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Best Practice & Research Clinical Obstetrics and Gynaecology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/bpobgyn

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Cultural aspects and mythologies surrounding menstruation and abnormal uterine bleeding

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Keywords:

menstruation
lunar and menstrual phase-locking
cultural and religious beliefs
major religions
menstrual products
social media

The objective of this chapter is to present an overview of how menstruation, a normal bodily function, was and is perceived in various ethnic groups and cultures in the world, from ancient mythology, historical, or traditional practices to contemporary belief systems. Mythical tales about menstruation abound in the legends and prehistory of ancient cultures. These tales characterize menstrual blood variously as sacred, a gift from the gods, or a punishment for sin, but it is almost always magical and powerful. In contrast, most world religions view menstruation, with varying degrees of severity, as a major problem, a sign of impurity and uncleanliness, and therefore, menstruating women are isolated, prohibited from polluting the holy places, and shunned. Many of these myths and cultural misperceptions persist to the present day, reflected in a wide range of negative attitudes toward menstruation, which can have serious and direct implications for reproductive health. In view of the increasingly globalized nature of current clinical practice, it is crucial that health care providers are familiar with existing cultural and social views and attitudes toward the menstrual function. The ultimate goal is to be able to provide women culturally sensitive and medically appropriate therapies for their menstrual disorders. This biocultural approach to menstruation management is desirable in contemporary medical practice.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bpobgyn.2016.09.015>

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Introduction

Menstruation is a natural bodily function that has been shrouded in myths, imbued with both good and bad symbolisms, and is the object of diverse taboos and rituals in all traditional cultures from as far back as historical records are available.

Many menstruation-related myths and cultural misperceptions persist to the present day and continue to find expressions in contemporary belief systems and attitudes toward normal and abnormal menstruation. More significantly, they have direct implications for reproductive health. They continue to exert major effects on the manner and extent by which women seek medical treatment for disorders of menstruation, particularly abnormal uterine bleeding, and related events such as menarche and menopause.

The objective of this chapter is to present an overview of how menstruation was and is perceived in various ethnic groups and cultures in the world, from ancient mythology and historical or traditional practices to contemporary belief systems.

Considering the increasing ethnic mixture of women seeking medical help in most countries and the globalization of current clinical practice, it is important that health care providers are cognizant of extant cultural and social views and attitudes regarding the menstrual function. The ultimate goal is to provide women with culturally sensitive and medically appropriate treatments for menstrual disorders. In view of the great variations in the experience of menstruation in women around the world, this biocultural approach to menstruation management is desirable.

The mythology of menstruation

Mythical tales about menstruation abound in the legends and prehistory of ancient cultures. These tales characterize menstrual blood variously as sacred, a gift from the gods, or a punishment for sin, but it is always magical and powerful. A few examples of these ancient beliefs illustrate the breadth and universal nature of these mythical and cultural views or dogmas.

In Norse mythology, the god *Thor* reached the magic land of enlightenment and eternal life by bathing in a river filled with the menstrual blood of “*Giantesses*” or Primal Matriarchs, the “Powerful Ones.” In Greek mythology, the gods were dependent on the miraculous power of menstrual blood. It was euphemistically called the “supernatural red wine” given to the gods by *Mother Hera* [1].

In the *Vedas*, the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, the origin of menstruation is narrated [2]. The myth tells about *Indra*, the powerful God of wars, storms, and the heavens, who slayed his main enemy, *Vritra*, the demon of drought in the form of a dragon. However, *Vritra* was a *Brahmin* (member of a caste specializing as priests, teachers, and protectors of sacred learning across generations), and by his murder, *Indra* acquired the sin of *Brahmahatya* (the act of killing a Brahmin, which is considered a major sin). To free himself from the sin, *Indra* divided his sin into four parts and gave them to trees, water, fire, and women. It has been declared in the *Vedas* that women's menstrual flow is a manifestation of that sin as women had taken it upon themselves a part of *Indra's* guilt.

Mayan mythology explains the origin of menstruation as a punishment for violating the social rules governing marital alliance. The menstrual blood turns into snakes and insects used in black sorcery before the Mayan moon goddess is reborn from it [3].

A Cherokee mythical story demonstrates the power of menstrual blood [4]. *Stoneclad* was a cannibalistic monster who was virtually indestructible because of his impenetrable stone skin. But *Stoneclad* had one weakness—he could not bear the sight of a menstruating woman. Although no Cherokee warrior could stop him, *Stoneclad* finally met his demise in the presence of seven menstruating virgins. One by one, they stood naked in his path, sapping his strength, until *Stoneclad* finally crumbled into a heap.

Persistence of myths. Even if they have no connection to reality, mythical stories about menstruation have continued to underpin current menstruation-related cultural beliefs and practices. Lunar and menstrual phase-locking and menstrual synchrony are two of the most persistent ideas crucial to the myths and rituals of traditional communities across the world.

Lunar and menstrual phase-locking. The terms “menstruation” and “menses” are derived from the Latin word *mensis* (month), which in turn relates to the Greek word *mene* (moon), the roots of the

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