

## Magahat Pregnancy and Births Practices

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### Introduction

In last year's convention I read a paper which discussed "Magahat Marriage Practices." To continue along similar lines of inquiry, I have decided to deal with the next cycle after marriage—pregnancy and birth practices among the Magahats, a pagan group located in the forest area of Southern Negros Island.<sup>1</sup> The research done in Southern Negros has been made possible through grants given by Dr. Fred R. Eggan, Director, Philippine Studies Program, the University of Chicago, Department of Anthropology. Field studies are still in progress in Southern Negros on the Magahats and other cultural minorities living in the area. To Dr. Cicero D. Calderon, President of Silliman University, I am very grateful for permission to visit the research area during the regular school year.

### Pregnancy

Pregnancy necessitates definite adjustments for the husband and wife. Most Magahats when planning to start a family feel an increased sense of duty and obligation. Usually both husband and wife desire to have a baby. Pregnancy is aimed at immediately after marriage. The couple therefore has less opportunity to adjust as husband and wife but this is not a problem to them. While in our society a husband and wife consider the need to attain emotional maturity to the point where they are freed from too much de-

pendence on the parents, the Magahats do not feel this need. A young married couple becomes immediately engrossed in matters pertaining to pregnancy even if they are not economically able to offer a reasonable degree of security toward the proper care of the mother and infant.

The Magahat couple feels that after marriage, pregnancy is a normal condition. A woman who does not become pregnant some months after marriage is considered lacking in her potentiality as a woman. This "lack" may be a reason for divorce. It was often the cause for divorce in the old days; this is no longer true today. Increasing contacts with others in the coastal regions have led the Magahats to realize that there are many couples who do not have children and yet are still together.

When the woman has not yet experienced childbirth and is unfamiliar with its natural processes, she will naturally have feelings of fear and anxiety. Physical discomforts experienced by her during pregnancy entail many precautionary measures that she has to observe. Since the Magahat woman does not have any contact with trained midwives, nurses, or doctors, she listens to the advice of her mother who has undergone the same experience. As Hoebel puts it:

Life begins with conception, and conception produces pregnancy. No matter how they envision conception, all primitives recognize pregnancy in empirical physiological terms. There are a number of externally observable biological alterations, that occur in

<sup>1</sup> Timoteo S. Oracion, "Magahat Marriage Practices" *Philippine Sociological Review* Vol. XII, Nos. 1-2 (January-April, 1964), p. 101.

the mothers of all races. Most notable among them are enlargement of the breasts and nipples, exudation of colostrum, cessation of menstruation, abdominal enlargement, and frequent nausea.<sup>3</sup>

The Magahats are able to recognize that sexual intercourse results in conception. They are able to recognize that the male semen injected into the female organ produces life. It is also common knowledge that the male plants the seed and the female takes care of it. However, they are not aware of the modern point of view (as cited in all medical books relative to the period of fertility) that there are three stages of growth and development through which the new form of life passes: first, the germinal stage—from conception until the end of two weeks—during which the new being may be referred to technically as an ovum; second, the embryonic stage—from the end of the second week until the end of the second month—when it is called an embryo, and third, the fetal stage—from the end of the second month until birth—during which time it is known as the fetus.

The Magahats do know that as the months progress, so will the abdomen enlarge until the time when the child is delivered. The simple way of stating the duration of pregnancy is to say of course that it lasts for nine months. A nine-month baby is considered full-term or normal. Sometimes a child is delivered after seven or eight months. Such birth is considered in our society as premature. The Magahats call the prematurely born child *ahat*.

When the signs of pregnancy are positive, taboos are observed. A pregnant woman should not see the eclipse of the moon. If she does, the child may be aborted, or if born, may become blind. She should not point to a rainbow or the child's fingers will not grow. She should

not eat green papayas because if she does, the child will always be crying. Fresh water crabs (*katang*) are tabooed so that the child would not become troublesome. She should avoid eating fruits found on the ground under a fruit-bearing tree because this would cause abortion. However, the fruits may be eaten if they are picked from the tree. A pregnant woman should not give fire to a neighbor asking for it because this action would make it difficult for the afterbirth and for the umbilical cord to come out normally.

