

# Malay customs in relation to childbirth

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THE ART AND SCIENCE of obstetrics have been practiced in this country for decades. It is surprising that no effort has been made to look into the customs and traditions of the local population. This is typical of the British colonial attitude. An art developed in and tailored to the needs of the British population has been infused into our population without regard for the differences in religion, customs and traditions which obviously exist. On the other hand, Malaysian obstetricians have not given the matter much thought either — certainly there has been no report on the subject.

This paper deals with customs and practices of the Malays in relation to childbirth. There are 3 distinct phases, viz, pregnancy, labour and puerperium, including the newborn.

## **Material**

As mentioned, there is a great scarcity of reference work on the subject. The few Malay customs reference books available carry very brief mention of this aspect of Malay customs.

The sources of material for this paper are:—

1. Malay patients who have been under my care.
2. Malay doctors who have so kindly read my manuscripts and given advice and comments.

One point worth noting is that these practices differ from state to state and even from district to district within the same state. Many of the practices are no longer followed and others are practised by the kampong Malays only. However, even in urban practice, either in a hospital or in a private nursing home, one still comes across these practices occasionally. When questioned, many of these patients are either too shy or not very conversant with the practices to go into detailed discussion. Some even admit that they are ignorant of the significance of the practices but carry out the requirements as instructed by their elders.

On the other hand, many of the older Malay midwives are able to give rather concise accounts

of the customs. The setback is that, to the uninitiated like myself, facts become very mixed up and controversial. Each midwife is equally adamant that hers is the true version. The point is that the story of the customs and practices depends entirely on which area the narrator has been brought up in.

The Malaysian doctors, many of whom are too ingrained in Western education and training, are not very conversant with Malay customs. The other reason may be that almost all from whom I have sought information are male doctors and are not conversant with customs relating to childbirth.

## Results

### I Customs related to the pregnant woman

#### Beliefs affecting the pregnancy

1. Bathing in the evening may cause hydramnios.
2. Ill-treatment of a bird or fish the month before conception may lead to congenital defects.
3. If the woman is "bitten" by a crab, the infant may be born with hare-lips.
4. "Kenan": this infers that if the pregnant woman sustains any fright, the infant runs the risk of being born with certain abnormalities.
5. Throughout pregnancy, the woman defends herself against attacks by evil spirits. One of these is the "langsayar" — believed to be the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth. It consists of a head and entrails only.
6. The following ceremony is performed on all primiparous women at the 7th month of pregnancy. The aim is to clear all evil spirits so that the woman will have a normal delivery.

"Melintang Perut" or "Mandi Tian", in which the midwife examines the abdomen of the pregnant woman and then places 7 pieces of coloured cloth on the floor. The woman then lies on these. The midwife waves the edges of these pieces of cloth and after chanting some prayer removes the pieces of cloth. A few days later, the woman is bathed by the midwife. The latter then sprinkles rice powder mixed with water (tepong tawar), yellow rice (beras kunyit) and burns incense over the pregnant woman.

#### Beliefs affecting labour

1. Prolonged and difficult labours may result from:
  - (i) Sitting on the doorstep.
  - (ii) Crossing over a line or a pole.
  - (iii) Sleeping in the afternoon.

2. Non-separation and retention of placenta may result from:

- (i) Sitting on the ground, crossing a line or a pole.
- (ii) Eating creeping vegetables, e.g. pumpkin.
- (iii) Not cleaning a starch-container thoroughly after starching clothes.

3. Normal separation of placenta is encouraged by eating lady's fingers.

4. At the onset of labour pain, a "bomoh" is called to the house to choose a place for the delivery. He is given a parang or an axe. This is thrown on the floor at random; wherever the instrument lands on is the spot chosen for delivery. A hole is dug beneath the house directly under where the instrument fell. Thorny leaves, such as pineapple leaves and mengkuang leaves, are put around the hole. The tail of a rayfish, spider's web, an old fishing net and a kind of bitter grass are thrown into this hole. The belief is that this will guard the mother against evil spirits during childbirth. Sometimes a coconut with holes in it is hung from the floor for the same purpose.

All unlocked cupboards and drawers are opened so that the woman can deliver normally. If the delivery tends to be delayed, the husband is summoned. He then steps over his labouring wife once. This is supposed to hasten the labour.

The placenta is usually buried without any ceremony. However, it is very important that the placenta must be buried. Should there be a still-born, this is also buried.

### II Beliefs affecting the Puerperium

After delivery, the mother must remain indoors for 44 days. In the old days, she used to stay and sleep by the fireplace. She puts on old clothing and does not bother about her appearance so as to be not too attractive to her husband during this period. She does her hair into a tight bun so as to "support the uterus", and to delay involution. It is encouraged that involution should be delayed. Early involution is believed to lead to prolapse of the uterus.

Her food consists of a plate of rice with salt and pepper only. A second serving of food is not allowed as this may cause early involution of the uterus. Vegetables and fruits should not be eaten as they are cooling and may cause weakness. Water is restricted because if too much is taken, it may cause distension and watery discharge. Fresh milk and fruits, if eaten, may result in haemorrhage.

