Chapter 11
The Raw and the Cooked

> Hunger is hunger, but the hunger that is satisfied with cooked meat eaten with fork and knife is a different kind of hunger from the one that devours raw meat with the aid of hands, nails and teeth.
>
> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (1857–9)

Culture – if the preceding arguments are accepted – originated under pressure from what for millennia must have been the most reproductively burdened and oppressed sex. When women as a gender group finally brought such pressures to a head, developing sufficient internal solidarity to enable them to assert a monthly 'strike', they thereby established the basic categories and distinctions of the cultural domain. We will see in this chapter how such action involved, among other things, distinguishing raw meat from cooked, imposing a taboo upon raw meat, tying feast days and therefore cooking to specific lunar phases, and integrating the raw/cooked opposition with that between kin and affines.

Because women signalling 'no!' had first and foremost to be inviolable, the condition of all these achievements was the establishment of menstrual taboos. These originated not simply as sexual avoidances, but have always had the profoundest economic, political, ritual and other dimensions. In the course of expressing their gender solidarity in blood, women asserted that females were separate from males, incest different from marriage, production distinct from consumption – and 'the raw' distinct from 'the cooked'. In fact, we will see that women's menstrual self-identity was the generative source of all culture's other basic categories, polarities and rules.

Menstrual Taboos

Menstrual taboos are familiar to us all. They are very much a part of our own culture, and are in evidence as a prominent feature of most traditional ones. Some cultures have weak menstrual taboos; the people in one agricultural community – the Rungus of Borneo – have aroused particular curiosity

because they seem to have none at all (Appell 1988). But exceptions of this kind serve only to prove the rule. Menstrual taboos may not be universal, but they are sufficiently widespread to justify the inference that they are an extremely ancient component of the human cultural configuration.

From one point of view, menstruation may seem a relatively ordinary biological event. In modern western societies it is a bodily function not thought to require much public acknowledgement or discussion. Yet traditional cultures almost everywhere have accorded it extraordinarily elaborate symbolic attention, far in excess of that accorded to other physiological functions which might at first sight seem comparable. It is not just that menstruation is thought of as polluting. Where taboos are strong, the avoidances are enforced through spectacular institutions buttressed by often extravagant beliefs in the supernatural potencies of women's blood. It is the draconic *powers* of menstrual blood – powers which can be used for good or ill, and which may be thought to influence not only the entire earth but the cosmos, too – which stand out in traditional mythologies.

In this context, few writers on the subject have put the case more vividly than the Roman historian, Pliny (1942: 549):

> But nothing could easily be found that is more remarkable than the monthly flux of women. Contact with it turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seeds in gardens are dried up, the fruits of trees fall off, the bright surface of mirrors in which it is merely reflected is dimmed, the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bees die, even bronze and iron are at once seized by rust, and a horrible smell fills the air. . . .

The Gimi of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea see menstruation as a constant 'threat to male purity and superiority'; objects touched by a menstruating woman are bound to deteriorate rapidly:

> wooden bowls will crack, stone axes will misbehave in the hands of their male owners and inflict upon them otherwise inexplicable wounds, crops will wither and die, even the ground over which the menstruator steps will lose its fertility. (Gillison 1980: 149)

The Mae Enga in Papua New Guinea believe that contact with a menstruating woman will

> sicken a man and cause persistent vomiting, 'kill' his blood so that it turns black, corrupt his vital juices so that his skin darkens and hangs in folds as his flesh wastes, permanently dull his wits, and eventually lead to a slow decline and death. (Meggitt 1964; quoted in Delaney *et al.* 1977: 5)

A Mae Enga tribesman known to the anthropologist M. J. Meggitt left his wife because she had slept on his blanket while menstruating; later, still not feeling quite safe from her evil influence, he killed her with an axe (Meggitt

1964). And Maurice Godelier (1986: 58) reports that the men of the Baruya of Papua New Guinea have a similar view: 'The attitude of the men toward menstrual blood, whenever they talk or think about it, verges on hysteria, mingling with disgust, repulsion, and above all fear.'

Magico-religious beliefs only marginally less intense were active among most rural populations in Europe, at least until a few decades ago.

The belief that menstruants cause fruit trees to wither lingered on late into the nineteenth and even into the twentieth century in Italy, Spain, Germany and Holland. In the wine districts of Bordeaux and the Rhine, menstruating women were forbidden to approach the vats and cellars, lest the wine turn to vinegar. In France, women were excluded from refineries when the sugar was boiling, lest it all turn black; and no menstruating woman would attempt to make mayonnaise sauce (Briffault 1927, 2: 389). In the United States in the 1920s, women widely believed that a permanent wave would not take if they were menstruating (Delaney *et al.* 1977: 7).

In England, the *British Medical Journal* in 1878 published correspondence from doctors insisting that in curing hams, women should not rub the legs of pork with the brine-pickle during their periods (Briffault 1927, 2: 389). The contemporary anthropologist Denise Lawrence (1988: 123), reporting on fieldwork conducted in the 1970s, writes that at the annual pig-killing undertaken by families in one village in southern Portugal, 'the greatest threat to a household's economic well-being is posed by the purported destructive effects of menstruation on processing pork'. In this village to this day, almost the entire female-governed organisation of pork sausage production still revolves around such taboos.

Theories of Menstrual Symbolism

In the 1960s, William Stephens attempted an ambitious cross-cultural survey of menstrual taboos from a psychoanalytical perspective. In his view, male 'castration anxiety' lies behind the taboos. The theory was that 'the sight or thought of a person who bleeds from the genitals (a menstruating woman) is frightening to a person who has intense castration anxiety' (1962: 93). He predicted that the intensity of menstrual taboos should therefore vary cross-culturally in proportion to the intensity of male fear of castration – a prediction which he claimed was borne out.

An opposite psychological theory had earlier been put forward by the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, author of *Symbolic Wounds* (1955). Bettelheim argued that males are not so much afraid of castration as, on the contrary, envious of women's capacity to bleed from the genitals. They therefore attempt to imitate this. Bettelheim saw this as the explanation for that very important class of customs known as 'male initiation rites', many of which involve cutting the penises of boys or in other ways making them bleed. In

some parts of the world male self-mutilation and bleeding is explicitly referred to in the native idiom as 'male menstruation' (see Chapter 13). While Stephens' model would lead us to see this as symbolic self-castration, Bettelheim's model interprets male initiation ritualism as an attempt by men to emulate women's peculiar blood-making/child-bearing powers.

A more recent theory with a psychological component rests on the observation that menstruation can be a rare event among hunters and gatherers. It is said that because of its rarity it would understandably have been worrying and seemingly anomalous – and therefore 'taboo'. It is said that badly nourished hunter-gatherer women reach menarche late in life, reach menopause early, and suffer frequent long spells of amenorrhoea, in addition to being pregnant or breast-feeding for much of their lives. They therefore hardly ever menstruate (Frisch 1975). The menstrual rhythm which modern Westerners think of as a frequent and regular periodic blood loss may be in other cultures, as Buckley and Gottlieb (1988: 45, citing Harrell 1981) paraphrase this hypothesis, 'a fairly rare occurrence, the rarity of which may indeed inform the great potency attributed to it and the stringency of ritual prohibitions by which it is so often surrounded'.

A different set of theories holds that psychology has little to do with the matter – people are simply being scientific in avoiding menstrual blood. The substance, according to this line of thought, really is highly toxic. This theory was first proposed in 1920 by a physician, Bela Schick, who posited the existence of what he termed 'menotoxins' in menstrual blood. Ashley Montagu (1940, 1957, cited by Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 19) was the first to bring Schick's theory to the attention of anthropologists, asking whether menstruating women indeed wither plants, turn wine, spoil pickles, cause bread to fall and so forth – all because of the alleged chemical effects of menstrual blood.

Not one of these theories has gained more than minority support. The mutually incompatible psychoanalytical models explain neither cultural variation, nor the complexity of menstrual rituals; concentrating on the male psyche, they in fact ignore most of the social, symbolic, cosmological and other dimensions of these customs. The argument from menstruation's rarity or apparent abnormality fails to explain more than a small number of possible cases. Accepting that menstrual bleeding in some hunter-gatherer societies may be quite a rare event, we are still left with a problem. In view of the extraordinarily elaborate menstrual rituals of so many cultures, it seems all the more remarkable that what little blood is actually shed should be made to serve such vast symbolic purposes. The ideological links with the moon, with cooking, with hunting, with shamanism and so forth seem too detailed in their cross-cultural recurrences and too central to cosmology and religion to be explained as puzzled or frightened responses to an occasional perceived abnormality. Finally, the view that menstrual blood is genuinely toxic is mythical; this kind of belief is an example of menstrual superstition, not an explanation of it.

New Perspectives on Menstruation

In their attempts to find a general, cross-cultural explanation for ethnographic menstrual taboos, few interpreters of the 1960s and 1970s ventured far beyond the parameters of male native ideology in such matters. Much was made of the 'pollution' associated with menstrual blood, and of women's oppression through the corresponding seclusion rules and taboos. The concepts of 'taboo' and of 'oppression' were closely linked (Stephens 1962; Young 1965; Young and Bacdayan 1965). In this respect, theories intended as pioneering feminist contributions (e.g. Delaney *et al.* 1977) not infrequently colluded with more traditional views.

Since the early 1980s, however, in response to a fresh current of interest in the lives of women, some radically new anthropological approaches to the topic have begun to emerge. These have not yet resulted in any new general theory of menstrual symbolism, but they have added a new dimension to the debates. In some cases they have drawn on strands from an older tradition of matriarchy-theory, as exemplified for example in Robert Briffault's encyclopaedic, magnificent, yet almost wholly ignored cross-cultural work, *The Mothers* (1927). Other recent writers have been influenced by emergent contributions to popular culture such as Barbara Walker's impressively ambitious and scholarly compilation, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (1983), or Penelope Shuttle's and Peter Redgrove's imaginative psychological exploration of menstrual dreams and symbolism, *The Wise Wound* (1978).

It was above all *The Wise Wound* that presented to a new generation of emancipated women in the 1980s what seemed at first to be a daring and paradoxical message: correctly approached and understood, menstruation need not be Woman's 'curse'. It can be an empowering and indeed magical experience. Social anthropologists were slow to respond, but an edited volume published in 1988 entitled *Blood Magic; The anthropology of menstruation* (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988) may mark the beginning of the discipline's dawning awareness of the positive potentialities of 'menstrual power'.

Without always acknowledging matriarchalist influences, most of the anthropological contributors to *Blood Magic* seem to have drawn on the insights of Bachofen, Briffault and other early matriarchy theorists in emphasising the ambiguity of most cultural constructions of menstruation, pointing out that terms such as 'pollution', 'taboo' or 'defilement' have in the past been far too simplistically understood.

The editors of *Blood Magic* point out that the dual significance of menstrual regulations is inherent in the very term *tabu*. The Polynesian word is made up from the root *ta*, meaning 'to mark', and *pu*, which is an adverb of intensity; *tabu*, therefore, means 'marked thoroughly' (Steiner 1956: 32). In many Polynesian languages, 'holy' and 'forbidden' are inseparable concepts: a thing which is 'holy' is by the same token 'forbidden'; a thing which is

'forbidden' is also 'holy'. A Fijian woman may be termed *dra tabu* – meaning 'holy blood' (Sahlins 1977: 33).

Durkheim: the Menstrual Origin of Exogamy

The notion of 'tabu' as connoting both 'danger' and 'power' belongs in fact to a venerable tradition. One source of this is the work of Durkheim, and in particular a pioneering article on menstrual symbolism published in 1898. It is worth recalling this, since Durkheim's piece – nowadays virtually forgotten in the English-speaking world – is directly relevant to the central argument of this book.

In 'The prohibition of incest and its origins', published at the turn of the century in the first issue of *L'Anné sociologique*, Durkheim (1963[1898]) set out to explain the origins of 'the law of exogamy' – the rule stipulating that members of a clan must 'marry out'. His theory was based on a very simple idea. Social order – manifesting itself in institutions such as exogamic rules – involves the capacity to counteract the natural tendency for the sexes to conjoin. But in concrete terms, what is the force which keeps the sexes apart?

At the simplest level, there are three possibilities. Firstly, women repulse men. Secondly, men repulse women. Thirdly, the two sexes are kept apart by some overarching, external force.

Durkheim tended to favour the third option, believing that it is moral/religious ideology imposed by society as a whole which keeps the sexes apart. However, he simultaneously favoured the first option, insisting that although women in earliest times may not have possessed social or political dominance, it was nonetheless they who were the immediate agents of religious ideology's segregating action. *Earliest women established sexual morality by periodically repulsing men.* To be more precise, Durkheim argued that women established the exogamy rule by periodically *bleeding* so as to repulse the opposite sex.

The law of exogamy, writes Durkheim, is only one specific case of a much more general religious institution, known as 'taboo'. Taboo, according to Durkheim, is the ritualistic setting apart of 'the sacred'. Durkheim gives several examples – tabooed priests whom commoners may not touch, tabooed religious objects, tabooed places and so on. Just as taboo sets apart the sacred, so exogamy sets apart a woman from all men of her own clan. 'The two sexes', comments Durkheim (1963: 71) in this context, 'must avoid each other with the same care as the profane flees from the sacred and the sacred from the profane. . .'. When exogamic taboos are in force, according to Durkheim, women become like sacred beings invested 'with an isolating power of some sort, a power which holds the masculine population at a distance. . .'

In 'primitive' societies, continues Durkheim (1963: 72), it is above all with their first menstrual flows that women become 'sacred'. From this moment, and then at each recurrence of the flow, women exercise a 'type of repulsing action which keeps the other sex far from them' (1963: 75). The moral order of typically 'primitive' cultures is sustained and defined by this action. 'Each part of the population', Durkheim writes, 'lives separated from the other'. Husbands may even avoid eating with their wives. Often, husband and wife have separate kinship loyalties, and shun intimate contact of any kind in public.

All this, according to Durkheim, expresses the deepest of male fears. 'All blood is terrible and all sorts of taboos are instituted to prevent contact with it.' Since a woman bleeds periodically, a 'more or less conscious anxiety, a certain religious fear, cannot fail to be present in all the relations which her companions have with her', reducing male contacts with her to a minimum (Durkheim 1963: 85). Since sex brings a man into the closest potential contact with a woman's blood, it is not surprising that the taboos should involve sexual prohibitions above all. 'It is from this', concludes Durkheim,

> that exogamy and the serious penalties which sanction it are derived. Whoever violates this law finds himself in the same state as a murderer. He has entered into contact with blood. . . .

Durkheim saw this whole arrangement as rooted in the 'religious system' known as 'totemism' (see Chapter 3). The secret of this, in his view, was simply the belief that blood *in general* is sacred or godlike, as a consequence of which game animals, too, are felt to be the repositories of highly tabooed blood. 'Among certain North American Indians, to eat the blood of animals is an abomination; the game is passed over the flame so that the blood in it will be dried up.' Among the Jews, continues Durkheim (1963: 83–4), the same prohibition is sanctioned by the terrible penalty of excommunication. Similar beliefs were current among the Romans, the Arabs and others.

In totemism, according to Durkheim, the blood of one's mother and her matrilineal clan is identified with the blood of an animal selected as the clan's emblem. The clan members 'consider themselves as forming a single flesh, "a single meat", a single blood, and this flesh is that of the mythical being from whom they have all descended. . .' Within the shared blood resides the 'god' or 'totem' of the clan, 'from which it follows that the blood is a divine thing. When it runs out, the god is spilling over' (Durkheim 1963: 89). 'God' as an object of respect, then, is in Durkheim's model inseparable from menstrual and other blood.

It would be interesting to study the ideological and political factors which led to Durkheim's insights being virtually ignored for a hundred years. Leaving aside this issue, however, and also leaving aside for the moment the detailed validity of his particular formulations, we can agree that the

potencies associated with sacrifical or other blood have for millennia meshed closely and sometimes indistinguishably with notions of 'divine power' (Girard 1977). The Siouan Dakota term for 'taboo' is *wakan*, defined in Rigg's *Dakota–English Dictionary* as meaning 'spiritual, consecrated; wonderful, incomprehensible; said also of women at the menstrual period' (quoted in Briffault 1927, 2: 412). Remaining in North America, a Muskogee informant from Oklahoma states that women naturally 'purify' themselves when they separate from men 'during their monthly time'. Men must enter monthly into a sweat-lodge to keep pure, whereas simply by menstruating, 'women are naturally purifying themselves to keep their medicine effective' (Powers 1980: 57). According to an Oglala informant, the power of woman 'grows with the moon and comes and goes with it' (Neihardt 1961: 212, quoted in Powers 1980: 62). Sacred water for ceremonial use by Oglala 'buffalo women' – sexual or pubescent women, 'those who have the power to create life' – is made by mixing water with red chokeberries. Powers (1980: 61) comments:

> Again we see the connection being made symbolically between buffalo women . . . and life. Moreover, if red is sacred and sacred water and menstrual blood are red, then symbolically sacred water *is* menstrual blood. If sacred water is life, menstrual blood also symbolises life.

A basic feature of the Sun Dance of the Arapaho and other Plains Indians was the drinking of red 'medicine water' symbolic of the menstrual flow (Dorsey 1903: 177); an informant explained that 'menses is called *ba'ataana*, which means "medicine" or "supernatural" ' (Hilger 1952: 72).

In Australia, comparable patterns are or were found. Over most of the continent, the status of women was generally rather low; however, women's 'blood-making and child-giving powers were thought both mysterious and dangerous' (Stanner 1965: 216). 'Even when ritually tabu. . .', writes Berndt (1951: 58–9) of the Yolngu of north-east Arnhem Land, 'a woman is regarded as sacred, for her blood [is] sacred. . .' The Wik-Mungkan Aborigines of Cape York describe tabooed things as *ngaintja*. Discussing the fact that women may be *ngaintja*, particularly when menstruating, McKnight (1975: 95) says: 'I think the answer to this lies in the fact that women also are associated with the Rainbow Serpent. The Rainbow Serpent is believed to be responsible for women menstruating.'

The significance of this 'Rainbow Serpent' – touched on in the Introduction – will be explored further in Chapter 13.

Frazer: Menstruating Maidens and Divine Kings

In the concluding chapter of the second edition of *The Golden Bough*, Frazer (1900, 3: 204) added his own contribution to the view of menstruants as semi-divine 'powers'. He drew attention to what he felt was an astonishing

cross-cultural parallel between (a) the ritual treatment of menstruating maidens and (b) attitudes towards divine kings or priest-kings in the ancient world. It was almost as if men could be vested with cosmically potent ritual power only if they could be conceptualised as in some sense 'menstruating'. The processes of initiation through which they acquired divine power were remarkably similar to male initiation rituals in other parts of the world, whilst these in turn bore remarkable structural resemblances to the first-menstruation rituals of young women who, in being 'set apart' were thought of as secluded in 'the world beyond', often conceptualised as a place high in the night sky. For such menstruants to be in sunlight or touching 'this earth' was therefore inconceivable, and immense efforts were often made – sometimes including the elevation of young girls (like the heroine in Grimms' *Rapunzel*) into shuttered turrets or seclusion-huts on stilts – to prevent the cosmic disasters which earthly contact would invite.

The Mikado of Japan, Frazer noted, 'profaned his sanctity if he so much as touched the ground with his foot' (1900, 3: 202). Outside his palace he was carried on men's shoulders; within it he walked on exquisitely wrought mats. Neither was the Mikado allowed to expose his sacred person to the open air, 'and the sun was not thought worthy to shine on his head' (p. 203).

The same applied in Mexico to the supreme pontiff of the Zapotecs, who 'was looked upon as a god whom the earth was not worthy to hold, nor the sun to shine upon' (Bancroft 1875, 2: 142, in Frazer 1900, 3: 203). Frazer lists the king and queen of Tahiti and the kings of Dosuma, Persia, Siam and Uganda as further examples of rulers who had to be carried almost everywhere to avoid their touching the ground. His list of future leaders or heirs to the throne barred from the sun includes Indians of Guiana, heirs to the thrones of Bogota and of Sogamoso, and the future Inca of Peru.

'Now it is remarkable', continues Frazer, 'that these two rules – not to touch the ground and not to see the sun – are observed either separately or conjointly by girls at puberty in many parts of the world' (1900, 3: 204). In parts of New Guinea, for example, 'daughters of chiefs, when they are about twelve or thirteen years of age, are kept indoors for two or three years, never being allowed, under any pretence, to descend from the house, and the house is so shaded that the sun cannot shine on them' (Frazer 1900, 3: 210). Among the Ot Danoms of Borneo, a maiden was placed in a cell which 'is raised on piles above the ground, and is lit by a single small window opening on a lonely place, so that the girl is in almost total darkness'. Here she was kept secluded, sometimes for as long as seven years, without being permitted to see anyone but a single slave woman appointed to wait on her (p. 210). Amongst the Nootka Indians of Vancouver Island, girls at puberty were placed in each house in a sort of gallery, where they were prevented from touching the ground or from seeing either fire or the sun's rays. 'The general effect of these rules', notes Frazer after listing a number of similar customs, 'is to keep the girl suspended, so to say, between heaven and earth' (p. 233).

Menstruation and the Sun

Frazer's puzzling cross-cultural findings regarding menstruants and the sun have been amply confirmed. 'In Native North America', writes Powers (1980: 63),

> the two most common proscriptions regarding menstruating women are: (1) that they be secluded, metaphorically, kept out of the sun; and (2) that they not cook for their husbands, that is, that they not go near the fireplace.