It is also a common practice that when pregnancy has been duly established because the menses have no longer appeared every month, the mother of the girl, who is her adviser, directs the pregnant daughter to take a bath in the nearest creek, river, brook, or spring. After this is done, the new mother to be goes home and drinks a medical herb consisting of the following roots mixed together in boiled water: *banlot*, *makimanayon*, and *panangkilon*. This tonic she must drink every day. As the fetus grows, the pregnant woman is careful to follow directions given to her by either her mother or the *babaylan*.

At night before retiring she prepares some leaves from *langingi* and *tampokao* vines and places them over her abdomen. Because they are cool, these leaves are expected to eliminate pain while she goes to sleep. They are also supposed to ease delivery when that time comes.

What are some of the fears and anxieties a pregnant mother suffers? One of them is fear that the child will not develop into a human being. Many of the Magahats have sometimes witnessed the birth of a child with the form of a baby monkey and their experiences show that such an infant does not live long. The longest it can stay alive is one week. Another is the fear that the child may

be aborted (*har-as*). The cause of abortion according to them is that the pregnant woman had a craving (*pangala*) for a certain food and the husband failed to satisfy her craving. There is also the growing fear that the delivery might be very difficult. This happens when the husband or the wife has displeased *Apila*. A ceremony called *diwata* (offering) is performed by a *babaylan* (medicine man). This ceremony is performed about an hour after sunset.

The *babaylan* directs the husband to procure a live pig. This animal is then killed. After the entrails and blood have been separated from the body, the pig is cleaned. A rectangular bamboo table is prepared and placed in front of the house. The head of the pig is cut from the body. It is placed on the center of the bamboo table. The remaining portion of the pig is sliced into four equal parts so that the portion containing each leg occupies one corner of the table. The meat is not cooked. Two plates of cooked rice are placed on the center of the table close to the severed head of the pig. The following items are equally apportioned at the four corners of the bamboo table: 14 pieces of *tilad* (a narcotic stimulant containing betel nut, betel leaf called *buyo*, lime, and tobacco) which is placed inside a pandanus leaf; 14 pieces of rice-cake called *ibos*; 14 pieces of *tostos*, or rolled tobacco cigars; and 2 glasses of *intus*, or wine made from the juice of sugarcane. When all these items are ready, two candles are lighted and placed on the center of the table near the two plates of rice.

As the candles are lighted, the husband places two plates of *dinogo-an* or food made from the intestinal organs of the pig sliced into small pieces and mixed with the pig's blood on the prepared table. Two plates of boiled meat are also placed on any empty space on the table. All the food is cooked without salt.

Meanwhile, around the ceremonial place, the *babaylan* alerts his companions—the agong player, the guitarist, and the drummer. Except for the agong which is an imported item, the guitar and the drum are all home-made. He then signals the drummer, the guitarist, and the agong player to commence playing their instruments.

Before starting the ceremonial dance, the *babaylan* stands near one side of the table and blows on his carabao horn. After this, he calls on the different spirits to partake of the food with these words:

Kamo mga abyan ko

(You who are friends of mine)

Naga puyo sa tuboran

(Who reside in springs)

Sa olohan sa mga kasapa-an

(At the source of the brooks)

Taga bato, taga kakob

(From rocks, from caves)

Taga ilag, taga Kanaway

(From white rocks, from trees)

Taga talamban, mga taga bondo

(From big stones, all from the hills)

Domo-ol do kamo din-ni

(Come here now in this place)

Ayani so ipaka-on kaniyo

(This is to be eaten by all of you)

Pa bata-on don niyo

(Help deliver this child)

Ayao ron pag idugay

(Do not delay it)

Pa bata-on don

(Deliver the child at once)

Naga ampo ako kaniyo.

(I am praying for you).