Early bowel motion leads to frequent pregnancies. Hence, purgatives are not given in the

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puerperium. In the puerperium, the mother usually wears an iron nail in her hair. Alternatively she carries with her a knife, a pair of scissors or a small penknife. It is believed that birth spirits fly away at the sight of iron and sharp objects.

After a bath, the "tungku" (a stone pounder), a piece of stone or iron bar, is heated and wrapped with a certain kind of leaves and cloth. This is then applied to the abdomen to reduce the "swollen nerves" which follows delivery. It also ensures good contraction of the uterus. Thereafter a tight abdominal binder is applied to help the abdomen regain its shape.

For 3 days after delivery, the midwife massages the mother to encourage the flow of milk and to "bring the nerves back into position". The mother is then given a bath with hot water containing all kinds of leaves.

On the 44th day, the midwife performs the ceremony of disposal of the fireplace. She also wishes the mother well. The mother then puts on new clothes and is allowed to join the family and friends for a feast. The puerperium is then officially over and this is referred to as the "Lepas Pantang".

### III Beliefs with regards the newborn

1. Neonatal thrush is believed to be the result of a woman wearing flowers in her head during the ante-natal period.
2. After birth the baby is bathed, dressed and then put on a rice tray covered with seven pieces of sarong. The father whispers prayers from the Koran into the child's ears. The midwife takes a little betel juice from her mouth and gently spits on the baby to protect him from disease. The baby's tongue or lips are touched with a gold ring for power and with honey to induce sweetness of disposition.
3. If the baby is a male and resembles the father very much, it is believed that either will die soon; therefore the child's ear is pierced immediately by the midwife to avert this.
4. After the "lepas pantang", if the baby is to be taken out of the house, the forehead is marked with soot from the "kuali" in three directions. This is done to scare away evil spirits that may want to attack the baby.
5. On the seventh day, after the child is lifted from the rice tray, his head is shaven except for a lock; rice powder is put on his face. This is said to prevent any evil spirit from attacking the child. The rice from the tray is cooked into porridge and distributed amongst other children. The baby is fed on baked banana with

a little salt, and sometimes a little rice is mixed with it.

6. The umbilical cord of the infant is dressed with ash obtained from burning old rags or from the stove. Occasionally siah leaves are applied. This is held in position with a small abdominal binder. When the umbilical cord drops, it is wrapped in cloth with some spices and this is heated over "kamiyan" (incense) and applied to the baby's umbilicus. This prevents "wind" from entering the abdomen.
7. Another ceremony is performed on the child when he is six months old. The "Turun Tanah" is the ceremony when the child is allowed to touch the ground for the first time. This takes place at 5.30 a.m. before the morning prayers. In this ceremony, a tray containing rice, gold ornaments, pencil, needle and the Koran is placed in front of the child. The child is held with its feet touching the ground and facing the tray.
8. The mother breast-feeds her baby "on demand". The neonate is fed on the right breast first because this is supposed to contain food. The left breast is supposed to contain water and hence is seldom offered to the infant.
9. The weaning diet consists of rice and sauce with a little salt fish and, occasionally, vegetables. Biscuits are given in between meals.

### Comments

This is not a true scientific paper in as much as the materials are mainly hearsay evidence. A few of the practices have been witnessed by the author. However, in view of the scarcity of reference work on this topic, it is felt that the materials collected ought to be recorded in a medical journal.

As expected, many of the practices are mere mythological and superstitious beliefs. Most of them are innocent and harmless. They seek to find an explanation for complications that happen. In a way, a very similar practice exists in western medicine as practiced in the United Kingdom as well as in Malaysia; women have been told that they have a "twisted womb" or a "tilted womb" to explain various conditions. Even today, a "tilted womb" is used by doctors to explain infertility, backache, dyspareunia and a host of other things.

In studying the matter, one is impressed by the frequent association of ideas; for instance, the water used in bathing may give rise to hydramnios; the "bite" of a crab may cause hare-lip, and so forth. It is noticed that retained placenta is something undestirable and eating lady's fingers is said to help separation of the placenta. Could it be that

the slimy nature of this bean will "lubricate" the delivery of the placenta?

One practice that is consistent and almost always carried out is the disposal of the placenta. Even so, the author has met with a few young Malay couples who have refused to take the placenta home for disposal.

It is interesting to note that in the puerperium, the post-natal woman is not to make herself too attractive to the husband. Perhaps the idea is to put off sexual intercourse for the 44 days' confinement. Again, some Malay couples have started sexual intercourse before the "lepas pantang".

Early involution of the uterus is discouraged as

this leads to prolapse of the womb. The author is unable to elicit an explanation for this. Even before the family planning board came into existence, frequent pregnancies are discouraged. To this end, purgatives are not given to the patient!

On the whole, as revealed by this study, most of the practices in relation to pregnancy and childbirth, as practised by the Malays, do not appear to be medically harmful.

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