These two prohibitions can be regarded as related in that the sun is experienced as fiery, menstrual blood having to be kept rigidly segregated from all 'fire'. Typically, this is less to protect the menstruant than to prevent her excessively potent blood from polluting household fires or even blotting out the sun.

Lévi-Strauss discusses a number of American Indian prohibitions segregating menstruants from sunlight in the final chapter of *The Origin of Table Manners* (1978). According to the Salish of the Cowlitz River, a menstruating girl must not look at the sky. The Tlingit of Alaska enforce the wearing of broad-rimmed hats to prevent girls who have begun to menstruate from looking up at the sky and thus polluting it (Lévi-Strauss 1978: 503). Durkheim (1963: 75) notes of these same pubescent Indians that 'in order to isolate themselves from the sun, they are obliged to blacken their faces'. Throughout the west and north-west of North America, continues Lévi-Strauss (1978: 500), 'a girl menstruating for the first time was not allowed to touch the ground with her feet, nor to look at the sun'. To keep her from the ground, the Carrier Indians conveyed her bodily from point to point. Hoods, mats, baskets, eye-shades and numerous other devices were used among various tribes to prevent such girls from looking at the sun. To Lévi-Strauss' examples we can add that among the Waiwai Indians of southern Guiana, a menstruating girl cannot look at the sky because it would cave in and crush the earth (Fock 1963: 48–53).

In the Old World, rules about keeping away from sunlight apply also in Africa among the !Xõ and other Kalahari San peoples. Taylor (1985: 62) writes of a !Xõ initiant during her first-menstruation ritual:

> During the whole time of her menstruation the girl must not touch the earth, neither must the sun fall on her. She must wear no beads or clothes. Food is brought to her inside the hut where she remains alone for most of the time. . . . No man may see her face, for if he does it is believed that ill luck will befall him.

Here in the Kalahari, such a girl 'is believed to have great supernatural power which can be harnessed for the good of the community if rightly treated' (Taylor 1985: 62). When she has just been scarified following her seclusion

and is led out of her hut to become the focus of a joyful ritual dance, she keeps her eyes solemnly downcast. This is

> because in her enhanced state of potency she can affect the game that may be hunted in the coming days. If she keeps her eyes down, so too will the animals when they are hunted; they will not look up and see the hunter as he creeps up on them. (Taylor 1985: 63, citing Lewis-Williams 1981: 51)

Clearly, then, through menstruation a girl in some symbolic sense 'becomes' the hunted game which men hope to be able to kill. There is no doubt that *it is because she is bleeding* that she is identified with *game which should also bleed when successfully hunted*. We are here, of course, approaching from a new angle the 'totemism' discussed in Chapter 3.

Menstruation as Power

The contribution of Durkheim and Frazer was to have developed the concept of menstrual repulsion as a form of power – 'sacred' power in Durkheim's case, and something akin to 'royal' or 'priestly' power in Frazer's.

Neither version would deny that through menstrual taboos, women may be oppressed. In many cultures, menstruating women are subject to forms of exclusion and isolation amounting to severe and sometimes (to Westerners) horrific oppression. But, building on the insights of writers such as Durkheim and Frazer, we can begin to appreciate the extent to which men have sought to isolate and oppress women *because* of their intrinsic and much-feared menstrual powers. 'The monthly seclusion of women', as Robert Lowie (1920: 203) wrote long ago,

> has been accepted as a proof of their degradation in primitive communities, but it is far more likely that the causal sequence is to be reversed and that their exclusion from certain spheres of activity and consequently lesser freedom is the consequence of the awe inspired by the phenomena of periodicity.

Likewise the psychoanalytical interpretation of George Devereux (1950) takes as its themes 'The Menstruating Woman as Witch' and 'The Menstruating Woman as Power', drawing on the arguments of both Freud and Durkheim in insisting that 'the sacred' is also 'dangerous' and vice versa. The oppression of the menstruating woman and her power, writes Devereux (1950: 252), are by no means incompatible; indeed 'the menstruating woman can be defined as both sacred and dangerous, and in a good many ways, as "sacred *because* dangerous", and "dangerous *because* sacred" '. Devereux (1950: 252n) cites a colleague's report of an Italian peasant folk-legend according to which, although the menstruating woman has 'nefarious powers', nevertheless:

> at the time of her monthly period, each woman rises a notch in the social hierarchy. The peasant woman becomes a lady, the latter a noblewoman, the noblewoman becomes a queen, while the queen becomes identified with the Madonna. In fact, menstruation specifically proclaims woman's kinship with the Madonna.

Menstruating women, Devereux concludes, 'are set apart from, and, in many ways, set above the rest of mankind'.

There is no need to multiply examples of menstrual taboos or of their recurrent magical and cosmological dimensions. It is clear that a menstruating woman may be forbidden – but she is forbidden not because of her powerlessness or degradation but, on the contrary, precisely because of the peculiar intensity of her assumed magical powers at this time.

Menstruation as Sex Strike

Throughout the traditional world, menstruation – real or pretended – has been used by women as a means of avoiding the obligation to provide sexual services in marriage. This has been the case whether or not the women have chosen to enjoy in the meantime intimacies of a different, infertile, illicit or 'incestuous' kind.

Many early accounts of menstrual taboos depict them as a woman's way of saying 'no!' Women of the Tully River district in Queensland told one ethnographer they were anxious to menstruate regularly, for otherwise 'the men would be enabled to continually pay them sexual attentions, a course to which the women assured me they objected' (Roth, quoted in Briffault 1927, 2: 406). Folk-tales of the Kiwai Papuans (Briffault 1927, 2: 406) represent men as 'enraged owing to their being repulsed by their menstruating wives'. Briffault (1927, 2) gives numerous other examples in his immense compilation, *The Mothers*, remarking that 'there is little indication that any compulsion is needed to force the women to segregate themselves at such times'. And Delaney, Lupton and Toth in *The Curse* (1977: 19) cite further cases, commenting that even today:

> If a woman does not wish to engage in sexual intercourse, her period is her one legitimate way out. . . . Using 'the curse' as an excuse, many a woman has enjoyed a dinner date free from the bothersome knowledge that she herself might be the dessert.

Katharina Dalton (1971: 26) notes in this regard that some women actually develop prolonged menstruation as a way to avoid sex.

Among the Beaver Indians, according to an early report, a menstruating woman 'pretends to be ten days in this state and suffers not her husband except upon particularly good terms. Her paramours, however, are permitted to approach her sooner' (Keith, quoted in Briffault 1927, 2: 404). For

a woman to repulse her husband, only to take advantage of his absence by engaging in extra-marital love affairs (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 13) does not seem unusual. Citing Radin (1920: 393), Lévi-Strauss (1969a: 21) draws on evidence of this kind to argue that, contrary to Durkheim's claims, 'the horror of blood, especially menstrual blood, is not universal': 'Young Winnebago Indians visit their mistresses and take advantage of the privacy of the prescribed isolation of these women during their menstrual period.'

Similar customs are reported of the Djuka of Dutch Guiana (Kahn 1931: 130), the Warao of Venezuela (Suárez 1968: 2–6), the Kaska of western Canada (Honigmann 1954: 124), the Yolngu of north-east Arnhem Land, Australia (Berndt 1976) and many other peoples.

Many taboos shield menstruating women not only from marital obligations but also from household chores. In association with avoidances of the sun's 'fire', a ban on contact with cooking-fire is often imposed. An African example will illustrate this.

In Central Africa among the Bemba (Richards 1956: 32): 'The most constant danger to the family fire is in fact the touch of the housewife herself, when she is passing through her periods.' It is firmly believed that anyone who ate food cooked on a contaminated fire would become ill. 'It is difficult', writes Richards (1956: 33),

> to exaggerate the strength of these beliefs, or the extent to which they affect daily life. In a village at cooking-time young children are sent here and there to fetch 'new fire' from neighbours who are ritually pure. Women in their periods call their sisters to cook for them.

When a woman's menstrual period is over, the old fire has to be extinguished, whereupon a ritual act of sexual intercourse takes place and a new, ritually clean fire is lit (Richards 1956: 32). It is worth noting that marital intercourse is associated with the renewal of fire, just as – by contrast – menstruation is associated with its negation or pollution.

Anthropologists have usually seen all such mythico-ritual patterns and constraints as additional proof of the extremity of female oppression wherever menstruation is feared. The assumption is that women want marital sex, want to be able to cook for their families, and want to gather or labour in the fields – even during their periods. Given such assumptions, the taboos certainly appear to constitute irksome restrictions. But as Buckley and Gottlieb (1988: 13) point out, all this is a strange way of looking at matters. Taboos prohibiting women from working, cooking, engaging in marital relations and so on 'can as easily be interpreted as boons to women as means of suppressing them'. Often, the taboos may protect women from male attempts to pressurise them into cooking or working in the fields when in fact they have no inclination for this at such a time.

An example of how women can use and enjoy their periods of release from labour comes from the Beng of the Ivory Coast, West Africa, as described by

Alma Gottlieb in *Blood Magic* (Gottlieb 1988: 71–2). In this culture, older men – or, more specifically, men who have eaten meat from animals sacrificed to the Earth – are strictly prohibited from eating food cooked by a menstruating woman. The irony is that such men are known by women to be missing something:

> Women themselves are said to enjoy food cooked during their menstrual periods immensely and for a specific reason: women cook best when they are menstruating. In particular, there is one dish, a sauce made from palm nuts . . . , that is supposed to be most delicious when prepared by a menstruating woman. This is because the sauce gets better and better (i.e., thicker and thicker) as it cooks longer and longer – up to four or five hours for optimum flavor.

Usually a woman does not have the time to cook a sauce for so many hours because she is busy working in the fields:

> While she is menstruating and confined to the village, however, she has the leisure to cook the sauce properly – virtually all day – and she and her friends and close female kin with whom she exchanges food have the exquisite pleasure usually denied to men of eating palm-nut sauce as it was meant to be eaten.

As it cooks for hours, adds Gottlieb, the sauce's colour 'develops into a rich, deep red, not unlike the colour of menstrual blood'. Gottlieb concludes by noting that if Beng culture has *haute cuisine*, 'it is this rich, red, thick palm-nut sauce – a cuisine of menstruation'.

Menstruation as Solidarity

To go 'on strike' implies female power and – if analogies with Marxist concepts of class struggle are to have any force – collectivity at the point of production/reproduction. Nothing could seem further from this than our received image of the menstruating woman isolated in her hut. What possible connection could there be between menstrual taboos and the great collective sex strike which, according to the central hypothesis of this book, inaugurated the human cultural domain?

But the possibility of synchrony places the question of menstrual taboos in a new light. Seclusion need not necessarily mean isolation from other women. We have just seen how Beng women share out their menstrual cuisine among 'friends and close female kin'. Other ethnographic reports show how menstrual blood and its symbolism, far from isolating women, may in fact express their solidarity and kin-based sisterhood. On Mogmog Island in the Pacific atoll of Ulithi, menstrual seclusion is welcomed by women – who 'enjoy this break from their normal labors and spend the time happily talking or weaving' (Patterson 1986: 490). On this island, women's

large *ipul* – the 'women's house' – is equipped with looms and serves as a community centre for women with their children (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988: 12, citing photograph by David Hiser in Patterson 1986: 490–1). Much other evidence supports the view that similar patterns may once have been widespread.

The Mbuti *Elima* Ceremony

The Mbuti people of the Ituri Forest, Zaire, are basically hunter-gatherers, though they live in a symbiotic relationship with neighbouring cultivators. Whereas their village-dwelling neighbours see menstruation as a defiling calamity, the Mbuti celebrate it positively. The onset of a girl's first flow is marked by a joyful ritual known as the *elima*, this word denoting in the first instance a large hut in which one or more pubescent girls are joined by female relatives for a period of singing and celebration. During this, the girls are taught to be proud of their bodies both sexually and in terms of reproductive potential (Turnbull 1976: 167–81).

The *elima* forges strong bonds of solidarity between girls who together 'have seen the blood'; it simultaneously achieves 'at least a temporary obliteration of the bonds of the nuclear family' (Turnbull 1966: 136).

A girl who has begun to menstruate for the first time is said to be 'blessed by the moon' and becomes the focus of rejoicing as everyone is told the good news: 'The girl enters seclusion, but not the seclusion of the village girl. She takes with her all her young friends, those who have not yet reached maturity, and some older ones.' They enter a single communal 'women's house' (the *elima*) where the girls celebrate the happy event collectively.

During the ethnographer Colin Turnbull's fieldwork visit, two young women experienced their first menstruation at the same time, and entered the house together, along with their female friends. Turnbull's (1976: 169) description is enough to refute the view that such 'seclusion' must always and everywhere be a degrading experience:

> Together they are taught the arts and crafts of motherhood by an old and respected relative. They learn not only how to live like adults, but how to sing the songs of adult women. Day after day, night after night, the *elima* house resounds with the throaty contralto of the older women and the high, piping voices of the youngest.

It is a time of gladness, Turnbull continues, not for the women alone but for the whole community. People from all around come to pay their respects,

> the young men standing or sitting about outside the *elima* house in the hopes of a glimpse of the young beauties inside. And there are special *elima* songs which they sing to each other, the girls singing a light, cascading melody in intricate harmony, the men replying with a rich,

> vital chorus. For the pygmies the *elima* is one of the happiest, most joyful occasions in their lives.

An aspect of the celebrations is that the girls in the hut have the right to rush out from time to time and chase after the young men. Should a boy or man be caught, he has to enter the hut, whereupon he is teased and is under some pressure to give sexual satisfaction to the girls inside (Turnbull 1976: 171). Clearly, then, this is a very simple form of 'initiation ritual' – a time during which young people of both sexes are made tangibly aware not only of the obligations but also of the rewards of adult sexual life.

Like so many other manifestations of menstrual potency in Africa, the *elima* can influence hunting-luck. Sometimes, during the *elima* there is an injunction against eating meat; 'this seems to be when the *elima* activities are affecting the hunt and the supply of game'. When game is killed, this is seen as a 'gift from the forest', a gift which may be withheld should the forest be displeased. The *elima* is said to 'rejoice the forest', and to make it happy and glad (Turnbull 1966: 134, 161).

Admittedly, this and comparable patterns are nowadays rare. Yet theoretically – in terms of cultural origins and evolution – they surely have as much potential significance as the more oppressive patterns, which need not be regarded as 'basic' or 'original' from an evolutionary standpoint. Other examples of positive or empowering seclusion could be cited, and writing of seclusion in general, Buckley and Gottlieb (1988: 13) decline to rule out the possibility that in many societies at least, 'women themselves may have been responsible for originating this custom. . .'. This was certainly Briffault's (1927) view.

Hunting and 'Ceremonial Chastity'

This book has outlined a model in which women go periodically on an extended sex strike in order to motivate men to hunt. The model stipulates that before and during the hunt, marital intercourse should be ruled out lest it undermine the entire system, threatening in particular the success of the hunt.

It is tempting to relate this aspect of the model to the otherwise inexplicable fact that in many parts of the world, 'ceremonial chastity' is experienced as an indispensable condition of hunting success, while a hunter's contact with a *menstruating* woman is thought of as the gravest possible threat to the chase (Kitahara 1982; Dobkin de Rios and Hayden 1985; Kelly 1986).

Like mother-in-law avoidances, totemic avoidances and menstrual taboos, pre-hunt sex bans are or were sufficiently recurrent features of traditional cultures to have been exhaustively commented upon by early anthropological

theorists. For example, Crawley (1927, 1: 65–6) noted the frequency with which men about to go hunting seek to enhance their luck by observing strict taboos, the most constant of which 'prohibits every kind of intercourse with the female sex'. Frazer (1926–36, 2: 191–8) made essentially the same point. Hammond and Jablow (1975: 7), in a more recent cross-cultural survey of traditional women's roles, have confirmed such findings. Virtually throughout the world – and particularly where hunting is a collective activity – hunters keep away from women and all things sexual both prior to and during the hunt. People in western cultures are of course familiar with equivalents: for example, the widespread taboo which prevents a boxer from having sex on the night before a big fight!

Anthropologists have usually interpreted such observations from a male standpoint, accepting native male ideological statements to the effect that women are simply harmful to hunting. But the previous arguments of this book would lead us to suspect that women themselves may have played just as vital a role in setting themselves apart.

In the light of the sex-strike model, women's segregation from direct physical involvement in hunting seems predictable. How could women have maintained the integrity of their strike had they allowed some females to join in long-distance hunting expeditions alongside men? In view of the risks of seduction or rape, it is easy to see how the logic of strike action would have ensured that it was not just some women – for example, those with particularly heavy child-care burdens – who were forced to stay behind, but in principle all women, regardless of their situation or hunting capabilities. The result would have been the 'ideological' exclusion of women from hunting – the exclusion of women simply *because* they were women.

Other considerations – for example the need for women to help as beaters in a communal game-drive – may in practice have led to some relaxation of such rules. But it is noteworthy that here, too, the model fits. In communal game-drives it is not just some women who join the men while others stay at home. The tendency is for the whole community to go hunting, with children also involved. Moreover, segregation is still maintained, with men performing certain tasks – above all, those of actual bloodshed – while women and children perform others. Marital sex during the preparations is never encouraged, despite the sexual excitement and anticipation always associated with a hunt.

In Africa, the Lele of the Kasai (Douglas 1963: 207) will undertake no hunting expedition 'without one night of continence being imposed first on the whole village'. Those directly concerned with the hunt, such as the makers of pit traps, may have to abstain from sex for several months. In Zambia, among the matrilineal Bisa, an informant explains:

> We don't have sexual intercourse before a hunt because when we are hunting we are helped by the spirits of dead hunters. These spirits. . . .

> have no sexual intercourse. When we have sexual intercourse before a hunt, we get out of tune with the spirits who will help us in the bush. (Marks 1976: 114–15)

An elephant hunt among the Bisa may last for weeks or even months, during which time the hunters' wives, remaining in the village, have to maintain 'behaviour beyond reproach' to ensure success.

Among the Central African Tumbuka, when hunters set off to kill an elephant, after all preparations had been made and sacrifices had been offered to the spirits of the dead,

> The chief hunter charged the villagers who remained that there must be no quarrelling or immorality indulged in within the village. None were to leave their homes to visit other places, but all were to remain quiet and law-abiding lest the game disappear, or turn in anger and rend the hunters. (D. Fraser, quoted in Frazer 1936: 21)

In the case of the Wachamba (also Central Africa), while a hunter was away in the forest his wife at home was bound to observe all the magical restrictions which were incumbent also upon him. She remained alone for weeks. She was forbidden to receive visits from men in her hut. Only her closest relations could feed with her. If she did not observe these restrictions, it was believed that her husband would fall ill or perish in the forest (Frazer 1936: 23). Among the Banyankole,

> when a man was out hunting, his wife refrained from sexual intercourse with other men. . . . She might let no man pass behind her back, but warned him to keep in front of her. Should she neglect any of these precautions, her husband's chances of obtaining game in the hunt would be ruined. (J. Roscoe, quoted in Frazer 1936: 20)

Junod (1927, 2: 62) makes a similar point about the Thonga of Mozambique: 'Old Makhani assured me that incontinence on the part of the wife at home would have as a consequence that the husband would be attacked and killed by wild beasts far away in the desert. . . .'

Such evidence leads us to suppose that evolving early women would not have regarded themselves as in any simple sense harmful to hunting. Sharanahua Indian women regard the periodic 'special hunt' as their own, since it is they who initiate this event and to an extent control it (Siskind 1973a, 1973b; see Chapter 4). In a comparable way virtually throughout the world, women have believed in their sexually controlled influence on the hunt even when distant from the scene.

Ceremonial Chastity and the Menstrual Dimension

An entertaining illustration of the logic we have been discussing – and one which will also serve to introduce the connection with menstrual taboos – is

Nigel Barley's (1986: 110–18) description of a disastrous hunting expedition among the Dowayos, a tribe in the Cameroons, West Africa. In Barley's village, there was one old man who was regarded as a 'true hunter' in possession of the necessary magic. One day, he resolved to direct a new hunt and to co-ordinate the activities of the men:

> The most important thing was that no man should have intercourse with a woman for three days. All agreed to this. The hunter gave them a lecture on the importance of this consideration.

The great fear was that if sex were allowed at such a time, men would quickly lapse into seducing one another's wives, communicating a fatal 'smell' of adultery to each and every hunter:

> A man so infected would be incapable of the simplest shot. His hand would shake, his eyes cloud over. His arrow would miss its mark. Worst of all, dangerous beasts of the bush would home in on him. He would be stalked by leopards and scorpions, and risked an awful death. They would smell him from miles away. He would thus be a menace to everyone.

Among these Dowayos, the chastity rule was difficult to maintain. On the one hand, young men were considered unreliable, while there was little confidence that women of any age category could be counted on to uphold the rule. The older men felt far from secure about their wives' fidelity at the best of times, and suspected that younger, more virile rivals would seize the opportunity presented by the sex ban to cheat, seducing their ever-willing wives in the three days prior to the hunt. To guard against this, some men 'went as far as accompanying their wives down to the water-hole and back. . .' (Barley 1986: 111–12).

All this would be predicted by the model. 'Ceremonial chastity' is not an aspect or derivative form of the sex strike. In the model's terms, it *is* the sex strike.

Even more interestingly – as so often in cultures which practise hunting – among the Dowayos the major terror is of the damage to a man's hunting gear that contact with a *menstruating* woman will cause.

The Dowayos say that hunters' bows can cause women to bleed even if they are merely in the approximate vicinity and even if the women are pregnant. Bows make women miscarry. Such is the fear of the consequent blood contamination that hunters avoid the village's main paths and skulk around on long detours. Should a man meet a woman, he immediately lays his bow down, pointing away from her, and will not speak to her until this has been done.