After these words are spoken, he dances around the table. He sings a song with words composed principally of "la la la or tra la la la." While doing this he holds in his left hand a coconut shell filled with burned incense. He waves his left hand back and forth so that the smoke of the incense surrounds the place. The *Magahats* believe that the spirits love the odor of the incense. In his right hand he waves a sharp, shiny bolo. Af-

ter the performance, the babaylan again utters a thanksgiving prayer to the spirits, saying:

Ini na tapus na  
 (This is over now)  
 Paga kowa-on nakon ini halad  
 (I am now getting this offering)  
 Indi na pag padugayon ang pagbata  
 (Do not delay the birth of the child)  
 Sini nga baba-e  
 (From this woman)  
 Kaya na ampo-an do kamo.  
 (Because I have prayed to you  
 already).

When the ceremony is over, the babaylan orders the food on the table removed. It is re-cooked in the kitchen with the proper seasoning. The people, who are mostly relatives of the married couple, wait and then eat the food and drink the intus or any other alcoholic beverage served by the husband. Then the friends go home, only the close relatives await the delivery of the child.—When delivery is normal, no ceremony of this kind is necessary.

It should be mentioned here that during the period of pregnancy, the husband suffers some kind of sex frustration. One means of avoiding such frustration which is open to Magahat husbands is the practice of polygyny. Although polygamy may also serve as a competitive status symbol and a mark of prestige in the sexual field, one important aspect of having an additional wife is to provide the husband with sexual gratification during the long period of the wife's pregnancy. Among the Magahats, the women do not object to their husbands' taking additional wives. The common practice is for the husband to take the wife's sister, or if she does not have one, a relative of the wife. This satisfies the sexual urge of the husband and at the same time eliminates husband-wife conflict because of illicit sex relations with another woman.

## The Birth of the Baby

All medical books on childbirth mention mother's labor. Medical authorities agree that labor refers to the three successive stages involved in delivery of the fetus. The first stage begins with the contraction of the uterine muscles, starting with feeble, infrequent movements but increasing in intensity and frequency as the cervix dilates. It is then usually that the "bag of water," known in medical language as the amniotic fluid surrounding the fetus, breaks and passes through the dilated cervix. The second stage, ordinarily lasting about two hours, begins when the head of the fetus pushes through the birth canal to the outside. The third stage begins with the birth of the child and lasts until the expulsion of the placenta which is commonly called the afterbirth. The average duration of labor is sixteen hours for the first baby and ten or eleven hours for subsequent births. Actually there is no complete agreement among authorities as to what forces or conditions of nature initiate the process of birth. For some women labor may be painful, perhaps intensified by their fear of pain as much as by the experience itself. Other women describe labor pains as no more severe than a minor attack of menstrual cramps.<sup>4</sup>

A pregnant woman learns from her mother that a child can be born during the seventh month. If this happens the child is premature but has all the characteristics of a full grown infant. This infant is called *ahat*, and if it survives to adulthood it is expected to have many unusual traits; for example, it may become a good medicine man or woman; or an exceptional hunter; or have other qualities not found in persons born normally during ninth months.

At the ninth month, the expectant mother stays around the house because she knows that the birth of a child is ex-

pected anytime. She does not stop her normal household duties. If a woman is living in an isolated area and no midwife or babaylan is available, she simply spreads a mat on the floor, lies down and delivers the child alone. The husband helps cut the umbilical cord with a bamboo knife, gathers the afterbirth or placenta, places them inside a bamboo tube mixed with ashes and buries the tube under the house. The child is given a sponge bath by the mother and is breast-fed. If the mother does not have milk, the child is sustained by liquidized porridge or sugarcane juice. After delivery, the wife resumes her normal household chores.

Sometime during pregnancy, the wife joins her husband in hunting or fishing. It is possible that she may give birth while in the fishing or hunting area. When this happens, the husband constructs a lean-to. The wife lies down and delivers. The birth procedure described before is followed.

A more elaborate delivery procedure witnessed by the writer shows some variation. The woman wore two dresses and many skirts to absorb the discharge. All male members including the husband stepped out of the house. No one was allowed to sit on the stairs because this was believed to make delivery difficult and to prevent the fetus from coming out at once. Children were also driven out of the house.

