The term ‘taboo’ is widely used in many European languages, with the meaning of ‘prohibition’ or ‘ban’. This generalized use is accompanied by the tendency to consider the phenomenon it represents as both widespread and universal, with the assumption that a prohibition in one culture is likely to be similarly regarded in another. However, the casual use of the term taboo in modern languages presents an obstacle to understanding cultural phenomena that, when properly contextualized, may be otherwise explained. This observation provided the impetus for an inquiry into the study of taboo in religion and society, with a focus on the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The current paper surveys the views of some of the more influential scholars on the topic.

Keywords: cultural evolutionism, W. Robertson Smith, J.G. Frazer, S. Reinach, F. B. Steiner.

The author of this paper presented an early version of his study on ancient Egyptian perspective on the menstrual taboo at the 2002 Madrid conference, El Universo Femenino. Vida, cultura y pensamiento, organized by Covadonga Sevilla. It gives me great pleasure to offer the current work as a tribute to the memory of Cova with whom I shared a love of Egyptology and a passion for opera.

The term ‘taboo’ is widely used in many European languages, with the meaning of ‘prohibition’ or ‘ban’. This generalized use is accompanied by the tendency to accept the phenomenon it represents as both widespread and universal, with the assumption that a prohibition in one culture is likely to be similarly regarded in another. The problem with this view is illustrated by this author’s study of the supposed menstrual taboo in ancient Egypt. Countering a common belief in a universal connection between menstrual taboo and society, my suggestion that there was no general ‘taboo’ on menstruation in Ancient Egypt was met with scepticism. While it is possible, of course, that my arguments were...

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† Later published as Frandsen 2007.