But the most dangerous women are those who are already menstruating:

> Their effluvium is held to 'spoil' the bow and make it useless. The link in Dowayo thought seems to lie in the similarity of the different types of bleeding in each case, hunting or menstruation. *They are sufficiently similar to need to be kept rigorously apart.* (Barley 1986: 112; my emphasis)

For this reason, as part of the pre-hunt ritual of ceremonial chastity which Barley (1986: 112) observed, the men withdrew their weapons from their huts altogether – and hid them well away from the village compound out in the bush.

Notwithstanding such precautions, this particular hunt turned out to be a disaster. After it was over, the men despondently discussed the conclusions to be drawn. 'Everyone was agreed', writes Barley (1986: 118), 'that the hunt had failed owing to the unbridled sexual self-indulgence of almost everyone else'.

In terms of this book's basic argument, we might say that despite the Dowayo hunt-leader's worthy efforts, this had evidently been a 'sex strike' which neither the women nor the men had had sufficient commitment to help one another enforce!

One further example from another culture will help clarify the picture. The Arapesh of Papua New Guinea, according to a classic ethnography (Mead 1941: 421), observe similarly strict taboos:

> A menstruating woman must guard the village from her blood; she must guard her husband, his food or possessions, from any close contact with it, and she must guard herself from her own dangerous state. Consequently, she may not enter a house on the ceremonial level, nor cross the village, nor walk on a good road.

Despite all this, men do actually stay in the same village as their wives even when menstrual blood is flowing. This makes them extremely anxious – and above all worried about the likely effects on their hunting luck. Men explain:

> if we can find game, if we can find pigs in traps and in the rain, if cassowaries fall into our deadfalls, if our dogs catch phalangers, if the yams which we plant stay in the garden and fill the house to the ridge pole, then we say 'This is all right'. But if our yams fail, if our hunting fails, then we go and rid ourselves of the coldness of this woman, we purify ourselves with bark and leaves in the bush, and set the woman afar off, we speak of her as a sister or a mother.

'When it is time to sleep', the same informant continues, 'the woman sleeps in one house and the man in another'. If need be, an Arapesh hunter is prepared to go on treating his wife as a 'sister or mother', the two sleeping in separate houses, for a year or more continuously – until his hunting luck begins to improve (Mead 1941: 421).

Hunting, Menstrual Odours and Game

Writing of North American Indians generally, Driver and Massey (1957: 255) note that the taboos surrounding hunting (see Chapter 3) have never been catalogued or classified. 'One of the most widespread beliefs', however, 'is that menstruating women are offensive to game animals'. In particular, a hunter must take care that his wife 'does not touch any of his hunting gear or drip any menstrual fluid on the meat of previously slain game'.

Taboos of such kinds have long seemed to defy rational explanation. In a variation on the 'menotoxins' theme, a recent tendency has been to link the beliefs with supposedly genuine chemical/biological effects of spilled blood. It is argued that some animals, such as bears, tend to attack women when they can smell their menstrual odours, while these same smells really do frighten more timorous prey animals away (March 1980; Kitahara 1982; Dobkin de Rios and Hayden 1985).

It is probably true that dogs and other carnivores are attracted by menstrual odours, as by other forms of blood. And it has certainly been shown that white-tailed deer show avoidance responses to menstrual blood (March 1980), as well as to blood from men's veins (Nunley 1981). In this context, Kitahara (1982) has argued that menstrual or other blood-taboos may be explained by the fact that 'to a hunting people, it is most important that they can come near game animals without being noticed by them . . .'

Kitahara demonstrates that hunting peoples do indeed tend to have the most stringent menstrual taboos – an important finding in terms of the argument of this book. However, as has been pointed out (Kelly 1986), the theory hardly explains why particularly rigid taboos should apply in north west America to Nootka salmon fishers, Tareumit whale-hunters or Tlingit seal-hunters – marine prey should be in no way affected by female smells.

There are other anomalies. In north-western California, when men returned from hunting, their meat was always taken into the house by removing a wall board instead of through the normal entrance 'for fear that a menstruating woman had dripped fluid in the entrance way'. Expressive of comparable fears was a rule prohibiting menstruating women from eating meat, 'particularly fresh meat' (Driver and Massey 1957: 255). 'Fresh meat', in this context, presumably meant meat with the blood still visible within it. Here, the symbolic connections linking menstrual with animal blood seem evident enough. But references to prey animals' responses to odours do little to explain such ideas. There should surely be no anxiety lest dead meat should flee from menstrual smells.

The odour theorists make no mention of the moon. In view of recent understandings of what constitutes hard science, this may seem unremarkable. In social anthropological terms, however, it is surely a drawback if the paradigm leads us to ignore many of those details of the relevant rituals and mythologies which native informants most strongly emphasise.

Let us turn to the Eastern Chewong, a small Malay group who practice matrilocal residence and live by hunting, gathering and slash-and-burn tapioca cultivation. Here, there is a taboo against giving birth either at full or dark moon; a woman who gave birth at such times, it is said, 'would suffer heavy bleeding'. Numerous work activities are likewise forbidden at full and dark moon, for fear of making the moon itself 'sick', whereupon nothing would grow (Howell 1984: 198–9). The most common colloquial expression for menstruation is 'I don't want meat'; other terms for the condition are 'moon children' and 'moon blood'. The injunction against eating meat is justified on the grounds that 'blood may not be mixed with blood' (Howell 1984: 194). Strict rules compelling returning hunters to give away and share their meat are linked conceptually with gynaecological rules governing the separation of the mother from her baby and separation of the baby from its placenta; in each instance, an act of 'cutting flesh' is involved, with all the dangers inherent in such shedding of blood. The basic rule – in an echo of the 'totemic' logic discussed in Chapter 3 – is that just as a woman should separate herself carefully from her own baby, so a man should separate himself from his kills (Howell 1984: 69–71; 77).

The Chewong case is not unusual. Menstrual blood is in virtually all mythologies associated with (a) the moon and (b) blood from a wound. In hunting symbolism, wounds and bleeding vaginas are frequently juxtaposed, and the one form of blood may be thought to promote the flowing of the other. As we saw earlier, a Kalahari San hunter's association with a first-menstruant may not only fail to damage his hunting luck – treated ritually in the correct way, the blood may actually enhance his luck. Roy Wagner (1972: 69) presents a further example in a report on the Daribi of Papua New Guinea:

> On one occasion Kagoiano had a particularly 'good' hunting dream, in which he was trying to have intercourse with a woman, but stopped when he saw that her genitals were bloody, realising that she was in her period. He explained that 'the blood in the dream is the blood that a man sees on his arrow when he has shot a pig'. Asked whether the penis in the dream is the same as the arrow, he replied that it was.

This belief in the positive import of a menstrual dream fits ill with the theory that hunters avoid menstruants simply because the blood frightens away the game.

A comparable problem is posed by the 'Mistress of Game Animals' – a construct virtually universal in one form or another in the Americas and beyond, although the gender of this personage is variable. The Hopi Indians tell of 'The Bloody Maiden Who Looks After the Animals'. This terrifying mythological woman, having slain a number of hunters who had angered her, appears before the people, 'her face and clothes covered with blood'. Seizing a live antelope,

> she wiped her hand first over her own genitalia and then over the antelope's face, and let it go after twisting its nose. She then turned to the people who had gathered outside and said, 'After this, you shall have great difficulty in hunting these animals'. (Simmons 1942: 426–8)

By wiping her hand over her own genitals and then over the very nose of the antelope, this blood-stained heroine would seem to be flying in the face of all men's efforts, confirming their worst fears, deliberately causing the game to flee from menstrual odour – and asserting that Womankind's blood in some magical way 'protects' the game itself. In myths of this kind, something more complex than biological reactions to smells is surely involved. An important element seems to be the idea that menstrual blood has a supernatural connection of some kind with hunting blood. It is this supernatural belief which we must attempt to explain.

Alain Testart – the Ideology of Blood

Although menstrual taboos may not be universal, they are so widespread as to suggest their immense antiquity. Their prevalence struck early theorists such as Crawley, Durkheim and Frazer so forcibly that they overcame what must have been very strong Victorian reticences on the subject. 'Blood', as Richards (1956: 19) puts it,

> appears to be the object of a set of emotionally tinged ideas in all human societies. It stands for death, murder, life-giving force or kinship. Menstrual blood with its mysterious periodicity is considered especially terrifying and disturbing, to judge from what we know of primitive ritual.

Developing this idea, my French colleague in Marxist anthropology, Alain Testart (1986), has recently gone so far as to suggest that an 'ideology of blood' can be discerned at the root of all human symbolic-cultural traditions, his view being that humanity's most ancient ideology for some reason originally counterposed two forms of blood – menstrual blood on the one hand, the blood of the hunt on the other. These opposites were felt to attract one another, but the basic, primordial cultural rule was to prevent this – the two blood-forms should never be allowed to mix.

Testart specifies nothing concerning menstruation's cultural-symbolic links with the moon. He makes no claim that his 'ideology of blood' corresponds to a cosmology. His concern is to explain why it is that women are so frequently excluded from shedding blood in hunting. He rejects all appeals to child-care burdens, female body odours or lesser mobility in explaining this, since the rules apply to all women regardless of strength or condition. Neither, he argues, can we explain the sex division of labour by reference to the biological fact that women menstruate. It is only cultural

ideology which makes menstrual blood significant in this way (Testart 1986: 87).

The 'ideology of blood', Testart continues, does not in itself imply female inferiority. It becomes a sign of inferiority only when women are in practice socially inferior. In such cases, it functions ideologically to justify keeping women in subordination. But there is no reason to suppose that this is inherent in the nature of things, or inherent in the original ideology. What is universal is only the idea that menstrual blood is *dangerous*, and for that reason, a source of ritual power. Given this ideologically constructed potency, it then becomes possible for either sex to take advantage of it. In certain cases – for example, some northern Australian Aboriginal societies – it is men who monopolise surrogate 'menstrual' power. But other societies are known in which women are felt to be ritually powerful on account of their blood (Testart 1986: 89).

According to the basic ideology, continues Testart, women are not ritually dangerous except in relation to their blood. When avoidance rules affect only menstruating women, we can speak of menstrual taboos. When they affect all women – including menstruants – a consequence is the sexual division of labour. In deciding whether or not women can perform a given role, it is the utilisation of weapons which constitutes the decisive criterion. Whatever else women may be allowed, they cannot be permitted to shed blood (figure 15). Testart lists numerous societies, particularly from the more northerly latitudes, in which it is believed that hunters lose all their luck when they allow a menstruant to come into even the slightest possibility of contact with their hunting gear. Once washed with menstrual blood, hunting implements can never again shed blood of any other kind.

However – insists Testart – to say that women are forbidden to approach men's hunting implements implies discrimination against females. Yet this is only one way of expressing matters. As far as the effects are concerned, it is precisely the same as saying that hunters must keep their weapons well away from menstruating women. This could be conceptualised as protection for women in a vulnerable state. Certainly, it is not the women themselves who are thought to be supernaturally damaged by the contact. The sanction of bad hunting-luck appears in the first instance to affect men, although a failed hunt would of course hit the community as a whole (Testart 1986: 34–7).

In a hunting and gathering society, Testart concludes (1986: 34–42), both sexes regularly come into contact with blood. For a woman, this is her own menstrual blood. For a man, it is the blood he sheds in hunting. Both forms are dangerous – each as much as the other. They must be separated, because ideology fears the unlimited, disorderly flowing out of blood. Thus, one of the most common prohibitions applying to menstruating women is a rule forbidding the eating of meat or the touching of red meat: it is clear (writes Testart) that this food taboo separates the two bloods as surely as does the weapons taboo.

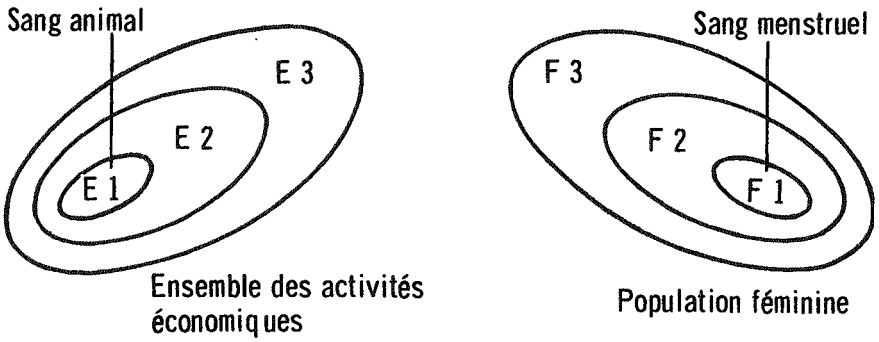

Figure 15 The ideology of blood. The set of possible economic activities is trisected, as is the total female population. The figure shows (left) hunting involving bloodshed (E1), subsumed within the wider set of hunting activities generally (E2), subsumed within the set of all economically productive activities (E3). Correspondingly the trisection yields (right) women whilst menstruating (F1), subsumed within the wider set of adult fertile women generally (F2), subsumed within the set of all women, regardless of age or condition (F3). The basic rule is to keep animals' blood and women's blood apart. To achieve this it would suffice, minimally, to exclude just F1 women from just E1 activities. But segregation can be achieved more drastically and with less scope for error by separating any F set up to the widest from any E set. Exclusion of F3 from E2 yields the sexual division of labour. Exclusion of F3 from E1 corresponds to more specific taboos segregating women from contact with spears or other blood-drawing weapons. Exclusion of F1 from E3 would describe women's complete inactivity and seclusion in the bush during their periods. A range of previously unrelated taboos are in this way revealed as variations on a theme (after Testart 1986: Fig. 2).

The Ideology of Blood – a Materialist Explanation

Testart's dismissal of biological and sociobiological findings and his insistence on the independent structure-imparting power of 'ideology' render his fascinating arguments ultimately disappointing. To explain specific, localised ideological constructs by reference to more universal constructs may help us in discerning patterns, but it is not in the final analysis an explanation. If hunter-gatherers perpetuate an ideology of blood, we need to know where this ideology comes from, and why it takes the specific forms that it does.

It is also not clear that Testart has in fact defined his ideology quite accurately. Whilst it is true that menstrual blood and blood from the hunt are often counterposed and kept separate, they are also conceptually confused and combined. Indeed, it could be argued that the taboos depend upon a deeper-level identification of the two kinds of blood.

Suppose that a man were killing a game animal with a menstruating woman in the vicinity. If the hunter for ideological reasons felt obliged to keep her at a distance, it would surely be in part because he perceived a connection. In some way, the danger would be that her blood would manifest itself in the blood of his victim, being in a deep sense 'the same'. The wounded and bleeding game animal would then be 'menstruating'.

We saw this earlier with the 'lucky' dream of the Daribi hunter, who

believed he would soon wound a pig with his spear since he had already dreamed of encountering and then avoiding the vagina of a menstruating woman (Wagner 1972: 69). The connection can be illustrated with another ethnographic example, taken this time from David McKnight's (1975: 85–6) description of life among the Wik-Mungkan Aborigines of Cape York Peninsula in Queensland. Here, meat food becomes prohibited from the moment it displays the slightest suggestion of contact or affinity with menstrual blood:

> Any act suggestive of menstrual bleeding makes things *ngaintja* [sacred/taboo]. Thus if blood from an animal falls on a woman's lap, her father and many other male relatives may not eat it. If a young man carries meat on his back or shoulders . . . so that the blood runs down between his buttocks this, to the Wik-Mungkan, is too uncomfortably like menstrual blood to be ignored.

It is not surprising, then, to learn that when men, having killed a game animal, begin to cut up the flesh,

> they make certain that women, especially their daughters, stand well away. Men will not even take fish from a daughter if she has caught it with a fishing line and pulled the line so that it falls on her lap. If a daughter should accidentally sit on her father's possessions then they are *ngaintja* to him . . . I might add that blood from wounds is also considered to be *ngaintja*, though not to the same degree as menstrual blood.

The direct symbolic identification of menstrual blood with the blood of raw meat is also illustrated by this example from Bernard Arcand's (1978: 3–4) description of the Cuiva Indians of the eastern plains of Columbia:

> Women, fish, and raw meat from all animals share the characteristic of being *asuntané*. This refers to a specific smell and feel: it is a quality attached to the gluey stuff on the back of fish, to animal blood, and to menstrual blood. Women are said to be especially *asuntané* at puberty, when menstruating, and immediately after giving birth. Contact with women during these periods is considered dangerous for men, since it would result in *awapa*, an illness which makes one vomit all one's food. Fear of the same illness is also the explanation Cuiva give as to why men are always quick and careful to wash any animal blood from themselves and why hunters usually leave the preparation of raw meat to women.

Here, then, men seem to actively encourage women's contact with raw and bloody meat, on the grounds that women alone – always in contact with the bloody source of *awapa* – are less in danger of this illness.

The paradoxes are resolved if we adopt a different starting point from Testart's, and take it that women in the first instance assert their periodic

menstrual inviolability not for ideological reasons but in order to extract meat from men. We can then see that to indicate non-availability in a language of blood would have been powerfully in women's own interests. It would have been in women's interests not to keep blood separate from blood, but to weave myths asserting that women's and animals' blood-flows attract one another and must conjoin since they stem from the same source.

It will be remembered from previous chapters that in the course of establishing culture, women would have been faced with two closely interrelated problems. One would have been to separate themselves from male company from time to time, inhibiting sexual advances so as to concentrate the minds of the opposite sex on the challenges of hunting. The other would have been to ensure that hunter-males did not cheat them by eating what they had killed out in the bush.

By selecting blood as the basic zero-symbol or indicator of 'taboo', the two problems could have been simultaneously solved. Success would have been achieved to the extent that blood could be equated with blood – that is, to the extent that animal blood could have been perceptually merged or confused with menstrual blood. 'The bleeding feminine condition' writes De Heusch (1982: 168) in his analysis of Bantu myths in Central Africa, 'makes of the patient a wounded game animal'. Lévi-Strauss (1981: 239) at one point in his *Mythologiques* notes the existence of a whole class of North American myths which teach that 'the application of *raw bleeding meat* causes the occurrence of female periods'. Many of these myths confront men with the terrors of being mauled by a savage bear or other carnivore – should a menstruating woman's anger be aroused. We are dealing with variations on a theme.

'The Origin of the Moon's Spots'

Our previous arguments have led us to the finding that earliest fully cultural women could collectively inhibit male sexual advances, signal 'no!' by synchronously bleeding – and use the moon to schedule synchrony-enhancing rituals such as dancing. We have also concluded that men in their periodic hunting exertions were for various reasons able to fit in with this rhythm (Chapter 10). To understand the constraints responsible for the patterns examined in this chapter, we simply have to follow this logic through.

Persistent sexual 'cheating' on the part of females would have been risky because it would have meant getting out of phase, and because menstrual bleeding is not easy to hide. Male cheating would have been detectable in similar ways. Sexual contact with a menstruant can leave a visible mark. Males who cheated by engaging in sex at the wrong time would therefore have risked discovery and exposure. They would have been stained by blood, and to avoid detection would have had to find some way of washing off the blood or otherwise removing it before being seen in public. In practice, in

reality, the risks may have been small and the possible solutions numerous. Any man who really wanted to avoid detection ought to have been able to achieve this. But men who wanted to be 'above all suspicion' or who wished to be rid of all guilt or anxiety may have elected to avoid the moral danger with scrupulous rigour. This may have involved strict observances with regard to the dangers of blood contact.

Almost universally, the Indians of North and South America seem to have been aware of some such logic. An extremely widespread myth tells of a man who made love to his sister night after night, visiting her in the dark without letting her know who he was. One day, she decided to smear his face with a dark staining fluid – in some versions, black genipa juice, in others, her own menstrual blood – during the love-making. The next day, the man was seen with his face all stained, and his angry sister was thereby enabled to expose him to the whole community. His crime was written on his face. With help from his mother, the man then escaped into the sky, revealing himself at last as Moon. This celestial being still has spots on his face – spots of dark paint or of menstrual blood (Dorsey 1903: 220) – which tell the whole world of his crime.

The Sharanahua Indian women – who paint their faces with black genipa juice or with red achiote when challenging their menfolk to go on a 'special hunt' (Siskind 1973b: 33, 96, 101, 119) – know this particular story and use it as a basic means of transmitting culture's rules to each new generation (Siskind 1973b: 57). The Peruvian Sharanahua version treats the prototypical man who violates his community's rules as a rapist who is exposed by the indelible 'paint' left on his skin by his victim. Following the incident in which Moon is exposed by his sister, he forces his attentions on many women in succession, so that they all begin to bleed, followed soon afterwards by the synchronised menstruation of the entire community:

> Moon made love to all the women. 'Ari!' they screamed. 'Why does my vagina bleed?'
>
> Then Moon asked his mother for a black ball and a white ball of thread, which she threw from the house. Then Moon went up the thread to the sky, and all his people watched, and they said, 'My child, my child goes playing to the sky'.
>
> Then many women, three days after he came, bled. One woman after another, all of them. (Siskind 1973b: 47–9)

This story is thought to be so powerful that women will menstruate merely on hearing it – which explains why under-aged girls are told to cover their ears with their hands during the telling of the final episode (Siskind 1973b: 57).