The woman babaylan, now given the additional title of *partera*, directs the pregnant woman to sit down over a pile of pillows on a mat spread on the floor. The latter so sits that her back leans against the wall. A rope is tied above her so that as it hangs it falls directly in front of her. With both hands, she holds this rope. In this position she is directed by the babaylan to follow her instructions. The babaylan pushes the fe-

tus downward to hasten the coming out of the infant. As soon as the baby comes out, it is wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed on the floor. It is rolled on the mat to stimulate blood circulation. The babaylan then squeezes the afterbirth (*inonlan*) to stimulate the breathing of the child. If breathing is normal, then the squeezing of the placenta does not need to be prolonged.

The babaylan cuts the placental cord (*pusod*) with a bamboo knife and ties it securely with a white thread. The cord is tied at a point about four fingers away from the infant's navel; if the thread is tied too close to the end of the cord, it may slip off easily and be difficult to re-tie. The placental end of the cord is tied temporarily to one of the legs of the mother so that it may not slip back into the uterus and remain there together with the placenta or afterbirth (*inonlan*).

The pillows from underneath the mother are removed and replaced with some old clothes to absorb the discharge. After the placenta has been removed, it is placed either in a bamboo tube mixed with ashes or in a pot. The cord is also deposited here. As the babaylan announces that the child is born, the husband gets the pot or bamboo tube and covers it with a piece of black cloth and buries it under the kitchen. Sometimes the placenta is hung in the attic of the house and removed a year later or when the next baby comes. The infant is then given a warm bath, rubbed with coconut oil to warm it further, and honey is smeared over the infant's mouth. If the placenta does not come out immediately, betel leaves that have been heated over a fire are placed over the abdomen. This eases the expulsion of the placenta. The unnecessary delay in expelling the placenta sometimes causes death.

When the infant has been attended to, the babaylan winds up the process by getting a piece of cloth and using it as a binder or a belt, placing it around the waist line over the umbilical cord. This procedure is believed to prevent coagulated blood from the uterus from going directly to the head and passing out through the hair follicles there.

The mother is not allowed to take a bath for a period of thirty days. Bathing before this period may give her a relapse. Bark from the *bangkal* (*Nauclea orientalis* L. [Ruby]) tree is secured, mixed with water, and boiled. The mixture is drunk by the mother many times daily (for a period of three days) in order to repair any broken tissues inside her.

When delivery is difficult, the Magahats observe some rituals to solve such a problem. The husband scrapes with his bolo the last stair step in his house. This last step is the one closest to the floor entrance. When enough shavings have been scraped, the husband places these in a pot and burns them with some green medicinal herb. The mother is lifted and the pot with the burned shavings now producing plenty of smoke is placed under her. The smoke naturally covers the mother; this process they believe would stimulate delivery.

If this does not seem effective, the babaylan places a molted snake skin over the fire; the smoke it produces again covers the body and is supposed to help make delivery easy. Another effective method for quick delivery is for the babaylan to place over the mother's abdomen a portion of a monkey's dry skin containing the umbilical cord. This is resorted to only when all other means have been exhausted and all have failed. Many babaylans do not like to use this because of the effect the monkey's skin will have over the infant when it grows

up. They say that the infant will form the bad habits of a monkey—such as stealing and being cunning.

In another delivery witnessed by the writer, the husband acted as the midwife. When the child came out, he cut the umbilical cord with a bamboo knife. He wrapped the afterbirth and the umbilical cord with an old cloth, mixed some ashes, and buried them immediately near one of the posts of the house facing east. It is believed that thus when the child is of age, he will be an early riser. This procedure is done only for male infants. If the infant happens to be a girl, the afterbirth and the umbilical cord, wrapped in an old cloth are buried in the ground under the kitchen, directly below the cooking stove so that the girl will become a good cook.

