Sundance ceremony, which is the most sacred of all Native American ceremonies, and there are bleeding women dancers, they have to dance in an area specially designated for this purpose. It is located at some distance from the main arbor. The Indians believe that the energy in a body of a woman who is under the influence of the grandmother moon flows counterclockwise, as oppose to the regular, clockwise flow. When a bleeding woman dances in a separate place her energy is interweaving with the energies of the people in the main arbor. They create infinity.

In addition to the power of blood it is also believed to be one of the most nutritious of all liquids. The plants that are watered with it seem to grow much faster and are much healthier. It is a natural fertilizer. Blood also carries all information about humans and when it is given to Mother Earth she recognizes it and feels nurtured. Just like plants grow better when they are talked to, Mother Earth is happy when women share their fluids with Her. This practice is especially significant today, when the Earth has been neglected for so many years. The Native American women in the moon lodges were usually letting their blood flow freely. Today, this sacred liquid is flushed down the toilets without a second thought. It only shows how much the societies have been disconnected from the roots.

Blood has always been seen as a very powerful liquid. It has been used in folk magic. Its smell, and probably chemistry was believed to evoke deep emotion if a man consumed it. The semen and blood are considered two of the most powerful ingredients produced by humans. If joined together they are supposed to bring wisdom and strength. "In the Tantric tradition men became spiritually powerful by ingesting menstrual blood" (Owen 37). Although today it may seem disgusting and insane, the drinking of blood from a 'sacred wound' was quite popular among people involved in magic.



Women do not lose the power of their blood even in her post-menopausal days. They become even stronger as now their blood is “permanently retained” (Walker 641). No longer do they have to give it away. A woman’s life is imbued with the sacredness and the power of blood. Through all the stages of life, a maiden, a bride and a crown woman are infused with the presence of blood.

When I sat down to write this paper I started to bleed. It seemed that blood came to help me or maybe it wanted to speak and share its wisdom. The time has come for all the women of the world to dive deep in ‘the red river of life’ and regain its power. The experience of moon time is the decision that we all make every month and if we choose it to be it can be an extremely empowering time. Women should reach deep into their ancestors’ wisdom and relearn the value of this sacred time. It is time to transform all the negative beliefs existing in the male-dominated society into something that can be constructive and helpful. It depends on each and every one of us, women if the life of our daughters will be full of shame and guilt or full of joy and power. Happiness is not only our choice. It is our responsibility.

References:

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