This story cannot be dismissed as 'mere mythology'. It is sufficiently widespread and invariant to be clearly very ancient. As Josephine Flood

(1983) points out in an Australian context, archaeological information is contained in this kind of evidence no less than in stones, bones, or other more 'material' things. As it happens, this particular tale is unusually valuable because it is representative of what Lévi-Strauss terms a 'vast group' of similar stories which appear in virtually identical forms 'from the extreme north to the extreme south of the New World'. As he mentions this distribution pattern, Lévi-Strauss (1981: 218–19) informs the reader of 'a fact of supreme importance' – that all the myths of the Americas are logically derivable from this one simple tale. 'We might even say', he writes, 'that it constitutes the most plausible initial state for the whole series of transformations. . .', firstly because of its widespread distribution, secondly because it is not the kind of story which can vary to any great extent. In other words, if a single story had to be chosen as the starting point from which all the interlinked myths of the Americas have been derived, this would be a very strong candidate for selection.

There is no need to follow Lévi-Strauss' detailed arguments here, or to try to decide between various possible 'original' myths. The model we are using implies that the interlinked myths of the Americas are similar because they all derive from the same lunar-scheduled 'initial situation', not because certain ancestral myths produced more mythological offspring (in the form of local variants) than did other myths.

Let us take it simply that this particular story could not have survived if men did not understand its basic message – namely that a man risks being suspected of sexual-political 'cheating' if he is blood-stained following sex. This poses a problem. Hunting and butchery are both practices which involve contact with blood. There would be a potential risk of confusion here. A blood-marked hunter might be suspected of having touched or molested a menstruating woman. In any event, morally sensitive hunters might be anxious to avoid even the remotest possibility of such suspicion. Their anxieties would stem not from any conceptual distinction between the two forms of blood but, on the contrary, from an inherent risk of their being confused. To avoid the serious charges levelled at the mythological Moon, then, blood-stained hunters would need to remove such staining from their bodies before returning to female company.

The Ideology of Blood

We are now arriving at the heart of the 'ideology of blood'. It arises out of a dialectical relationship of opposition and polarity between the sexes. On the one hand, women needed to identify their own menstrual blood with the blood of the hunt. They needed to convince men that a violated menstruant would avenge her violator – damaging his hunting luck, perhaps even to the extent of causing him to be killed by an animal during the hunt. Anything which stressed the identity between menstrual blood and hunting blood

would have helped in this endeavour, and such symbolic links would quickly have turned into stories about women 'turning into' monstrous spirits or avenging beasts. On the other hand, blood-covered hunters – men who had killed an animal but had not committed rape or any menstrual misdemeanour at all – would have wanted to avoid being misunderstood. Anxious to draw a distinction between one kind of blood and the other, they would have been prompted to deny or at least minimise women's mythological claims.

Let us take women's needs first. For them, what was important was to establish that blood was simply blood. That is, it made no difference where the blood came from: it was conceptually all the same. The blood of murder, the blood of the hunt, the blood of menstruation or of childbirth: it was all in the final analysis just blood. We can speculate on the intellectual processes involved in making this identification. We can describe it as metaphor, perhaps, or as analogy. What is important is that once the confusion or merging had been accomplished an extraordinary result would have been achieved. If the preceding arguments in connection with menstruation are accepted, then no substance could have been equated with menstrual blood without the most potent of consequences in evoking 'respect' or in conveying 'power'.

Once the blood of the hunt had been likened to menstrual blood, a symbolic breakthrough would have been made. At a stroke, women would have achieved a radical simplification of some of life's most pressing problems. No more could men feel at ease about eating an animal raw, out in the bush – even if no one were looking. Each time a group of men killed an animal, its flesh would have seemed to them to 'menstruate'. The men would have *had* to take it home in order to get the flesh cooked, the visible blood removed, and the meat thereby rendered safe to eat. In other words, the same blood symbol through which women temporarily separated themselves from men would have functioned on an economic level as well, temporarily separating game animals from their potential consumers. The equation of blood with blood would have extended women's blood-symbolised sex strike to the world of consumption generally, so that whilst blood of any kind was flowing, abstinence had to be observed not only with regard to sex but with regard to meat-eating, too.

On the other hand, men's interests would have been somewhat different. They may often have needed to claim that hunting blood had nothing whatsoever to do with menstrual blood, being an entirely distinct substance. To have blood on one's hands – men would have needed to establish – does not necessarily make one a murderer or rapist. The blood could be that of a game animal. For men far away from female company, out in the bush or out hunting, there may have been few anxieties on this score – companions would 'know' that any bloodstains must have been acquired in the course of hunting. However, the nearer men came to women, the greater would have been the risk of false accusations or of genuine confusion between the two

kinds of blood, and the greater the need to stress the distinction between them.

The strength of this model is that it explains the ethnographic details. It explains not only why men going away to hunt prepare themselves through 'ceremonial chastity' conceptualised particularly as the avoidance of all contact with menstrual blood. It also explains why, on their return, hunters still fear contact between the blood in their meat and menstrual blood. Men who are carrying home bloody chunks of meat will not want this blood to be confused with menstrual blood, and so will do all possible to keep the two kinds of blood apart.

Men could try to avert suspicion by washing themselves or 'sweating' so as to remove all female blood before coming into contact with game animals, and then all bloodstains from the hunt before coming back into contact with women again (we will see in a moment how this may help explain certain details of the Amerindian sweat-lodge tradition). They could attempt it by refusing to approach women for some time, leaving their kills at some point on the periphery of the base-camp area, and insisting that their womenfolk collect the meat. They could do it by insisting that those women who did collect or consume the meat could guarantee that they would not be menstruating at the time (Kelly 1986). And they could do it by refusing any further contact with raw flesh until it had been thoroughly cooked, so that all visible blood within the flesh had been removed.

We would not expect any of this to be directly relevant to hunters' taboos and cooking rules as these have been described in the contemporary ethnographic record. Too much time has elapsed and too many changes will have occurred since the early Upper Palaeolithic. Nonetheless, if such changes as have occurred have always been variations on a theme, the model ought to generate a conceptual structure which illuminates the ethnographic details that have been recorded.

The Amerindian Sweat-lodge Tradition

The Yurok Indians of north-western California, close to the Klamath River, were just one of the very many American Indian groups sharing the institution of the 'sweat-lodge'. In preparation for all important undertakings, Yurok men went into their specially heated lodges to sweat and to train spiritually for ten days – precisely the period of time that women stayed in menstrual seclusion. Elderly Yurok men told the anthropologist Tim Buckley (1988: 204) that men always did this 'during the dark of the moon', which is when women in Buckley's view were probably menstruating. As noted earlier (Chapter 10), women among the Yurok may have secluded themselves and sought spiritual power in large dome-shaped communal

menstrual huts (Buckley 1988: 200–4). Like the women in their huts, men in their sweat-lodges maintained strict continence, bathed twice daily and were restricted in their diet to only a few gathered and pre-prepared foods. Moreover, just as women bled menstrually, men during this period 'gashed their legs with flakes of white quartz, the flowing blood being thought to carry off psychic impurity, preparing one for spiritual attainment' (Buckley 1988: 195).

Entering a sweat-lodge – in this culture at least – was, then, a male counterpart of female menstrual seclusion or (to use the terms of the model) the activity of going 'on strike'. Indeed, Yurok women themselves made the connection explicit in stating that their menstrual seclusion house was 'like the men's sweathouse' (Buckley 1988: 190).

We can interpret this ancient tradition theoretically and in terms of our model by saying that if women were on sex strike, then men had to be doing something in that period, too – something which did not involve sex. Over an immense area of America – its distribution map marking a 'vast triangle, the angles of which are formed by Alaska, Labrador, and Guatemala' (Luckert 1975: 142, citing Krickeberg 1939: 19) – 'sweating' prior to hunting was the basic answer that men found. Men would generally sweat just before a hunt, and then again at the hunt's conclusion. Luckert (1975: 145) explains the significance of this by quoting a well-informed Navajo:

> when asked about the meaning of the sweat bath, he acknowledged that one such bath is taken at the beginning; immediately, however, he went on to explain the one which concludes the hunt: 'You do not sleep with your wife with blood on you.'

It would be hard to be more explicit than that.

Blood, Meat and Fire

We have seen that men would have been anxious to avoid suspicion of cheating, and for that reason anxious to avoid being incriminated by the principal symbolic indicator of possible cheating – inexplicable bloodstains. It was also noted that various stratagems to deal with such risks were logically possible, one of these being a refusal to handle raw meat beyond a certain point – abandoning it until it had been cooked by someone else so as to remove all visible blood.

This kind of thinking is well documented almost everywhere in the Americas. Lévi-Strauss (1970: 152) quotes Colbacchini (1919: 28) on the Bororo of Central Brazil:

> They believe themselves to be polluted whenever, for some reason or other, and even while hunting wild animals, they happen to become stained with blood. They immediately set off in search of water in which

> they wash and rewash, until all trace of the blood has disappeared. This explains their dislike of food in which the blood is still visible.

Among these Indians, most health practices are connected with the view that the 'spirit' or 'blood' or 'life-force' (the terms are interchangeable) of an animal should never be eaten. 'Meat, for example, is thoroughly boiled to the point of tastelessness to ensure that the slightest trace of blood is removed' (Crocker 1985: 41–2). A similar taboo was widespread in the region. 'Meat, whatever it is', writes Huxley (1957: 84–5) of the Urubu of the Brazilian highlands, 'has to be cooked thoroughly, or the Indians won't eat it – the slightest sign of redness inside, and back it goes to the fire'. Writing of the Eastern Timbira or Ramko'kamekra of the eastern highlands of Brazil, Lévi-Strauss (1969a: 151, citing Nimuendajú 1946: 246–7) notes 'the violent abdominal pains that follow the consumption of roast meat, when it is eaten with fingers stained with blood from the hunt . . .'.

James Adair (1775: 117) found a variant of the blood taboo among the Indians of the south-eastern United States, seeing it as evidence that the Indians were descendants of the Lost Tribe of Israel:

> The Indians have among them the resemblance of the Jewish Sin-Offering, and Trespass-Offering, for they commonly pull their new-killed venison (before they dress it) several times through the smoke and flame of the fire, both by the way of a sacrifice, and to consume the blood, life, or animal spirits of the beast, which with them would be a most horrid abomination to eat.

These Indians would never eat blood of any kind (Adair 1775: 134).

Similar notions feature prominently in mythology almost throughout the Americas, countless stories identifying culture with cooking-fire and conveying the message that only animal carnivores – not humans – eat their meat still covered in blood. In his *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss (1970; 1973; 1978; 1981) endorses the message of all these myths and beliefs: culture, he argues, was indeed established when men first learned to eat their meat *cooked instead of raw*.

Fire and the Origin of Menstrual Taboos

Apart from its many practial uses, the central *symbolic* importance of fire can now be appreciated in a new way. Perhaps the most important point is that prior to fire's use in cooking, it would have been difficult for women to assert the dangers inherent in blood contact at all. If people habitually ate their meat raw or with visible blood still showing in it, then it would have seemed normal for men to be bloodstained for much of the time, not only out in the hunting grounds but also back in the home. This would have made menstrual taboos difficult to impose. Indeed, to associate blood with ritual

pollution or 'taboo' would have been virtually impossible until such time as society could control and negate the bloodiness of meat food. Cooking was the only realistic solution. And if fire was a resource basically under female control, then this whole symbolic system – this 'ideology of blood' to use Testart's term – would have given women further leverage in exerting their power. Since no flesh could be deemed edible until it was cooked, it would have given women substantial control over supplies of meat food.

We can now add a new and important element to the model. It has already been noted that at the time when meat was brought home to be cooked, women ought to have ceased menstruating. If the basic symbolic function of cooking was to remove blood from meat, any excess of menstrual blood in women would have had an anti-cooking effect, negating the cooking process by adding to the presence of blood in the vicinity. Fire and blood, in other words, would have been experienced as antithetical in their effects; consequently, we arrive at an absolutely basic rule – *no menstruating woman ought to have been permitted to cook meat*.

Symmetrical results are arrived at on the level of sexual relations. Men would have brought back meat to the base camp in expectation of sexual rewards. But just as meat could not have been eaten until it had been rendered safe through cooking, so women could not have been approached for sexual relations until they had ceased to signal 'no!' Before sex became permitted, then, women must have signalled that they were ritually safe. They must have washed the blood off themselves, or passed through smoke or fire, or removed all blood or all thought of blood in some other publicly visible way. In some communities, the mere fact of the moon's fullness or of women's involvement with cooking-fire may have been sufficient indication that womankind's 'dark' and 'dangerous' period was now over.

In any event, while menstruating women would have been 'bloody' and in that sense 'raw', women who were safely available as sexual partners ought logically to have been thought of as blood-free or 'cooked'. Put another way, we can say that to be with one's kin – one's 'blood' – would have been to be in a 'raw' state, while conjoining with one's spouse or lover would have involved becoming 'cooked'.

Intimations of a Universal Structure: the Raw and the Cooked

The symbolic logic which applies the 'raw/cooked' opposition equally to women and to meat is familiar as one of the more curious yet widely publicised findings of Lévi-Strauss in his *Mythologiques*. Lévi-Strauss explicitly associates cooking with marriage (1973: 303–4), and shows that '*raw is to cooked as kinship is to marriage*' is a formula discernible not only in American Indian mythology but also in other parts of the world, including within the folklore of certain areas of England and France.

Lévi-Strauss (1970: 334) writes that in France, in the Upper Forez, Isère, Ardèche and Gard areas, women (and sometimes men) who were thought to have remained too long unmarried (that is, to have remained overdependent on their kin) were teasingly reminded of their 'rawness' by being made to eat a salad consisting of onions, nettles and roots, or of clover and oats; this was termed 'making them eat salad' or 'making them eat turnip'. In several areas of England, the penalty was different: the unmarried elder sister of a girl who had already married was forced to dance 'in the raw' – that is, to dance barefoot.

The remedy for such 'rawness', in other cases, was quite literally to be 'cooked'. In the St Omer district of France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, if a younger daughter was married first, 'this was a sad day for her poor elder sister, for at some point during the celebrations, she would, willy nilly, be seized upon, lifted up and laid on the top of the oven, so that she might be warmed up, as the saying was, since her situation seemed to indicate that she had remained insensitive to love'. A similar custom existed during Napoleon III's reign, at Wavrin, in the Lille area (Gennep 1946–58, Book 1, Vol. 2, pp. 631–3; quoted in Lévi-Strauss 1970: 334). English-speakers to this day perpetuate this structure in language: to speak of a woman as 'hot' implies sexual readiness, while 'coolness' of course means the reverse.

Over immense areas of the world, the same logic gave rise to customs comparable with those in France. When women were required, because of their dangerous 'wetness' or 'rawness', to disjoin from society or from men, the fact that they were menstruating or shedding afterbirth blood was emphasised, publicised and even exaggerated. When the aim was, rather, to terminate the period of 'pollution' or 'rawness', the opposite action was taken, and the female flesh concerned was warmed up or 'cooked'. Hence from Cambodia, as well as Malaysia, Siam and various regions of Indonesia, have come reports that a girl during her first menstruation – a phase which had to be accentuated – had to 'go into the shade' and remain out of sunlight to preserve the potency of the supernatural power. On the other hand, a woman who had just given birth – a phase which had to be brought to a close – was 'laid on a bed or a raised grill under which there burned a slow fire' (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 335). Pueblo Indian women gave birth over a heap of hot sand, which was perhaps intended to transform the child from its 'raw' state into a 'cooked person' approachable by society. It was the habit of various Californian tribes to put women who had just given birth into ovens, hollowed out in the ground. After being covered with mats and hot stones, they were conscientiously 'cooked'. The Yurok Indians of California used the expression 'cooking the pains' – a reference to menstrual periods – to refer to all curative rites. 'This rapid summary of customs', Lévi-Strauss concludes (1970: 336), suggests that

> the individuals who are 'cooked' are those most deeply involved in a physiological process: the newborn child, the woman who has just given birth, or the pubescent girl. The conjunction of a member of the social group with nature must be mediatised through the intervention of cooking-fire, whose normal function is to mediatise the conjunction of the raw product and the human consumer, and whose operation thus has the effect of making sure that a natural creature is at one and the same time *cooked and socialised*. . . .

All this, it would seem, can be put very simply: just as blood imposes sexual and culinary 'consumption' taboos, *so fire is necessary in order to lift them.*

Women and Fire

Women, it was noted earlier, would have gained from promoting male anxieties concerning blood, not for spiritual or religious reasons but because it would have accentuated female control over meat brought back to camp. It would have meant that although men as hunters held a monopoly of access to living game animals, this applied only for as long as the meat was out in the bush. The moment it was brought back, the only way to avoid contamination and possible suspicion would have been for men to relinquish it and wash or otherwise purify themselves. An immediate task would also have been to remove the source of the pollution. This would have required the female recipients' emphatic demonstration that they were not menstruating or about to begin menstruating; it would also have meant proceeding immediately to cook the meat.

Once men's meat had been brought home for cooking, it would have entered the feminine sphere. We can imagine, perhaps, large earth ovens filled with hot stones into which the game was put. To the extent that the blood in the meat was 'like' menstrual blood, the ovens may have been perceived as 'like' immense wombs in which a transformative process was taking place. In the case of a large animal, the cooking may have lasted many hours. The test of whether the meat was finally ready or not would have been a simple one: Was the blood in it still visible? If it was, the oven had yet more work to do. If no blood could be seen, the cooking process had been completed – whereupon eating could safely begin.

The reader will recall that in the early stages of the Upper Palaeolithic, the base camp would have revolved around a fire, with women's control over the domestic space involving particular responsibilities in connection with cooking. Maintaining a fire requires constant vigilance rather than mobility, and it is easy to understand that this would have been primarily the responsibility not of male hunters forever on the move but of females and those males too old, too sick or for other reasons temporarily unable to hunt.

The need to control domestic fire, in other words, would have turned women's relative immobility – a potential disadvantage in other contexts – into an advantage.

The cultural stipulation that meat had to be cooked before it could be eaten functioned to ensure that it was circulated between the sexes. Given female control over cooking (or rather, given the mere fact that the necessary fire remained at the home base, not being readily transportable), it followed that to eat their own kills, men would have had to face the blood-polluted nature of their food. Eating one's own kill would have meant eating meat raw. Getting the meat cooked – obligatory to the extent that blood was to be avoided – implied taking it home, where it came under the influence of the opposite sex. The avoidance of blood, in other words, acted in inhibiting men's consumption of their own kills in the bush.

In this context, the model helps explain a paradox which was noted in this book much earlier (Chapter 8). Why was it so long after the earliest discovery of fire that this resource came to be used systematically for the cooking of meat? Fire was harnessed apparently as early as 1.5 million years ago, yet there is little if any evidence for its use in cooking until over a million years later. How can such an extraordinary delay be explained?

The model would suggest that until women could organise their intervention, the main problem would have been the tendency of males to eat and (in later evolutionary stages) perhaps also to cook meat on a haphazard basis, wherever or whenever an animal had been killed, without following any definite timetable. By contrast, if women were to obtain an adequate share, they would have needed a definite regular schedule: a pre-arranged 'meal time' or 'celebratory feast-time' known to the group's members in advance, and not simply dependent on the particular time and place when a game animal happened to be killed. Imposing the necessary restraints and synchronisation of activities would have been a difficult task to achieve.

The model implies that women solved this problem – just as they solved others that involved timing – by using the moon. It would have been in women's interests to emphasise and perhaps greatly exaggerate the connection between menstruation and the moon. The notion that the period from dark moon onwards inevitably produced menstrual bleeding (Chapter 10) would have given women the leverage they needed. All 'darkness' in the moon – women could claim – was directly 'polluting' in a menstrual sense. It could be claimed that regardless of women's wishes, such blood pollution simply could not be dispelled until the moon itself was full – until it had succeeded in casting off entirely its blood-linked dark shadow. Once women had authoritatively established this ideological/cosmological point, their meat-gaining problems would in principle have been solved. A logical consequence would have been that cooking could not take place before full moon. This in turn would have stopped men from cooking in the bush. Waiting until full moon would have meant delaying cooking activities until

the moment of the hunters' return to camp. Such a delay would have guaranteed women access to the meat.

An implication of this model is that long before 'the mealtime' with its cooking-fire became a secular daily event, it was a once a-month ritual event – a special time of celebratory feasting. Large earth ovens or other fires were constructed and efforts were made to schedule the major processes of cooking so that they took place at the most propitious moment for this kind of activity – at about the time of the full moon, or at least as far as possible away from the time of the dark moon. In short, the dark moon made menstrual blood flow. Cooking's purpose, by contrast, was to reverse this flow. Consequently, cooking should occur at full moon.

Put another way, we can say that fire would of necessity have been associated not with darkness or the dark moon but with light, the full moon, marital sex and the sun. This logic finds expression in countless details of ritual and mythology, including the stipulation that a menstruating woman should never cook but should be kept in darkness, safe from all fire including the sun's rays.

Eclipses and 'the Moon's Blood'

The model, in any event, makes certain predictions. Some of these are more testable than others. Some refer us to archaeological inferences, others to already familiar phenomena within the ethnographic record. Menstrual taboos of the kind discussed in this chapter are a prediction of the hypothesis, yet have long been known about. Much the same applies to ritual avoidances of blood in meat. Again, the hypothesis would predict bride-service – the surrender of game to women and their kin, motivated by men's need for social and sexual prestige of a kind which can only be gained by success in hunting. But this, too, has long been a commonplace of hunter-gatherer studies (see Chapter 4). It is more satisfactory when the model predicts something of which we had no previous suspicion. When this happens, the more 'improbable' the prediction, the better. The hypothesis then stands or falls on the basis of an investigation whose outcome is unknown.