After the infant has been placed on the mat, it is massaged with the lard of a snake and *halo* (lizard). This is believed to make the child acquire some of the traits of the snake and the lizard. Then the mother is given a medicinal herb to drink; it is a drink derived from the roots of a shrub locally known as *cabahan sa amo*, which has been first roasted and then mixed with boiled water. This mixture is to prevent hemorrhage.

The infant is continuously breast-fed until the next sign of pregnancy. When this occurs the mother secures the vine of *panyawan* or *makabuhai* (*Tinospora rumphii* Boerl. [Menis.]). She roasts this until it is brittle enough to be pulverized, roasted and then mixed with boiled water. This mixture is to prevent hemorrhage. She mixes the powder with coconut oil and then smears the mixture over the nipples. When the infant then sucks the mother's nipples, it stops because the mixture is very bitter. Thus the infant stops further sucking and begins to eat rice and other food that is available. This practice is locally termed *lutas*.

While some mothers work immediately after birth, others take simple precautions by remaining in bed while the pelvic organs—uterus, cervix, and vagina—which have undergone physiological changes begin their gradual return to normalcy.

### Conclusion

The Magahat woman suffers much mental and physical pain during childbirth. It is not true that childbirth is easy for her. The many magical arrangements and measures taken in advance for meeting birth difficulty are surely adequate evidence of the Magahat woman's fear of hard delivery. It has been stated in this paper that the Magahats have special emergency medicinal herbs ready for a sudden and generally unexpected cases of difficult delivery. But during easy delivery there is little invoking of the supernatural.

The social interrelationship existing among the women group of the Magahats during delivery is so strong that as soon as the news gets around, one woman after another quietly goes into the house, and comforts the delivering woman. The higher the family's standing in the area, the more women come, arriving even from far and remote clearings in an unbelievably short time. The haste in coming and the excessive concern displayed are indications of their real interest and solicitude for the patient. All of them are busy giving comforting advice.

The propitiation of *Apila*, goddess of pregnant women, is not enough to secure a successful birth. The obstetrical skill of the babaylan is also needed. Most women are calm and obey the traditional custom of suppressing loud cries during labor. From childhood, girls are instructed to face this crisis with tranquility and equanimity. At pregnancy, the girl is told that if she cries during delivery, she will disgrace her sex and that her husband would not like her to be a coward. Dur-

ing labor she remembers these considerations and therefore keeps the pain to herself. The presence of her friends and relatives inspires her, giving her confidence that she is not alone in her distress. She knows also that her husband is listening outside and that if she shows lack of self-control by shouting, her husband will lose face among his male friends and relatives.

### Notes

2. For complete information about the Magahats see the following articles written by the author in the following publications:
  - a. Timoteo S. Oracion, "An Introduction to the Culture of the Magahats," *Journal of the 8th Pacific Science Congress* (March 10, 1953), pp. 504-507.
  - b. ———, "Economic and Social Organization of the Magahats," *Philippine Social Sciences and Humanities Review* (March, 1954), pp. 77-86
  - c. ———, "An Introduction to the Culture of the Magahats," *Silliman Journal* (April, 1954), pp. 1-24.
  - d. ———, "Magahat Food Quest," *Silliman Journal* (April-June, 1956), pp. 110-126.
  - e. ———, "Magahat Clothing, Shelter, and Implements," *Silliman Journal* (July-September, 1958), pp. 273-285.
  - f. ———, "The Magahats of Negros Island," *Saturday Mirror Magazine* (March 14, 1959), pp. 46-50.
  - g. ———, "Ceremonial Customs and Beliefs Connected with Magahat Kaingin Agriculture," *Silliman Journal* (July, 1955), pp. 245-248.
  - h. ———, "Magahat Marriage Practices," *Philippine Sociological Review*, (January-April, 1964), pp. 101-109.
3. E. Adamson Hoebel, *Man in the Primitive World—An Introduction to Anthropology* (2nd ed.; New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, Inc., 1958), p. 371.
4. J. L. Hirning and Alma L. Hirning, *Marriage Adjustment* (New York: American Book Company, 1956), p. 334.