A prediction which has just been arrived at is that cooking should occur at or in the days immediately following full moon, but not when the moon is dark. Despite Malinowski's Trobriand Islands finding that in 'all festivities, all enterprises, and on all ceremonial occasions, the climax is reached at full moon' (1927: 206), no anthropologist, to the author's knowledge, has ever suggested that *cooking* is traditionally most propitious at full moon. It is indeed a somewhat inconvenient consequence of the hypothesis, since it is hard to imagine any real human community restricting its cooking activities to within only a certain portion of each month. Contemporary hunter-gatherers are not prominently known to pay the slightest attention to the moon's condition when they need to cook a piece of meat.

However, they do show concern about women's menstrual periods. And a negative test concerning the moon can be envisaged. It would be to see whether the sudden or unexpected *absence* of a full moon would throw the cooking process into reverse. Such an expectation can be formulated more concretely. Were the hypothesis correct, a lunar eclipse should appear in tradition as the sudden and unexpected intrusion of a dark-moon episode into what was supposed to be a full moon. Fidelity to the logic would imply that menstrual blood 'must' be flowing, and that therefore all cooking should cease forthwith.

This expectation is confirmed. Referring to a widespread Amerindian myth linking incest ('excessive' blood unity) with eclipses, Lévi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked* (1970: 298) remarks that the mythological connections also include 'culinary utensils, food, and domestic fire'. In South America, in Guiana, 'the Lolaca and Atabaca Indians . . . were convinced that, if the moon really died, all domestic fires would be extinguished'. In North America, in the lower Yukon region, it is believed 'that a pervasive essence, a maleficent influence, spreads across the earth when an eclipse of the moon occurs, and that if by chance a small particle happens to get inside some utensil or other, sickness will ensue. So, as soon as an eclipse begins, the women hurriedly turn all their pots, pails, and dishes upside down.' The Alsea Indians of Oregon threw out their reserves of drinking water – 'bloodied' by the eclipse. The Californian Wintu 'would throw out all their food, and even water, in case they had become polluted by the blood of the sun or moon'. The Serrano forbade all food, since feasting would only assist the spirits of the dead to 'eat' the celestial body.

Two further examples, both Amazonian, may clarify the nature of the blood in pots and pans. It will be noted that it makes little difference whether the eclipse is lunar or solar: either way, the alignments of both moon and sun are involved in causing the eclipse, and the critical point is that the sudden plunging of earth and sky into darkness indicates the pervasive presence of 'blood':

1

> Pirá-paraná mythology says the moon copulates with menstruating women and that during an eclipse of the moon, called the 'dying moon', the moon becomes a small red ball of menstrual blood which comes to earth and fills the house and its objects, (C. Hugh-Jones, 1979, p. 156, on the Barasana)

2

> On 24 December 1973, I was startled by a tremendous shout from the men of the village. They had just noticed that the sun was gradually being eclipsed. Dropping all their activities they rushed back to the village in a state of genuine fear and alarm, for Kama (Sun), one of the important male spirits and culture heroes, was 'menstruating'. . . .

> Blood from the sun, like menstrual blood, is very dangerous. Each drop can penetrate the skin, causing sickness and leaving moles and blemishes. Quickly the villagers smeared themselves with ashes and manioc flour to ward off the blood. Carrying pots of porridge and stacks of manioc bread, the women threw large quantities of food into the bushes. Contaminated by the blood of the sun, just as a house's food may be contaminated by a menstruating woman, it was no longer fit for human consumption.
>
> In the late afternoon of the day of the eclipse, the villagers scarified themselves with scrapers (*piya*) set with dogfish teeth. Opening long cuts on their bodies, they 'menstruated' so that the sun's blood could flow out. . . . (Gregor 1985, p. 193, on the Méhinaku).

When the moon or sun suddenly becomes dark, then, cooking is inappropriate; people 'ought' to be menstruating – and food ought to be thrown away.

The Model

It is now possible to complete the detailed specifications of the model – corresponding to the 'genetic code', as it were, of the cultural configuration.

Once a lunar month, women enter seclusion. The moon is now dark. At this time, people do not walk out at night, or visit one another, or go hunting. They remain with kin, reassembling as coalitions of kin, men focusing around their 'mothers' and 'sisters', not their wives. Menstrual blood is now flowing, or at least assumed to be, and although a man can be in close proximity to his mother's blood, his wife's is to be avoided.

At dark moon, the blood which flows seems to come from the moon. It is the moon, after all, which brings kin together. It is the clock with which they synchronise their reunion. All symbolic authority in this phase is associated with mothers/sisters, not fathers. All bodily intimacy (for example, in dancing) is legitimate only to the extent that the symbolic authority of blood and of maternity is upheld. Men are of course involved, but the blood contact immediately defines them as 'sons' and 'brothers' in relation to their kinswomen, not fathers, husbands or lovers in relation to affines. This can be put another way by saying that to the extent that men are touched by the 'magic' of blood, their sexuality is washed away, temporarily suppressed or at least confined within the limits of immature, non-fertile eroticism. In essence, men are 'as if' reduced to pre-adolescence, their attitude to their kinswomen's blood being modelled on that of a child to the authority of its mother. This does not preclude physical intimacy or incestuous sexual fantasy, but it does preclude female sexual yielding or surrender to a partner in adult heterosexual intercourse. In short, the sex strike must remain firm.

With sexual energies aroused but not satisfied, both men and women now concentrate their attention on a future goal, channelling all energies into

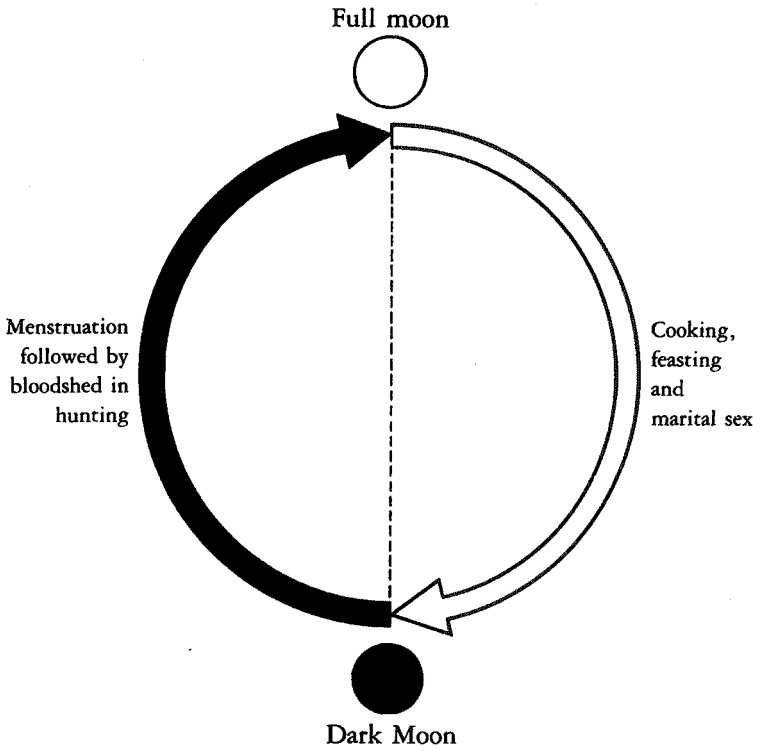

Figure 16 A model Ice Age hunting community's ritually structured schedule of work and rest. In addition to daily, seasonal and other periodicities, life normatively alternates to a fortnightly rhythm, switching between a 'production' phase of ritual power (initiated by menstrual onset, continued into hunting, butchery etc. and terminated as raw meat is transformed into cooked) and a corresponding 'consumption' phase of surrender or relaxation (beginning with feasting and celebratory love-making; terminated as meat supplies run low and the next menstrual onset approaches). The thick black line signifies the dominance of blood-relations whilst blood of any kind is flowing. The switch to white at full moon connotes cooking fire's lifting of the taboos associated with 'rawness' or visible blood, allowing feasting to proceed and marital partners to conjoin.

work. Traps are put in place and set, weapons sharpened or made. As the moon waxes, the time for the hunt itself draws near.

Towards full moon, when nights are light, hunting begins. The closer to full moon, the closer to the most propitious time for the kill. Following success, the meat is brought home; fires and earth ovens are prepared; the meat is ceremonially cooked. The killing-to-cooking (blood-to-fire) transition coincides with the transition from waxing to waning moon. Cooking, lunar transition, the removal of blood in meat and the lifting of the blood spell are all symbolised by the same light and fire. The collective, sex-striking community now dissolves: from now on comes feasting, celebration and sex. Couples are left free to enjoy one another's bodies, just as they are

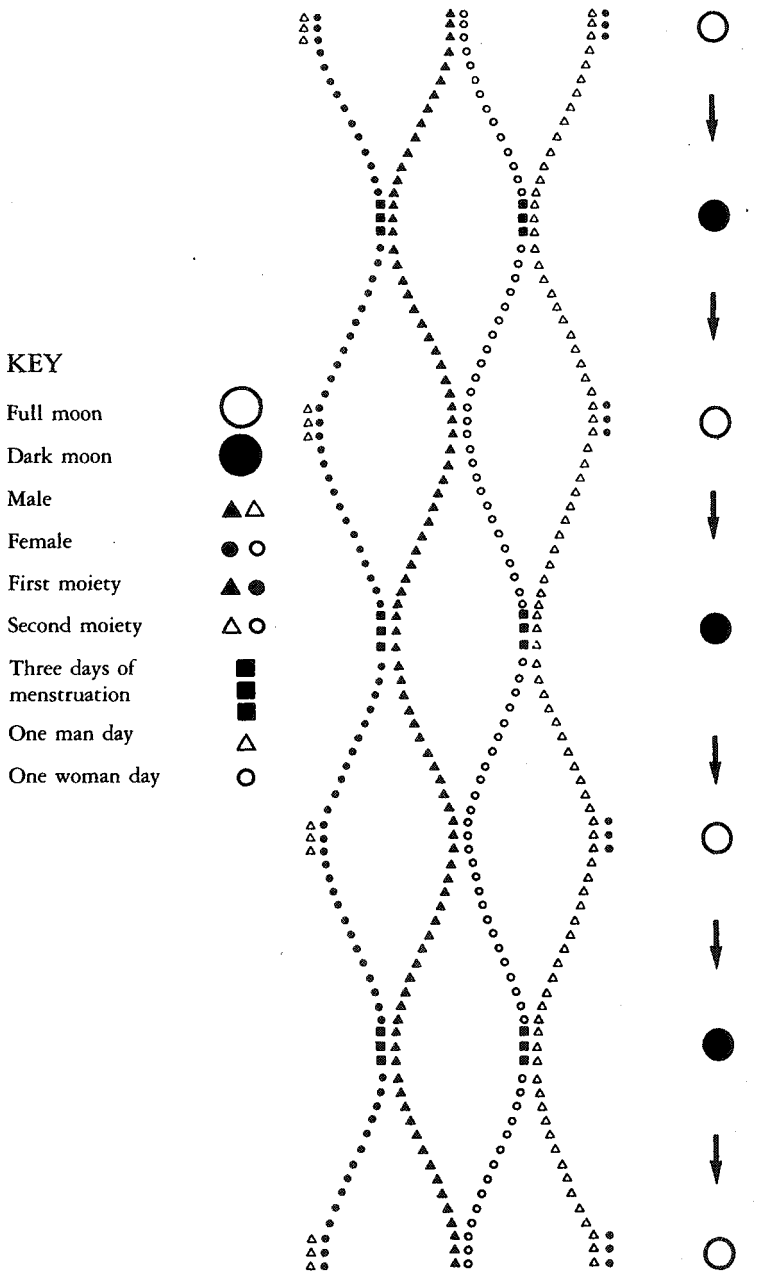

Figure 17 A different view of the alternation shown in the previous figure, displaying the model community's division into two exogamous moieties. A succession of repeated cycles is shown, each of 29.5 days, blood-kin conjoining at dark moon, marital partners at full.

free to partake of cooked meat. This lasts for anything up to thirteen or fourteen days – in principle until the time for the polar opposite spell-casting transformation has arrived.

Following a period of pre-menstrual build-up and tension, the power of the strike is once again unleashed. The cooked-to-raw (fire-to-blood) transition occurs ideally at dark moon. The menstrual flow then puts a stop to all feasting and love-making. Now males are reclaimed as sex-strike allies by their mothers and sisters, discipline and solidarity once more prevail over sex – and the cycle is set in motion for a further round (figure 16).

We are left, then, with a picture of two social 'worlds' corresponding to two kinds of time – that of the waxing moon on the one hand, waning moon on the other (figure 17). In one temporal sector, blood relations dominate, marital relations are excluded, meat is raw and meat hunger prevails; in the other, cooking-fires are lit, marital relations predominate and there is feasting on cooked meat. In the first phase, men are essentially 'maternal uncles', 'sons' and 'brothers' to their kin, while women are 'mothers', 'sisters' and 'daughters'; with the transition to the second phase, everyone exchanges partners and roles – to become spouses or lovers to polar-opposite kinds of relatives (a switch-over pictured in Lévi-Strauss' 'bird-nester' stories as a movement between polar-opposite worlds accompanied by an exchange of clothes, gender-roles or 'skins').

The model would define all this as the most elementary possible way of being fully cultural. It implies that at the culminating point of the hominisation process, there was glimpsed the possibility of a harmonious social and ecological logic linking menstrual cycles with the periodicity of hunting expeditions, maternal blood with the blood of game animals, cooking and feasting with sexual enjoyment – and all of these with the periodicity of the moon. So internally coherent and emotionally meaningful did this logic seem that it apparently inspired generations of our ancestors in the course of a human revolution which took millennia to consummate, and whose principles have continued to dominate traditional myths, religious rituals and magical beliefs up into recent times.

Chapter 12
The Reds

> Bourgeois society is the most highly developed and most highly differentiated historical organisation of production. The categories which serve as the expression of its conditions and the comprehension of its own organisation enable it at the same time to gain an insight into the organisation and the relationships of production which have prevailed under all the past forms of society, on the ruins and constituent elements of which it has arisen, and of which it still drags along some unsurmounted remains. . . .
>
> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (1857–9)

Blood taboos, ritualistic cooking prohibitions and lunar/solar cosmological beliefs, then, are not mere inexplicable manifestations of primitive irrationality. Neither were they invented by men as instruments for oppressing women. They arose out of and expressed a definite mode of production, distribution and exchange. They constitute some of the 'unsurmounted remains', to use Marx's expression, of those ancient institutions of human gender solidarity with which culture began, and which have been 'dragged along' uncomprehendingly by many of us in cultures right up until the present.

In being 'dragged along', however, these institutions have changed. Much has happened to traditions everywhere since culture first originated, and this applies to menstrual taboos as much as to other features. We would not expect to find living ethnographic evidence of people still practising the sex strike in the simple or initial form specified in the model. We are unlikely to find a culture in some forgotten corner of the globe where women still form up in a line, signal 'No sex!' in their own menstrual blood and send men off to hunt. Rather, we would expect derivative forms. The task is therefore to work out on a theoretical basis what evolved forms might logically be possible, attempt to determine the material conditions of these, and test whether our results are consistent with what the contemporary ethnographic record tells us.

Urucú

Cruising through the Bahamas on 15 October, 1493, Christopher Columbus and his crew picked up a lone Indian paddler in a canoe. He was carrying some of the native bread, a calabash of water 'and a piece of red earth made into a powder and then kneaded. . . ' The 'red earth' was in fact a dye made from the berries of a decorative shrub, *Bixa orellana* – familiar under its Portuguese name, *urucú* (Sauer 1966: 56).

Columbus had encountered what is now known to be a key aspect of cultural life in the South and Central American tropics. Among the Méhinaku, along the Xingu – a tributary of the Amazon – the *urucú* shrub with its red berries is grown in gardens, the pods being harvested in June and July. The villagers open the pods in their houses and boil the waxy red seeds in great ceramic pots. A family may be fully occupied for several weeks in the tasks of harvesting, shelling and tending the fires. The result of their labours is several large balls of pasty red dye, which will last throughout the year. It is used to colour masks and, above all, as body-paint. Covering the hair and body with liberal quantities is for the Méhinaku the 'sine qua non of good dress'; it is associated with all ritual occasions. The paint 'has an association with blood in that in a battle it will "attract" an arrow causing a wound' (Gregor 1977: 158–9, 173).

The Asurinis, along another stretch of the Xingu, paint themselves with red *urucú* mixed with oil from babassú palm-nuts, producing a particularly dark shade of red. In this case, their very name – Asurinis – means 'red people' (Lukesch 1976: 33–4). So widespread was such body-painting in the American tropics at the time of contact that, according to the anthropological historian Carl Sauer (1966: 56), it probably explains why Europeans came to refer to all the native peoples of the New World as 'red Indians'.

The Jibaros in eastern Ecuador regard *urucú* paint as 'magical'; the shrub from which the red berries come is a 'sacred tree' (Karsten 1935: 380). The Trio Indians, between northern Brazil and southern Surinam, use *urucú* to cover the whole body as a protection against evil spirits – which 'are unable to see objects coloured red' (Rivière 1969: 34). Female physiological processes are intimately involved in the symbolism:

> Red (*tamire*) is associated with protection against spirits, women (Waraku, the first woman was painted red), fertility, and its application is uniform and without design except on the face. The word to apply red paint is *imuka* which contains the same root (*mu*) as *imuku*, child, *imuhte*, to be pregnant, and *mumu*, blood. (Rivière 1969: 266)

A similar link between 'the first woman', shamanism and *urucú* red body-paint is brought out by Christine Hugh-Jones in her sophisticated structuralist ethnography of the Barasana:

> *Romi Kumu* lives up in the sky and is the first grandmother of us all; she is immortal because she has the sacred beeswax (*werea*) gourd with her. She grows old during the day, bathes at dawn and becomes young and white again. She also renews her red face paint, urucú (*musa*; *Bixa orellana*, used exclusively by women), and takes off a layer of skin with the old paint. This paint is her menstrual blood. Her name means 'Woman Shaman' but she is like a man. (1979: 137)

Among the Urubu of the Brazilian highlands, along the south-eastern limit of the Amazonian basin, numerous myths and taboos concern hunting and hunting luck. There are strict rules prohibiting hunters from consuming their own kills, breaches of which result in *panem* – a kind of impotence associated with loss of hunting luck. Huxley (1957: 145) also discusses 'processes of transformation' – rituals of birth and of death, rites of initiation, the baking of clay pots, the cooking of meat and so on – events which are thought to be dangerously magical and are therefore heavily hedged in with taboos. Having described a number of such transformation processes, he continues:

> For the Indians, perhaps the most dangerous of all these processes is that of menstruation, the regular and spontaneous manifestation of the creative power as blood. Blood is the very principle of life, as the Indians acknowledge every time they paint their faces red with urucu, in imitation of it; for that very reason, however, it is dangerous. No Indian will eat half-cooked meat, lest the blood that is still in it should poison him. . . .

Here, in one short passage, all of our origins model's connections – linking menstruation, transformative processes, face painting and avoidance of the blood in raw meat – are neatly made.

An early report on the Toba Indians of the Gran Chaco (Karsten 1926) is equally fascinating. Menstruation is thought to be caused by the new moon – at which time of month a woman is thought to be vulnerable to evil spirits (Karsten 1926: 10–11). On various occasions, women paint their faces bright red with *urucú*. Karsten (1926: 130) was given various explanations for the practice – it was 'to look beautiful', 'to attract the men' and so on – but was not convinced:

> As a matter of fact, the truth appeared to be that the Toba women generally paint themselves *at the time of their menses* – no doubt as a prophylactic against the evil spirits whose feared attacks also make them diet during the four or five critical days. (Karsten 1926: 13)

In discussing the Toba and other tribes, Karsten provides intriguing glimpses of a system in which symbolic menstrual blood functions very much as we would expect in the light of our model. For example, describing the Canelos Indians of Ecuador, he notes that men do two things prior to setting

off on a hunting expedition. Firstly, they avoid all sexual contact with women for eight days prior to the hunt. Secondly:

> Whether the hunting expedition is undertaken for a feast or not, the Canelos Indian never omits to paint his face red with roucou [*urucú*] before starting. The red paint is supposed to attract animals and birds, and thus to give good luck in hunting. . . . The Canelos Indian says that if he does not paint himself with roucou before going to hunt, he will be unable to kill any game. (Karsten 1935: 163–4)

However, these references to hunters painting *their own* faces appear to be misleading, at least in some important cases. On closer investigation, it turns out that a collective hunting expedition, which may last for anything up to fifteen days, is preceded by a ritual in which the red painting is executed upon the hunters' faces *by an older woman*.

In the following passage (paraphrasing Karsten 1935: 162), we do not exactly see the sex strike as outlined in previous chapters. We are not told of a line of synchronously menstruating women touching or threatening their menfolk with blood before sending them out to fetch meat. But glimpses of this logic – in a description recalling the picket-line of face-painted Sharanahua women discussed in Chapter 4 – can surely be discerned:

> Early in the morning of the day when a major hunting expedition is to start, all the hunters assemble in the house of the Indian who is to organise the feasting which will follow a successful outcome. The hunters' wives bring with them numerous drums, which the men – dressed in festival style – proceed to beat in a slow rhythm, moving in a circle in the middle of the large house. This may continue for about an hour, until the final face-painting ritual begins.
>
> Before leaving the house, the hunters range themselves in a row. An old woman has a gourd ready, containing some *mani* or earth-nuts. Each grain in the gourd is painted red with *urucú*. In another small gourd she has prepared some crude *urucú* with which the hunters' faces are to be painted. The old woman also holds a branch of a certain tree with large soft prickles, which the Indians call *chini papaya*: 'Each hunter in turn steps forward to the old woman, who paints the whole lower part of his face red with roucou and then slightly strikes him on the head, the shoulders, the arms, and the legs with the prickly branch, at the same time saying to him: *sinchita callpángi*, "may you run fast". The hunter thus treated now starts to run away from the house, all the women throwing after him the red *mani* grains. Then the next hunter steps forward to the old woman, to be treated in the same way, then the following one and so forth, until the last of them. After the hunters have left, the women pick up the *mani* grains and eat them.' (Karsten 1935: 162)

We will return to the topic of body-painting and its possible roots in menstrual symbolism later in this chapter. In the meantime, broadening our scope beyond the Americas, let us tackle a long-standing problem in comparative mythology, familiarising ourselves with issues which will deepen our understanding of what *urucú* and similar forms of pigmentation may ultimately mean.

The Myth of Matriarchy

Matriarchy myths are ideological constructs which postulate an 'original' period of 'women's rule'. Such narratives – which are known in many parts of the world – are particularly prominent in those areas in which men seek a monopoly of ritual power through secret male initiation rites. Such areas include much of tropical South America, Africa, Melanesia and Australia. In the societies concerned, men organise an apparent conspiracy against women, using an array of theatrical devices, sound-making instruments, blood-shedding operations and ritual songs, dances and other performances in order, it seems, to intimidate women and separate them from their male offspring as these come of age. The success of these endeavours varies from place to place, but in general the logic which men follow and the myths and symbols used are so stunningly alike in such widely separated regions of the globe that anthropologists have long sought an explanation for the parallels (Allen 1967; Bachofen 1973: 69–201 [original 1861]; Bamberger 1974; Dundes 1976; Gourlay 1975; Hugh-Jones, C. 1979; Hugh-Jones, S. 1979).

Myths of matriarchy, writes Joan Bamberger (1974: 249), have no historical value, and in particular convey no information as to womankind's actual past, present or future in any culture. On the contrary, matriarchy myths are just *patriarchal ideological constructs*. Their function is to justify male dominance 'through the evocation of a catastrophic alternative – a society dominated by women'. In these myths, Bamberger continues (p. 280), womankind 'represents chaos and misrule through unbridled sexuality'. Women are accused of being unable to restrain their sexual appetites. Using the terminology of this book, we can translate this as the accusation that women are unable to maintain any such thing as a 'sex strike'. When it comes to resisting the temptations of sex, women are failures. In the sample of representative myths which I now want to discuss, mythological women leave their legs open or their 'sacred enclosures' unguarded, allowing their privacy to be invaded by men. The conclusion, we will see, is that in the interests of culture, men must organise the necessary sex strike for themselves.

In the myths, woman-dominated society is envisaged not only as excessively sexual. It is seen as a world ruled by mysterious forces emanating in a more general way from nature. These are forces of 'evil', 'witchcraft' or 'medicine' bound up with darkness, wetness and the changing moon (as

opposed to the sun) and intimately linked with both reproductive and sexual aspects of female physiology. In a number of myths it is the 'Sun-man' or 'Sun-father' who finally overthrows 'women's rule' (Bamberger 1974: 269, 273).

Few specialists in comparative mythology have doubted that such myths are alleging woman's governance by the moon (cf. Eliade 1958: 154–63; Lévi-Strauss 1978: 221–2, 506). The Oglala Indian saying that woman's power 'grows with the moon and comes and goes with it', women secluding themselves monthly in their menstrual huts 'to keep their medicine effective' (Powers 1980: 62, 57) provides a good example. Beliefs of this kind, while varied in their specific forms, occur virtually throughout the traditional world. Through their bodies and, in particular, through their reproductive organs, women are felt to have a peculiar and privileged mode of access to 'medicine', 'magic' or 'witchcraft' of a kind which is all the more dangerous for being linked with the moon, rooted in nature *and therefore ultimately beyond male cultural artifice or control.*

Against this background, we may examine some typical 'primitive matriarchy' myths, several of them featuring a Women's Lodge or Hut suggestive of a communal menstrual hut:

> *The origin of the Hain.* Tierra del Fuego: Selk'nam-Ona.
> In the beginning, witchcraft was known only by the women of Ona land. They practised it in a Lodge, which no man dared approach. The girls, as they neared womanhood, were instructed in the magic arts, learning how to bring sickness and death to those who displeased them. The men lived in abject fear and subjection. Certainly they had bows and arrows with which to hunt. 'Yet', they asked, 'what use are such weapons against witchcraft and sickness?'
>
> The tyranny of women bore down more and more heavily, until at last one day, the men resolved to fight back. They decided to kill the women, whereupon there ensued a great massacre, from which not one woman escaped in human form. The men spared their little daughters and waited until these had grown old enough to become wives. And so that these women should never be able to band together and regain their old ascendancy, the men inaugurated a secret society of their own and banished forever the Women's Lodge in which so many wicked plots had been hatched. (Bridges 1948: 412–3; quoted in Bamberger 1974: 270; slightly abridged)

The essence of this narrative is the allegation that women once 'banded together' in some way connected with a 'Lodge' from which emanated death-dealing supernatural powers.

The next myth adds to these themes that of a special 'paint' used by

women to change their apparent identities. The 'Great Kina Hut' is the hut in which men carry on their rituals today:

> ***The origin of the Kina.*** **Tierra del Fuego: Yamana.**
> In the beginning, women had sole power. They gave orders to the men, who obeyed just as women do today. The men took care of the children, tended the fire, and cleaned the skins, while the women did no work at all. That was the way it was always to be. The women invented the Great Kina Hut and everything which goes on inside it, and then fooled the men into thinking they were spirits. They stepped out of the Great Hut, painted all over, with masks on their heads. The men did not recognise their wives, who, simulating the spirits, beat the earth with dried skins so that it shook. Their howls and roars so frightened the men that they hid in their huts.
>
> But one day, the Sun-man, whose job it was to supply meat to the women-spirits in their Hut, overheard the voices of two girls while he was passing a lagoon. Curious, he hid in the bushes and saw the girls practising their spirit-impersonations and washing off paint. He confronted them, insisting they reveal their secrets. Finally, they confessed: 'It is the women themselves who paint themselves and put on masks; then they step out of the hut and show themselves to the men. There are no other spirits there.' The Sun-man returned to the camp and exposed the fraudulent women. In revenge the men stormed the Kina Hut, and in the ensuing great battle killed the women or turned them into animals. From that time on, the men have performed in the Kina Hut; they do this in the same manner as the women before them. (Bamberger 1974: 269; citing Gusinde 1961: 1238–49; slightly abridged)

In this myth, men are identified with the sun. The women, by contrast, are associated with a lagoon. When painted, the women inspired terror as they impersonated 'the spirits'. They organised in a fearsome 'hut', but men eventually stormed this, taking it over *and performing in it exactly the same rituals as the women had done before.*

A further myth, from the Méhinaku (whose use of *urucú* was discussed earlier), introduces (a) the theme of flutes and bullroarers and (b) the theme of sexual dominance as expressed in rape. It is narrated by a man:

> ***The origin of the bull-roarer.*** **Amazonia: Méhinaku.**
> In ancient times the women occupied the men's houses and played the sacred flutes inside. We men took care of the children, processed manioc flour, wove hammocks, and spent our time in the dwellings while the women cleared fields, fished and hunted. In those days, the children even nursed at our breasts. A man who dared enter the women's house during their ceremonies would be gang-raped by all the women of the village on the central plaza.

One day the chief called us together and showed us how to make bull-roarers to frighten the women. As soon as the women heard the terrible drone, they dropped the sacred flutes and ran into the houses to hide. We grabbed the flutes and took over the men's houses. Today if a woman comes in here and sees our flutes we rape her. Today the women nurse babies, process manioc flour and weave hammocks, while we hunt, fish and farm. (Gregor 1977: 255)

In the next myth, women's sacred flutes are associated with the waters of a lagoon. These flutes needed 'feeding with meat' – that is, the women used the flutes to compel men to hunt for them:

The origin of the sacred flutes. Amazonia: Mundurucu.
Three women were walking through the forest long ago when they heard music coming from a lagoon. They investigated and caught three fish, which turned into three sacred flutes. The women played these to produce music so powerful that they were enabled to occupy the sacred Men's House, forcing the men to live in ordinary dwellings. While the women did little but play on their flutes all day long, they forced the men to make manioc flour, fetch water and firewood, and care for the children. The men's ignominy was complete when the women visited the men's dwellings at night to force their sexual attentions on them ('Just as we do to them today').

However, the flutes needed feeding with meat. One day, the men – who were the hunters – threatened to withhold what they caught unless the women surrendered the flutes. Frightened of angering the fertility-spirits contained in the flutes, the women agreed, and the men seized the flutes and the power, which they have held to this day. (Murphy 1973: 217–18)

In this myth, the men gain power by organising what may be termed (in the light of the arguments of this book) a male counterpart to women's menstrual 'sex strike' – a collective 'hunting strike'. They then base their power in what was formerly the women's sacred 'House', monopolising now the 'flutes' which 'needed feeding with meat'. In this as in so many similar myths, the implication is that every strategy which women once used against men, men are now justified in practising against women – and in a form as close as possible to the female-inspired original.

We now come to a myth which replaces 'flutes', 'bull-roarers', 'masks' and 'paint' with a strange power-conferring garment: a skirt made of fibres stained with the world's first menstrual blood:

The origin of royal dress. West Africa: Dogon.
A woman stole a fibre skirt which was stained with the world's first

menstrual flow. Putting it on herself and concealing her identity by this means, she reigned as queen and spread terror all around. But then men took the fibres from her, dressed themselves in the royal garment, and prohibited its use to women. All the men danced wearing the reddened fibres, and the women had to content themselves with admiring them. (Griaule 1965: 170)

The statement that the woman had 'stolen' the power of menstruation expresses a male stance typical of myths of this kind. While many of the myths state that men 'robbed' women of a power which was 'naturally' theirs, in other cases men use a paradoxical assertion in order, it seems, to escape the implication that male rule must therefore lack legitimacy. They claim that women's power – even when taking the form of the potency of the menstrual flow – had been 'stolen' by women in the first place!

The next myth tells of 'The Origin of the Bull-roarer'; it might have been called 'The Origin of Menstruation', however:

The origin of the bull-roarer. **Papua New Guinea: Kwavuru.**
Tiv'r, the Originator, was puzzled to hear a faint sound – like that of a bull-roarer – whenever his wife moved. He asked her what the sound was, but she pretended not to know. Eventually, Tiv'r felt sure that it was coming from her vagina, and he commissioned various birds to steal the object responsible. A number of birds swooped down on her while, with bended back and legs spread wide apart, the woman was engaged in sweeping the village. But each time, she frustrated them by abruptly sitting down. Only the parrot got near enough to draw blood: this is why parrots' feathers are red.

Eventually, Tiv'r called upon the little bird, Serekute, and threatened him with death if he failed to obtain the sound-making instrument. Tiv'r shouted to his wife to show a little more rigour in her sweeping, and as she bent down and the point of the bull-roarer protruded from her vagina, the bird swooped down and snatched it away. The woman lay streaming with her first menstrual flow, while Tiv'r hugged the bull-roarer to his breast and declared that henceforth it would belong to man alone. (Williams 1936: 307–8)

Womankind, then leaves her vagina exposed, losing her power along with her blood.

The next myth features a 'sacred enclosure' which seems to correspond to the 'lodges' and 'huts' of other myths. It is similar to the previous story in saying that womankind lost her power when she opened her legs too wide:

The origin of Ida. **Papua New Guinea: Umeda.**
One day the women – who alone held the secrets of *ida* – were preparing for a ceremony as usual, making and storing the materials, paint, masks etc. in the sacred enclosure. But this time, the men had decided to set a

> trap for them. They went hunting and killed so many pigs that, when the women had eaten, they lay about in postures of repletion, with their knees spread and their skirts out of place. The men copulated with the women, who 'died' (slept, fainted). While the women slept, the men broke into the sacred enclosure, stole the masks, etc. and began to perform *ida* for the first time. 'We're no good', said the women when they woke up; 'We fell asleep. From now on *ida* belongs to the men'. (Gell 1975: 172)

The image of women lying 'with their knees spread and their skirts out of place' conveys, to use the language of the previous chapters, womankind's abandonment of cultural duty, her surrender of the weapon of the sex strike. The men seize their opportunity to strike-break, taking advantage of the sleeping pickets, invading women's sacred enclosure and in this way stealing the sacred power. Any sex strike from now on will have to be organised by men.

Two more myths in this vein deserve citation. In what follows, it is stated that the flutes – originally women's – had *functioned spontaneously* when still in women's hands:

> ***The origin of the sacred flutes.*** Papua New Guinea: Wogeo.
> Two women invented the sacred flutes following a dream. The flutes played of their own accord. But then a man stole the flutes and started blowing into the holes. When the women tried to explain that blowing was not necessary, he kicked them out of the way. 'Very well', shouted the women in anger, 'you males can keep the flutes. But flutes won't sing by themselves again. You decided to blow this one, and that's the way it shall be. And learning what to do won't be easy – no, you'll have to work hard and sweat.' (Hogbin 1970: 101)

My next myth stresses the genital, menstrual associations of the sacred flute, comparing and contrasting female menstruation in huts with male ceremonies in the Men's House:

> ***The origin of the sacred flute.*** Papua New Guinea: Gimi.
> A woman kept the sacred flute under her bark-string skirts until, one day, it was stolen by her brother. On putting the blow-hole to his mouth, however, his sister's pubic hairs attached themselves to the man's face: this is why men today have beards. The loss of her flute caused the woman to menstruate for the first time; ever afterwards, she was secluded each month in a menstrual hut. The men, meanwhile, began playing the flute inside the Men's House, and have held power ever since. (Gillison 1980: 156)

Note again how the Men's House is the symmetrical counterpart of the defeated woman's hut. Here as in the myths previously examined, men retaliate against women by building a special pseudo-menstrual hut of their own.

The final myth in this set falls into a slightly different category, since it says nothing about ritual or the transfer of sound-making instruments or ritual adornments to men. Nevertheless, *something* is transferred from female possession to male. The myth was given, writes Lewis (1980: 121), 'in answer to my question why, exactly, the moon was connected with menstruation . . .'

The origin of the moon. **West Sepik, Papua New Guinea: Gnau.**
A woman caught the moon in her net while fishing in the river. Calling it a turtle, she hid it in her house under a pile of firewood, intending to cook and eat it later. She began to prepare the necessary sago, leaving her house each day with the moon in its hiding-place inside. As she left, she barred her house, and each evening as she returned she refused to let her husband come inside, instead making him eat his sago outside, always outside. He wondered why.

One day, while the woman was out, her husband peered through a crack in the wall and saw the light of the moon under the firewood. Calling to his brothers in secret, he obtained their help in breaking into the woman's house. They stole the moon. Singing, they pushed it up on a pole until it stuck fast to the sky. At this point, the woman was at work and saw the moon's image reflected in the red-leeched sago washings in her vat. Desperate, she rushed back. Discovering her loss, she cursed her husband. The men hunted by night, killing phalangers and feeding them to the woman until her jaws ached. At last, she made it up with the hunters and demanded no more meat. 'My grandchildren', she said, 'I was cross over my loss. I took all you hunted. From now on, you may eat the phalangers'. (Lewis 1980: 122–3)

This story connects cooking with the moon, and treats woman's 'ownership' of the moon as enabling her *to compel nocturnally hunting men to get meat for her*. Two points deserve mention: firstly, the menstrual connotations of the moon 'reflected in the red-leeched sago washings' of the woman's vat; secondly, the notion that men's capture of the moon and their trick in over-feeding the woman enabled them for the first time *to eat their own kills*. This recalls men's gaining the flutes which 'needed feeding with meat' in the Mundurucu myth.

It is not intended to dwell individually on each myth, or to detail in any depth its specific cultural context. In terms of their logic, such myths are all sufficiently similar to be dealt with, following Bamberger (1974), as a set.

If it is accepted that the fisherwoman's Moon in the Gnau myth symbolises womankind's lost ritual power, then it may be said that in all these different narratives, the formula remains the same: first, women possess ritual power; then they lose it to men. It seems clear that the 'flutes', 'bull-

roarers', 'masks' and so on are code terms for something which is naturally to be found in womankind's 'lagoon', 'hut', 'enclosure' or 'vagina'. This can be stolen when Woman abandons her menstrual sex strike – when she loses her ability to 'band together' with her sisters in menstrual seclusion, or (to put matters another way) when she leaves her legs apart or her enclosure unguarded. But when the myths speak of this 'something' which is then stolen, what is it in real life to which they refer? Or to put this another way: Granted that women 'in the beginning' probably did not possess *flutes which played music all by themselves*, is there a more realistic, scientific way of agreeing with the myths that ritual in these cultures nonetheless involves robbing women of something which is or was theirs?

Male Symbolic 'Menstruation'

Let us retrace our steps a little and return to the model of origins which this book has outlined.

Menstrual synchrony may have begun as a biological phenomenon, but – if our argument is accepted – it then took on the form of a cultural construct. This would have made it possible for changes to occur quite rapidly and in biologically 'improbable' ways. For example, once blood had begun to be used to signal 'no!' or taboo, and once sufficient levels of collectivity had been achieved, there would have been nothing to stop one woman from smearing herself with another woman's blood. This second woman, then, would have been 'menstruating' in at least a symbolic sense. She could have kept men away just as effectively. Even pregnant, ovulating or menopausal women could have symbolically 'menstruated' when the need arose. And if this were possible, then further departures from biology could also have been rendered feasible. A blood-symbolised sex strike could have been organised even when no woman was really menstruating at all. In theory, women could have used animal blood, the juices from red berries, red ochre – or any other suitably coloured pigment.

Unfortunately for women, this would have opened up yet a further possibility – the potential for a further radical departure from biology. In principle, men, too, could have 'menstruated'. They could have smeared themselves with some pigment *symbolic* of menstrual blood. Alternatively, they could have used real blood – cutting themselves so as to look as if they were menstruating. And if they could do this as a gender group whilst at the same time preventing women from exercising power by comparable means, they could have wrested ritual power away from women in part by wresting from them its symbols. Men could have organised their own 'sex strike', using their own blood, as an answer to what women had been doing.

The idea sounds fantastic. It seems to defy the imagination that men should ever have needed to do this. Yet in association with the myths just examined there is a body of perplexing ethnographic evidence concerning

'male menstruation' which is consistent with the model and would seem to be explicable in no other way.

Examining myths internally and in terms of their mutual relationships – as Lévi-Strauss does – is insufficient as a method of working out their significance (Hugh-Jones, S. 1979). Myths are acted out in ritual, and serve ideological functions in this context. I now want to show that 'male menstruation' is the secret of our set of matriarchy myths, and that such pseudo-menstruation is a means of robbing women of their actual menstrual power. The evidence is to be found in the ritual dimensions and re-enactments of the Gnau, Méhinaku, Dogon, Wogeo, Gimi and other narratives we have just examined.

Gnau men ritually bleed from their penises, but, when asked whether this is 'like' menstruation, reply: 'No, it is not like menstruation' (Lewis 1980; 2). However, in Méhinaku myth and ritual, there is 'evidence of the mutability of gender. During two ceremonies men shed "menstrual" blood by scarifying their bodies and piercing their ears . . . ' (Gregor 1977: 254). Dogon men circumcise their youths, and, in discussing menstrual blood, the ethnographer's informant Ogotemmêli 'compared this blood with that shed in circumcision' (Griaule 1965: 146).

When a Wogeo Islander (Papua New Guinea) has been dogged by bad hunting luck for a period, he soon begins to suspect the cause: it is an excess of sex. For this weakness there is only one remedy – in effect, a male-organised sex strike. It takes the form of an immediate gashing of the penis to make it bleed and thereby remove the 'impurities' arising from contact with women. 'The salutary effects of penile surgery', Hogbin (1970: 91) writes,

> are said to be immediately observable. The man's body loses its tiredness, his muscles harden, his step quickens, his eyes grow bright, and his skin and hair develop a luster. He therefore feels lighthearted, strong and confident. This belief provides a means whereby the success of all perilous or doubtful undertakings can be guaranteed. Warriors make sure to menstruate before setting out on a raid, traders before carving an overseas canoe or refurbishing its sails, hunters before weaving a new net for trapping pigs.

Here, female menstruation prior to a hunt – as specified in our model – appears to have been almost entirely supplanted by its male-controlled surrogate. The Wogeo hunter's 'technique of male menstruation' involves wading out to the sea with a crayfish or crab's claw, until the water is up to the man's knees:

> He stands there with legs apart and induces an erection . . . When ready he pushes back the foreskin and hacks at the glans, first on the left side,

> then on the right. Above all, he must not allow the blood to fall on his fingers or his legs. He waits till the cut has begun to dry and the sea is no longer pink and then walks ashore.

The man then wraps his penis in leaves, returns to the Men's House and stays there for two or three days, sexual intercourse being prohibited until the appearance of the new moon (Hogbin 1970: 88–9).

In discussing the Gimi 'Rule of Women' myth, Gillison (1980: 163) turns to the initiation ritual described in the myth:

> clan elders intern one or two of the men at a time inside a 'menstrual hut' or 'flute house' rapidly constructed in a clearing from palm fronds and wild banana leaves. Inside the hut, an older man applies a tourniquet made of peeled banana stems to the upper arm of the initiate and 'shoots' a protruding vein at the inside of the elbow with a miniature bow and obsidian-tipped arrow. As the blood spurts up . . . the men shout threats at the novice, telling him they will kill him if he reveals the secret they are about to reveal to him.

And what is this secret? It is that the initiate whose blood spurts up is symbolically menstruating. The 'secret' is that men are trying in this way to do artificially what women achieve in another way more easily. The novices, having sworn secrecy, are shown the most sacred flutes, which – although in a certain sense symbolic 'penises' – are penises *of a kind originally owned by women*. When they were owned by women, *they took the form of menstrual blood*. The entire ritual, as Gillison (1980: 164) explains, is 'predicated on the "secret" idea that menstrual blood betokens women's original ownership of the penis'.

The myths of the Gimi assert that menstrual potency *left in women's hands* is deadly and destructive, whilst in men's hands it becomes phallus-like and creative. The initiation rite in the forest is designed to transfer the menstrual power of women and attach it to men. 'The rite', as Gillison (1980: 164–5) puts it,

> implies an equivalence between the penis and the creativity of menstrual blood in this sense: *once menstrual blood is taken away from women (by men who menstruate) its phallic power is 'restored'*. Female attributes that are deadly in women become life-producing when they are detached from women and owned by men. Italics in original.

Let me now say what I think these myths really mean. They are expressions of the fact that in all the societies we have been examining, menstrual synchrony is not – or is no longer – the basic ritual organising principle of social, sexual and economic life. For reasons which have yet to be understood, men have learned to supplant and displace women in synchrony's

maintenance. This explains both the rites and the myths.

In short, the 'power' which men 'steal' – stated in the myths to be something to do with women 'banding together' – is that of menstrual synchrony and solidarity. Seen in this light, the myths we have examined lose their far-fetched appearance and turn out to make good sense. They reveal themselves, in fact, as uncannily accurate descriptions of sexual-political reality. Because menstrual blood is believed to be supernaturally dangerous, it can be coded as the source of death-dealing 'witchcraft'. Because the blood is 'wet' and resides in the womb it can be coded as 'fish' in a 'lagoon'. Because the cycle is rhythmical and because women's cycles may be synchronised, in part, through dancing, it can be coded as 'music' or 'dance'. Because it secludes women from their husbands – or, from another standpoint, excludes the husbands themselves – it can be coded as establishing Woman's secret 'Lodge', 'House' or 'Hut', which takes womankind to a world apart. Because blood is brightly coloured and because, while secluded, women are no longer playing the role of wives, it can be coded as a 'mask' or 'paint' which effaces one feminine image and replaces it by another. And because menstruation's cyclicity is or can be seen as lunar, it can be coded as woman's prior ownership of 'the moon'.

To these codings and equivalences we may add that if my hypothesis were correct, we would expect women's power to express itself as a form of solidarity, a 'banding together', associated not only with menstrual huts but also with hunting and the obtaining of male-secured meat. As we have seen, these conditions appear to be met.

My origins model would lead us to predict, finally, that *men should be unable to take over and monopolise ritual power of any kind without learning artificially to 'menstruate'*. This, in the instances we have examined, is the case. The myths explain how men establish the Men's House or ritual Lodge as their political answer to women's 'banding together' in their menstrual huts. As the men's counter-revolution is accomplished, male 'menstrual blood' becomes sacred and life-giving, whilst women's becomes polluting and feared, the first symbolising solidarity and power, the second, isolation and exclusion from power.

In a recently published Baruya (Papua New Guinea) matriarchy myth in the same vein as those just examined, the idea that *men steal the power from a woman's menstrual hut* is spelled out in so many words:

> ***The origin of the sacred flutes***
> In the days of the Wandjinia [dream-time], the women one day invented flutes. They played them and drew wonderful sounds from them. The men listened and did not know what made the sounds. One day, a man hid to spy on the women and discovered what was making these

> melodious sounds. He saw several women, one of whom raised a piece of bamboo to her mouth and drew the sounds that the men had heard. Then the woman hid the bamboo beneath one of her skirts that she had hung in her house, which was a menstrual hut. The women then left. The man drew near, slipped into the hut, searched around, found the flute, and raised it to his lips. He too brought forth the same sounds. Then he put it back and went to tell the other men what he had seen and done. When the woman returned, she took out her flute to play it, but this time the sounds which she drew were ugly. So she threw it away, suspecting that the men had touched it. Later, the man came back, found the flute and played it. Lovely sounds came forth, just like the ones that the woman had made. Since then the flutes have been used to help boys grow.

Note that the stolen flute *had been stored by its owner under her skirt in her menstrual hut*. Maurice Godelier (1986: 70–1), who recorded this story, comments:

> The message of this myth is clear. In the beginning, women were superior to men, but one of the men, violating the fundamental taboo against ever penetrating into the menstrual hut or touching objects soiled with menstrual blood, captured their power and brought it back to men, who now use it to turn little boys into men. But this power stolen from the women is the very one that their vagina contains, the one given to them by their menstrual blood. The old women know the rough outlines of this myth and relate it to young girls when they have their first period.

Such stories, then, describe how men – performing the role of strike-breakers – violate women's menstrual space and solidarity, in effect invading women's menstrual huts so as to secure the symbols of blood sanctity for themselves.

So men gain the 'flutes', 'bull-roarers' and 'lodges' – while women are left to menstruate in their little huts. And in this respect, it is not just that my hypothesis is confirmed within the realm of myth. At this point it is as if the characters in the mythical portraits were refusing to stay within the picture frame, insisting on stepping out into real life. Men as they establish and affirm their ritual solidarity set out deliberately and in often painful ways, firstly, to *isolate* menstruating women (both from one another and from their own male offspring) and, secondly, to *menstruate collectively* (whilst conjoining with their offspring) themselves. In this context it seems clear that there are at stake sexual and political issues so burning as to be uncontainable within the confines of Lévi-Strauss' 'myth-making mind'. These are not light, entertaining narratives through which 'the mind' idly 'communes with itself', free of engagement in the practical, political world (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 10). These are *political* myths which codify men's consciousness of and violent maintenance of their own sexual-political supremacy, a supremacy which can be sustained only through an endless process of vigilant suppres-

sion, exploitation and *ideological deception* of the female sex.

I asked earlier what could be the explanation for the extraordinary symbolic details of the extremely widespread set of male mythological fantasies concerning an 'original matriarchy'? My model of cultural origins suggests an answer. Men, it seems, have needed to menstruate in collective ritual performances because 'from the beginning' they have lacked an alternative language in which to express ritual power. In those times and places in which real women's synchrony (for whatever reason) broke down, its collapse seemed to threaten the collapse of culture itself. Since women could not synchronise – or proved unable to prevent men from destroying their synchrony – there were basically two alternatives. Either synchrony was lost, along – perhaps – with culture itself. Or culture-heroic men stepped in with their own artificial 'menstrual cycles' and synchronised those.

Menstrual synchrony is touched on or connoted in all of the traditional myths and associated belief systems I have examined here. Often, what is stressed is the idea of harmony between the menstrual cycle and other cycles of cyclical change and renewal. Two case studies – concerning the Fore of Papua New Guinea and the Barasana of north-west Amazonia – may help us to clarify this aspect of menstrual synchrony as a form of ritual power.

The Fore. Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea

The Fore case (Lindenbaum 1976: 56–8) illustrates a number of recurrent features: the link between menstrual cyclicity and wider rhythms of renewal, the threat which men may see in this, the 'political inversion' through which men usurp the symbolic potency of menstruation whilst turning real menstruation into a female curse – and finally, the link in male ideology between mastery over nature and men's dominance over women:

> In a sense, female menstrual cycles provide a physiological regularity, like the annual ripening of the pandanus fruit, which is an ecological given. . . . Yet the order in this case poses a threat, since it is a structure provided by women, not men, a phenomenon Fore and other New Guinea groups attempt to neutralize by male rituals of imitative menstruation . . . letting blood from penis and nose.

In this way, 'a political inversion is accomplished; menstruation is dirty and demeaning for women, strengthening and purifying for men'.

Women's own menstruation, given this political inversion, becomes a perpetual suppressed threat. But it is not the only threat: it becomes symbolic of a general threat felt to be posed by nature and the forces of the wild. 'There is a sense of a universe under constraint, of predatory forces purposefully brought under masculine control.' Only with difficulty is mastery of the animal world upheld: myths allow of the possibility that

animals might once have gained the upper hand.

> But the most precarious victory of all concerns the ownership of the sacred flutes, said to have been once in the hands of women. While the flute myths, stories of male trickery and violence, are myths about the subjugation of women, they are also embryonic statements in the history of the battle of men to control women's bodies. As one Fore man observed: 'Women's menstruation has always been present; men's bleeding, that came later'. (Lindenbaum 1976: 56–8)

The Barasana. North-west Amazonia.

The Barasana case illustrates many of the themes of the preceding discussion; it is particularly valuable for stressing the link between menstrual onset and the onset of the annual rains – a recurrent cross-cultural theme. It is also worth noting how the fairy-tale motif of 'skin-changing' is interwoven with other images of cyclical change.

The initiation-rite known as *He* House is a rite of artificial male collectively synchronised 'metaphorical menstruation' designed to help bring on the rains, which are a 'skin of the universe'. It occurs 'at a time of cosmic skin-change', the time of the onset of the annual rains (Hugh-Jones, C. 1979: 153). Rain, besides being a 'skin', is also the menstrual flow of the most important of all ancestral beings, Woman Shaman, from whom all contemporary shamanic powers derive (p. 156; see also S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 100).

During *He* House, the men apply to their bodies red paint, which 'is identified with menstrual blood' (Hugh-Jones, S. 1979: 184). No woman is allowed to touch this paint; if she does, she 'will immediately start to menstruate; the blood which flows is this paint' (Hugh-Jones, S. 1979: 76). The ritual involves men 'giving birth': in order to do this, they 'must first be opened up and made to menstruate' (p. 132). The boys who are to be newly 'born' must first be put back into a 'womb': they are said to be swallowed by an anaconda (p. 218) and returned to the condition of foetuses (p. 77). This condition is compared to that of 'crabs and other animals that have shed their old shells or skins' (p. 120). *He* House brings about rebirth; it is 'believed to bring about a change of skin' (p. 120), both of the initiates and of the universe, the process being 'associated with the moon' (Hugh-Jones, C. 1979: 156) and modelled on women's menstruation, which 'is an internal changing of skin' (Hugh-Jones, S. 1979: 183).

Women are excluded from the *He* rites, despite (or more accurately because of) being 'naturally' closer to the *He* world then men (Hugh-Jones, S. 1979: 251). The myths tell of how men seized the sacred *He* instruments from Woman Shaman, and punished her and her kind by causing female menstruation (Hugh-Jones, S. 1979: 266). The most coveted object which men tried to steal was a life-giving gourd. However, they were able to gain only an artificial replica of this. Woman Shaman kept and still keeps in her

possession the true gourd: it was her vagina, which alone confers real immortality. Men admit that their attempts to achieve rebirth and immortality through the artificial gourd and other paraphernalia are somehow 'false'. 'We were told directly', writes Christine Hugh-Jones (p. 154), 'that *He wi* [*He* house] is like women's menstruation, but that women really do menstruate while *He wi* is *bahi kesoase*, imitation'. Or, as the women say: 'The men make as if they too create children but it's like a lie' (Hugh-Jones, S. 1979: 222).

The magical powers of menstruation, then, derive in part from the blood's perceived connection with wider rhythms of social and cosmic renewal. It is this connectedness – 'harmony' and 'synchrony' are alternative terms – which men appear to envy and attempt to duplicate by artificial means.

Throughout the world, men's 'menstrual periods' were difficult to produce and often, as in much of Australia, involved operations causing intense pain (Gould 1969: 112). On the other hand, provided men were prepared to cut themselves in the requisite way, it would seem that the resultant blood flows had one distinct advantage over women's. Synchrony could be achieved without hormones, without pheromones or without need for the subtle effects of weak nocturnal light. Men could make the blood flow by a mere act of will – simply by cutting themselves at the appropriate times.

All the myths we have been examining make sense in this light. The ideological function of the myth of matriarchy is certainly, as Bamberger (1974) says, to justify 'men's rule'. But it does this by legitimising the otherwise inexplicable and certainly unnatural fact that today men 'menstruate' in order to exert ritual power. The widespread recurrence of seemingly conspiratorial secret male initiation rites testifies to this process. All such rites involve male self-mutilation and/or bleeding as an 'answer' to women's more natural blood-making and reproductive powers. All such rites involve men 'giving birth' to their own kind on the grounds that women cannot do it in accordance with the proper rhythms or in the ritually correct way. The myth of matriarchy in its countless versions legitimises this male sexual-political counter-revolution in pseudo-historical terms, constantly reiterating, as Bamberger (1974: 280) puts it, that 'women did not know how to handle power when they had it'. Women did not know how to handle menstrual potency when they had it, and so men have had to appropriate it for themselves.

Ochre in Prehistory

Radio-carbon dating of human blood discovered in red pigments drawn on ice age rock surfaces in Australia – particularly in Laurie Creek in the Wingate Mountains, Northern Territory (see references in Bahn 1990) – has revealed many of these paintings to be among the world's earliest – some of

them more than 20,000 years old. Where traces of this kind exist, archaeology may help add to our understanding of the mythological patterns we have examined and the historical processes which gave rise to them.

Ochre is an ill-defined term referring to various natural rocks and clays, most of them containing iron and usually of reddish colour but varying from pale yellow to deep orange or brown. Indications of ochre's use as a pigment have been found at archaeological sites dating back – according to some claims – to as early as 250,000 years ago. Although it was once argued that *Homo erectus* at still earlier dates regularly used ochre pigments, most of these claims are now discounted (Butzer 1980). Some Neanderthal groups may have begun to use ochre in burials and for ritual purposes, but there is good evidence for this only from about 70,000 years ago.

It is not until the emergence of the Upper Palaeolithic that crayons, painted bones, shells and other ochred objects become abundant, although it appears that even as recently as 30,000 to 35,000 years ago many communities may not have been ochre users. One writer has pointed out that most prehistoric burials are in fact without ochre (Wreschner 1980: 632). However, this does not mean that such communities used no pigments. Many of the colorants used in the past – whether for treating skins, for body-painting or for other purposes – would have been biodegradable substances such as berry juices and extracts of roots, bark, leaves and so on. We tend to concentrate on 'ochre' simply because it has survived in the archaeological record.

It was noted in Chapter 9 that when modern humans first spread across Europe between 40,000 and 32,000 years ago, it was on the basis of a tradition known as the Aurignacian. It is worth quoting the French prehistorian André Leroi-Gourhan (1968: 40) as he comments on one striking characteristic of this earliest modern pan-European tradition:

> The use of ocher is particularly intensive: it is not unusual to find a layer of the cave floor impregnated with a purplish red to a depth of eight inches. The size of these ocher deposits raises a problem not yet solved. The colouring is so intense that practically all the loose ground seems to consist of ocher. One can imagine that with it the Aurignacians regularly painted their bodies red, dyed their animal skins, coated their weapons, and sprinkled the ground of their dwellings, and that a paste of ocher was used for decorative purposes in every other phase of their domestic life. We must assume no less, if we are to account for the veritable mines of ocher on which some of them lived. . . .

Later in the Upper Palaeolithic, graves were richly ochred and whole caves painted red – suggesting, as one writer has put it, 'the magic making of life deep in the earth, as though in the menstruous womb of a woman' (La Barre 1972: 395).

Leroi-Gourhan, in the passage on ochre use just quoted, is referring only

to the Aurignacian peoples of Western Europe and particularly France. But in European Russia and in Siberia, comparable patterns are found. Quantities of ochre have been recorded at many sites; for example, about 10 kg was found in a dwelling made of mammoth-bones at Mezin in the Ukraine. It was also used in quantity in many burials. Paint made from mixing ochre with other materials was widely used. Mammoth-bones from Mezin were painted with red-ochred lines and zigzags; at Kapova Cave, similar paint was used to outline representations of animals. Colouring materials, usually ochre, may also have been used in dressing skins, as is suggested by ochre traces on bone burnishers. Richard Klein (1969: 226) in a survey of Soviet archaelogists' work writes of the 'extraordinarily large amount of red ochre found in many of the Kostenki-Borshevo sites'; these are the sites discussed earlier (see pp. 322–4), many of which indicate collective living in large dwellings, with female figurines buried in pits in the floor.

Views on the significance of ochre are basically of two kinds. First, there are the 'symbolic' interpretations, typically seeing ochre as meaning 'ritual potency', 'danger' or 'life blood', its use in burials being interpreted as an attempt to establish the grave's sanctity, to deny the finality of death or to ensure resurrection. Secondly, there are those sceptics who question all such speculations and who believe that ochre may have had some much more prosaic, utilitarian significance, any ritual or symbolic connotations being secondary.

A representative of the first school of thought is Ernst Wreschner, a palaeoanthropologist at the University of Haifa who has made a special study of the whole subject. Wreschner (1980) freely uses ethnographic analogies in his speculations on the prehistoric significance of ochre.

The symbolic systems of Upper Palaeolithic hunters, Wreschner writes (1980: 632), 'seem to revolve around fertility and procreation, death-life, and the cycle of the seasons'. In recent nonliterate societies, he continues, 'red is closely connected with reproduction, with "mothers", with blood, and with rituals and symbolism related to life and death'. In Central African Ndembu rites of the river source, according to Wreschner, red clay represents the blood of the 'mother' (1980: 633, citing Turner 1969: 53–69). The relationship between ochre, blood and 'mothers', continues Wreschner, 'is signified by the Greek *haema/haima* (as in haematite), which means "blood"', and is related to the basic Indo-European root MA which means 'mother'. Citing the Africanist Victor Turner (1967: 172), Wreschner observes that 'the womb is in many cultures equated with the tomb and both associated with the earth, the source of fruits. It is believed that ores grow inside the earth like an embryo in the womb.'

Finally, Wreschner (1980: 633) mentions prehistoric burials on the island of Malta – burials in which the corpses were not only heavily ochred but provided with bowls of additional ochre set alongside them. 'The placing of a

bowl of ochre in the grave', comments Wreschner,

> recalls the Maori legend of the woman who went to the netherworld and found there a bowl of red ochre; she ate the ochre, became strong again, and was restored to life.

In a commentary on Wreschner's 1980 article, Bolton (1980: 634) notes the salience of red as a colour-term in folk-tales from all over the world, and comments that cross-culturally, 'red connotes potency more than any other colour does'. Bolton suggests that red colouring was used by prehistoric peoples in their mortuary rituals in order to express 'defiance of death'.

However, there is another view. Most prehistorians believe that Middle and Upper Palaeolithic peoples often ochred bones, corpses and also living bodies, but the cave-art specialist Paul Bahn (Bahn and Vertut 1988: 69–70) argues that even if we accept this consensus, the practice may have been functional and utilitarian rather than ritual/symbolic. Ochre, notes Bahn, can be used in cauterising and cleaning injuries, in warding off the effects of cold and rain, and as a protection against mosquitoes, flies and other disease-carriers. Moreover, ochre is useful in the treatment of animal skins because it preserves organic tissues, protecting them from putrefaction and from vermin such as maggots. 'It is probably this kind of function', he writes of the European Upper Palaeolithic data, 'which explains the impregnated soil in some habitation sites and the traces of red mineral on many stone tools such as scrapers'. Similarly, he continues (citing Audouin and Plisson 1982), 'red pigment may have been applied to corpses not so much out of pious beliefs about life-blood, as is commonly assumed . . . but rather to neutralise odours and help to preserve the body'.

The many theories resting on a utilitarian function for ochre use may seem healthily sceptical and sober, but ultimately they fail to satisfy our curiosity. Such narrowly functionalist-utilitarian arguments would seem to rob early humans of ritual or aesthetic sensibilities. Those who argue along such lines make evidence for ochre use seem unconnected with the origins of art, ritualism, personal adornment or symbolic culture more generally. Ochre, it is said, was used by this group to ward off mosquitoes, or by that one to keep away the maggots. This whole approach is surely undermined by the evidence that as ochre use intensifies, it is found in archaeological deposits which also testify to a sudden flowering of interest in pierced shells, teeth and other objects clearly intended as personal adornments (White 1989a, 1989b; Wreschner 1980: 632; Masset 1980: 639).

Beyond this, it seems odd that a variety of chemically different clays sharing little more than the fact that they are reddish-coloured (Butzer 1980) should turn out to be equally good at repelling mosquitoes, neutralising odours or cauterising wounds. What is it about redness which has such

consistent chemical effects?

Finally, the utilitarian, anti-symbolic approach shares with its symbolic counterpart a basic weakness. Each camp's arguments seem ultimately aimless and anecdotal, failing to engage effectively with any wider context of evolutionary or palaeoanthropological theory. In contrast to the study of tools, discussions concerning the significance of ochre have unfortunately remained a backwater of palaeoanthropological debate.

The model of origins presented in this book has a ready-made theoretical place for ochre. This is because it has a place for the symbolism of blood. The term 'ochre' is in fact almost meaningless, since it has been used by archaeologists to describe a wide variety of ferruginised shales or sandstones, haematitic or limonic concretions and pastes made from sesquioxide-rich clayey or sandy soils (Butzer 1980). Just about the only thing held in common by these variegated soils, clays, pastes, sands and rocks is the fact that they are orange, reddish or brown in colour – or can be made so by heating them to a high enough temperature. It is the colour category, then, which seems significant – not the precise chemical composition, which may vary from place to place.

Our model of cultural origins would lead us to expect a certain extremely ancient cultural attitude towards redness. Early kinship coalitions should have valued blood as a means of signifying their shared identity and power, while menstrual blood in particular should have signified a state of ritual sanctity or inviolability ('protection from evil spirits'). Women who were covered in blood should have regarded themselves as shielded from sexual violation or other harm by the symbolic effects (conceptualised, we might suppose, as 'the magic') of this blood.

From this, we might go on to predict that evolving humans in diverse circumstances would have experimented with symbolic elaborations on the theme. On occasion, coalitions may have had no menstrual blood, or they may have had to make a small amount go a long way. After all, as earlier noted, women may have been pregnant or nursing for much of the time, and for this and other reasons menstruation may, on a physiological level, have been quite a rare event. Studies have shown that menstrual flows can be sparse and infrequent in contemporary hunter-gatherer and other non-western cultures, particularly where nutrition is poor (Harrell 1981). The implication is that even though the evolving human female may have been losing more blood than any primate female had done before, it was still not always enough to serve the sex strike's symbolic purposes.

Of course, women could have insisted that even the most microscopic speck of blood could still pollute a man who violated their space, or that even a single menstruant amidst a hundred women sufficed to pollute/protect them all. Women might well have discovered the value of exaggerating such

things almost indefinitely – until it was established that blood could pollute a man 'magically' even when it was totally invisible to anyone. The mere fact that the moon was dark or in the culturally 'correct' phase for menstrual bleeding (Lamp 1988; Buckley 1988) could also have been taken as sufficient. Certainly, there is enough ethnographic evidence for this kind of thing – evidence to suggest that by magnifying the imagined powers of eclipses or the supernatural dangers of menstrual blood, cultures have allowed miniscule or even non-existent quantities of the real substance to serve virtually unlimited ritual and symbolic purposes. Indeed, this is a useful aspect of the model: it helps to explain why eclipses should be so greatly feared (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 298) and why menstrual blood should be regarded in cultural traditions as so 'contagious' in its magical effects (Briffault 1927, 2; Delaney *et al.* 1977; Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). The cultural construct of 'contagiousness' is simply a means of making meagre quantities of menstrual blood go a very long way.

But despite this, it is reasonable to suppose that on many occasions, humans would have experienced the need to make visible the source of the 'magic'. The strike itself may have seemed in this context somewhat demanding of blood. If my hypothesis were correct, we might expect cultures to have evolved artifices serving to amplify the visual impact of women's blood. Real menstrual blood dries, flakes and turns almost black rather than red within a few hours. If women wanted to declare themselves defiantly 'powerful' for longer and longer periods, and wanted to express this in some visually unmistakable way, they may well have felt the need to augment their blood with something which stayed red for longer and did not quickly flake. Could red juices, ochre, or mixtures of ochre with blood and/or animal fat, have fulfilled such a function? And – assuming that this is accepted as a theoretical possibility – is there any way of testing this idea?

As anatomically modern humans moved into Western, Central and Eastern Europe, we witness 'a rapid spread of ochre customs' (Wreschner 1980: 632). Over a hundred ochre-bearing sites have been excavated, including twenty-five ochre burials, spanning the whole Upper Palaeolithic period (Wreschner 1980: 632). As the first modern humans spread across the globe, Australia was reached remarkably early, and it is intriguing to discover that here, too – as was later to happen when the first humans penetrated into North America (Wreschner 1980: 633) – the very first immigrant waves apparently shared traditions in which ochre was of central importance.

The Australian evidence is particularly interesting. In 1968, the geomorphologist Jim Bowler was attempting to establish the pattern of climatic change over the last 100,000 years in western New South Wales when he uncovered some burnt human bones, hearths and tools dated to about 26,000 years ago. There was also a quantity of ochre in pellets, which must

have been brought from at least 10 km away. The context was a ritual cremation of a woman. In 1974, Bowler discovered a skeleton of a tall man who had been laid in a shallow grave on his side with his hands clasped. 'The bones and surrounding sand were stained pink; the pink colour, derived from ochre powder that had been scattered over the corpse, clearly defined the size and shape of the grave' (Flood 1983: 46). This burial took place about 30,000 years ago. Both these finds of ochre were made close to the edge of what used to be a large lake – Lake Mungo.

In fact, at Mungo red pigment was in use still earlier, for lumps of ochre and stone artefacts were found deep below the ashes of a fire lit 32,000 years ago. Similar lumps of pigment, some showing signs of use, have been found in Pleistocene levels in other sites – such as Kenniff Cave in Queensland, Cloggs Cave in Victoria, Miriwun in Western Australia and several rock shelters in Arnhem land. Ochre 'pencils' with traces of wear have been found in layers in Arnhem Land, in northern Australia, dating to 18,000 and 19,000 years ago, and perhaps even 30,000 (Bahn in Bahn and Vertut 1988: 29, citing Chaloupka 1984; Murray and Chaloupka 1983–4).

What makes this Australian evidence particularly interesting is not only its extreme antiquity. It is the fact that contemporary Aboriginal attitudes to ochre can assist us in interpreting these archaeological finds.

We have no way of knowing what red ochre meant to the prehistoric Australian Aborigines who used it. Contemporary Aborigines associate it with blood. Whilst this may not be a universal association, it is extremely common; it is also not unusual for the association to be *specifically with that most ritually potent of all categories of blood – menstrual blood.*

Sometimes, as we will now see, myths which explain the origin of much-valued ochre deposits tell of matriarchal ancestral power, all-female forms of solidarity – and explicit menstrual synchrony. Groups of mythological women are said to have danced or practised ceremonies together, synchronised their periods as a result – and from their blood produced the ochre which is now mined for use in ceremonies.

Blood, Ochre and Ritual Power in Aboriginal Australia

'The deposits of red ochre which are found in various parts of the country', write Spencer and Gillen (1899: 463–4) in their classic account of Aboriginal Central Australia,

> are associated with women's blood. Near the Stuart's Hole, on the Finke River, there is a red ochre pit which has evidently been used for a long time; and tradition says that in the Alcheringa two kangaroo women came from Ilpilla, and at this spot caused blood to flow from the vulva in large quantities, and so formed the deposit of red ochre. Travelling away

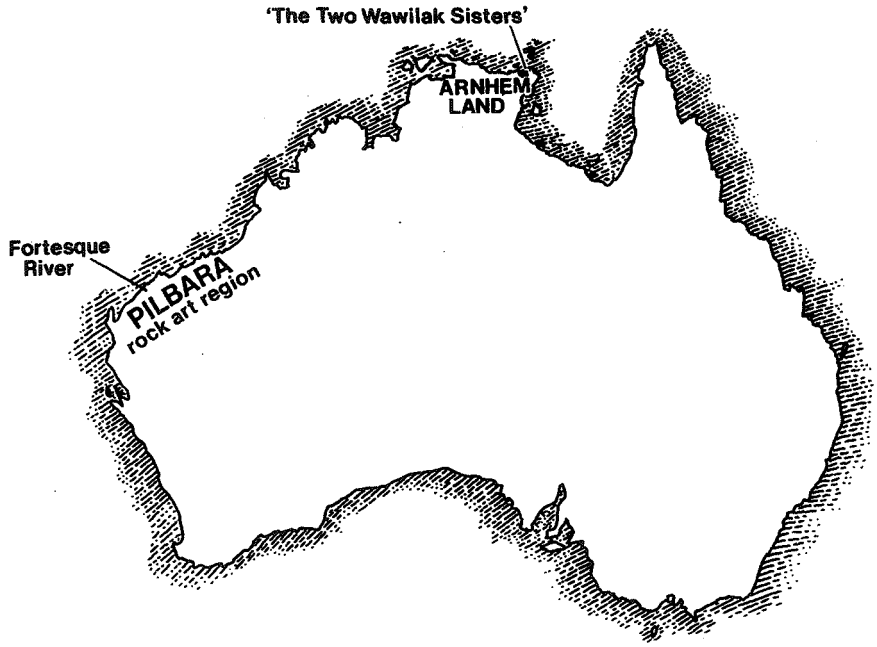

Figure 18 Map of Australia. Rock-engravings from the Pilbara region (see Figs 19, 21) often depict pairs of dancing women reminiscent of the heroines of the Wawilak myth recorded half a continent away. Little is known of the engravings' meanings, but at Pirina, some fifty miles upstream along the Fortesque River, rock-art specialist Bruce Wright (1968: 25) followed his Aboriginal guides as they looked among rocks in the flowing water, 'searching for certain eroded marks which they had been told had ritual significance'. They later showed Wright 'a circular mark, said to represent the moon, and a slightly raised natural platform, said to have been worn smooth by the dancing feet of the girls participating in the ceremonies'.

> westward they did the same thing in other places.

In much the same way, again in Central Australia,

> it is related of the dancing Unthippa women that, at a place called Wankima, in the eastern part of the Arunta district, they were so exhausted with dancing that their organs fell out, and gave rise to the large deposits of red ochre found there. (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 463–4)

Myths and rock-art images from other parts of Australia repeat such motifs with some insistence. In the Pilbara region of Western Australia, a number of rock-engravings appear to show women who are dancing together, usually in pairs, simultaneously shedding what looks like menstrual blood and, in some instances, becoming conjoined or encircled by the consequent flows (figures 18, 19, 21). We will examine a well-known Arnhem Land myth in a similar vein – the Yolngu people's story of the synchronously menstruating Two Wawilak Sisters – in Chapter 13.

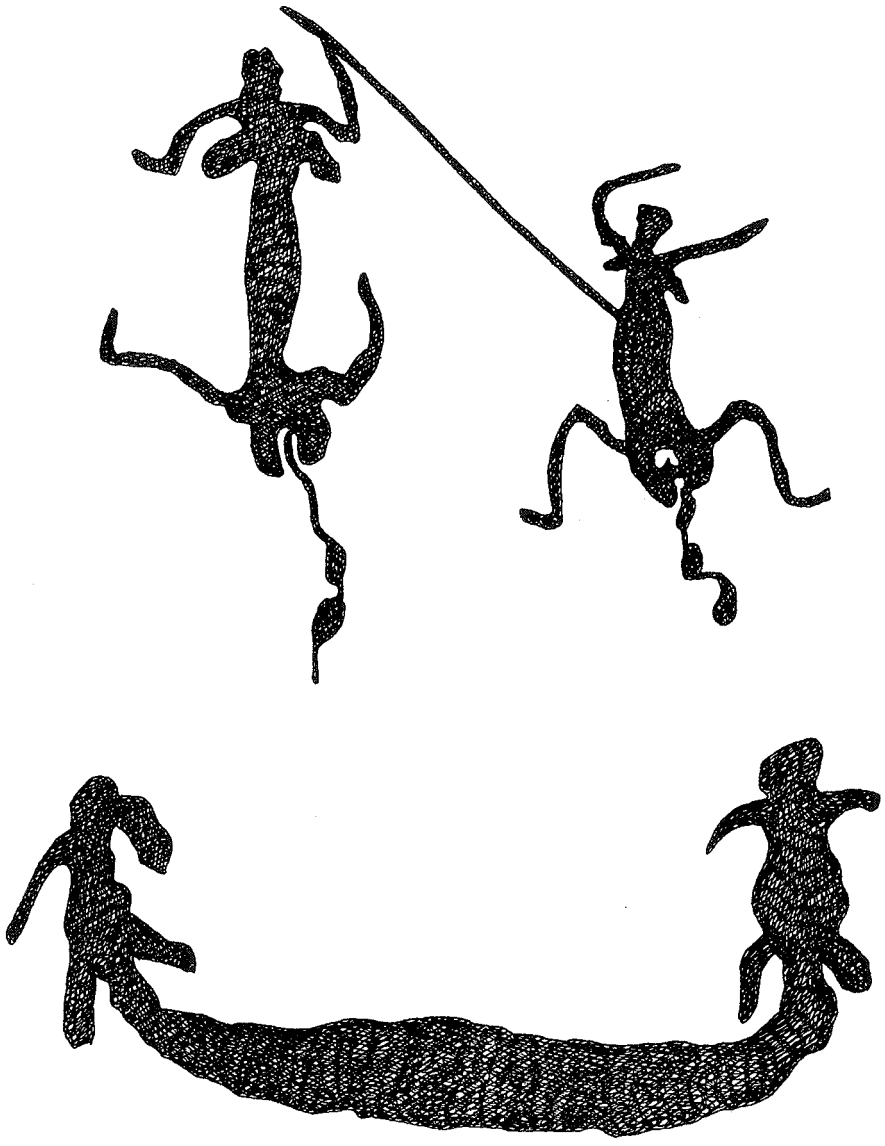

Figure 19 Pilbara rock-engravings. Age uncertain but probably recent. *Top*: Upper Yule River. Figures dancing, with vaginal flows. *Bottom*: Cape Lambert. One of many Pilbara scenes of figures linked by genital streams. Here, both figures may be female and the stream conjoining them a shared menstrual flow (redrawn after Wright 1968: Figs 112, 845).

There are further echoes of such themes in myths and songs concerning the awesomely powerful ancestral *alknarintja* women of Central Australia:

They are menstruating.
Their flanks are wet with blood.
They talk to each other.
They make a bull-roarer. . . .
They are menstruating.
The blood is perpetually flowing. (Róheim 1974: 138–9)

In any Aranda myth, an *alknarintja* may be recognised by the fact that she is constantly decorating herself with red ochre, is associated with water and is 'frequently represented as menstruating copiously' (Róheim 1974: 150). Such women are 'like men' in that they possess bull-roarers and other symbols of primordial, culture-creating power – power which is nowadays reserved for men. They also have solidarity – evoked in one song through the image of a clump of bushes 'so thick and so pressed against each other that they cannot move separately' (Róheim 1974: 144).

The central Australian *alknarintja* women, while not characterised as on 'sex strike', are known as 'women who refuse men'. The name *alknarintja* means, in fact, 'eyes-turn-away'. From another song come these lines:

They say, 'I won't go with you'.
'I will remain an *alknarintja*'.
They whirl their bull-roarers.
They stay where they are. They sit very still.
The man wants them to say, 'I will go with you'.
But they remain where they are. (Róheim 1974: 141–2)

Interestingly, an informant told Róheim (1974: 122–3) that 'all women become *alknarintja* when they are very small, i.e. they begin with an attitude of avoiding men'; it is only in later life that the 'resistance' of young women is broken and they lose their 'original' power.

Arnhem Land: Ochre, Blood and Dance

In north-east Arnhem Land, among the Yolngu (formerly known as the Murngin), menstrual synchrony is an acknowledged ritually potent possibility. Women tend to seclude themselves in groups, and among their pastimes on such occasions is the making of string-figures or 'cats' cradles' (as they are termed in English). Men are not supposed to see these. At Yirrkalla, such string-figures depict many things – particularly game animals, but also female reproductive events such as 'birth of a baby'. One conventional subject for a string-figure is 'menstrual blood of three women' (figure 20). Ethnographic reports do not explicitly document menstrual synchrony, but 'menstrual blood of three women' is surely not a conventional topic which

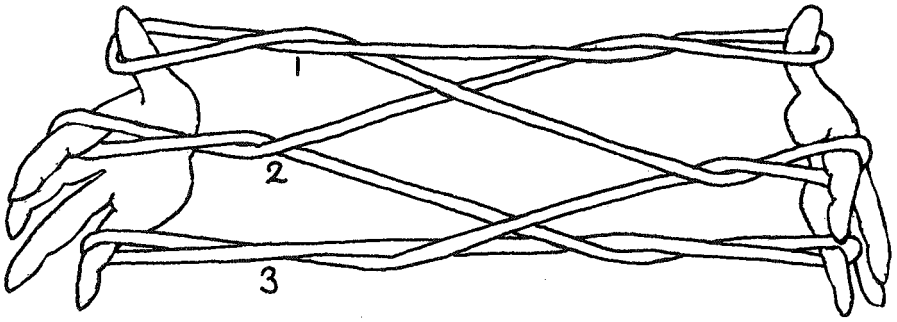

Figure 20 Yolngu (north-east Arnhem Land) women's string-figure: 'Menstrual blood of three women' (redrawn after McCarthy 1960: 466). An associated myth states that string-figures were invented by Two Sisters who in a ritual act 'sat down, looking at each other, with their feet out and legs apart, and both menstruated'. They then put string loops made of one another's menstrual blood around their necks. Note how this concept of genitally derived, all-encircling 'loops' finds apparent echoes in the Pilbara images shown in Figures 19 and 21.

would occur to women unless they were familiar with this potentiality (McCarthy 1960: 466).

Numerous myths from the region confirm the apparent ordinariness of synchrony, including a story which explains the 'origin of string-figures' themselves. According to this myth, Two Sisters invented string when they went on a long journey. Towards the end of this, they 'sat down, looking at each other, with their feet out and legs apart, and both menstruated'. The story identifies 'string' as inseparable from these sisters' menstrual flows. Having sat down and bled together, the women continued with their ritual: 'Each one made a loop of the other one's menstrual blood, after which they put the string loops around their necks.' This led to their being 'swallowed by a Snake' (McCarthy 1960: 426). Certain of Wright's (1968) rock-engravings – despite coming from a very different part of Australia – suggest women's or kinship-groups' encirclement by 'loops' of menstrual blood (figure 21).

Other myths from northern Australia feature various water-loving 'daughters of the Rainbow' or 'daughters of the Rainbow-Snake', such as the 'Mungamunga' girls. In one song from the Na:ra, a man called Banangala 'comes over and wants to copulate with the Mungamunga, but they are menstruating. They each say to him, "I've got blood: you wait for a while" ' (Berndt 1951: 164). Another song from the same area concerns two men who encounter a group of Mungamunga by a lagoon: 'No sooner do they seize a Mungamunga and put her on the ground, ready for coitus, than she slides away, jumps up and runs down to the lagoon, and dives into its water; then she emerges and joins the rest' (Berndt 1951: 174). These women, then, have two ways of avoiding sex with a man: menstruating, or 'diving into the water'.

Figure 21 Pilbara rock-art (Upper Yule River). *Upper left*: dancing, genitally linked females (Wright 1968: Fig. 105). *Right*: similar scene; linking streams absent, possibly replaced by overarching shared ritual ornament (rainbow?) and nearby snake (Wright 1968: Fig. 383). *Lower left*: three females, two males, all genitally connected (Wright 1968: Fig. 11). If this echoes previous themes, these figures are linked not maritally but as blood kin, the streams denoting blood potency as a source of within-group oneness and ritual status. *Lower right*: female encircled by her own flow (Wright 1968: Fig. 85; all figures redrawn).

All over northern Australia, when mythological women in groups 'dive into the water' to escape a man, it is clear that menstrual solidarity is the logic at the basis of the motif. The Alawa Aborigines of western-central Arnhem Land say that on entering the water, the Mungamunga girls become merged in the corporate identity of their 'Mother', the 'Kadjari'. They only recover their separate identities once again when this Mother figure emerges from the water and 'stands on the dry land' (Berndt 1951: 189–90).

Since 'entering the water' or menstruating is a kind of 'death' to marital life, it can be used symbolically to stand for other kinds of death. This is a positive, immensely hopeful symbolic equation, since menstrual bleeding leading to 'death' is for a woman not permanent. It is followed quickly by her emergence from seclusion – a kind of 'resurrection'.

Mortuary ritual among the Yolngu involves painting the corpse with red ochre. Howard Morphy (1977: 318) explains the symbolism of this: 'the red ochre painted on the body during mortuary ceremonies is said to be (or to signify) the menstrual blood of female clan ancestors'. As if to accentuate this symbolism, women during the period of mourning cut their heads so as to bleed. The resulting blood – like the ochre on the body itself – is symbolic of menstrual blood (Morphy 1977: 318).

This and other evidence shows how mortuary ritualism among the Yolngu is assimilated to menstruation and a 'return to the womb'. The flowing of 'menstrual' blood and the red-painting of the corpse both help to make this point. We can appreciate how all this helps to soften the impact of death. Menstrual bleeding is known to be only a 'temporary death' – like that of the moon each month. Similarly, if the grave is 'blood-filled' – if one is inside a womb rather than just dead and in the ground – birth or 'rebirth' is the inevitable next stage.

Recalling my survey of ochre use in ice age burials, it seems significant that so many Aboriginal ceremonies are 'birth' or 'rebirth' rituals which can also be used to bury the dead. Time in the Aboriginal view is cyclical and therefore ultimately reversible; birth and death are seen in ritual terms as cyclical transformations and inversions of one another. Each presupposes the other, and therefore the same rites apply. As Morphy (1984: 31) puts it, most Aboriginal rituals 'concern both initiation and fertility, the living, and the dead, and contain themes and events which cut across myth, moiety and context'.

In one Arnhem Land group, the Gunwinggu, the *lorgun* is a combined circumcision and mortuary ritual; it 'is held when the moon is waning', its basic myth telling of how the Moon decided to die and come alive again, whereas a certain Pigeon-man foolishly ignored the Moon, deciding to die and stay dead – thereby for the first time introducing to humanity the calamity of non-lunar (i.e. non-reversible) death (Berndt and Berndt 1970: 133). Versions of this myth are known all over Australia (Knight 1985), as

indeed over much of Africa and the world. Their sad message to humanity is that if only we had known how to listen properly to the Moon, we might have retained the secret of its immortality to this very day.

I have cited some evidence linking Aborigines' traditional use of ochre with menstrual symbolism. Admittedly, not all female ancestral beings in Aboriginal mythology are depicted as synchronously menstruating, not all red body-paint is symbolic menstrual blood, and not every traditionally used ochre deposit in Australia is linked in myths explicitly with such blood. Yet such themes are common, and the fact that ochre *can* be conceptualised in this way has obvious significance for the argument of this book. The theory that ochre is in the first instance a substitute for human blood has – over all other theories – the additional advantage of simplicity. The model of cultural origins presented here does not require us to assume some additional factor in order to explain why early Australians were using blood-like substances to cover corpses or as body-paint. Given menstrual synchrony, and given women's need to mark themselves strongly with blood – perhaps often having to make a little blood go a long way – the logical principle behind the use of ochre in body-painting is already accounted for.