
NOTES ON PLACENTOPHAGY

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IN a Swiftean satire,¹ a modest proposal was made that the human female might prevent choriocarcinoma by emulating placentophagus viviparous mammals that eat the placenta. At that time only one case of choriocarcinoma in an animal had been reported, specifically in an armadillo.² Shortly thereafter, an example of choriocarcinoma was reported in a rhesus monkey.³ It was with some dismay that the writer of the modest proposal learned of an instance of human consumption of a term placenta following natural childbirth by a member of the counter-culture.⁴ A young woman living in a commune had natural childbirth assisted by friends. After delivery the placenta was steamed, and she shared it with those who stayed behind. She described the after-effects as "wonderfully replenishing and delicious." In today's Western society human placentophagy is as taboo as cannibalism, and it was with astonishment that the modest proposer learned from a Czechoslovakian medical officer that circa 1960 placentophagy was being practised by midwives and obstetrical nurses in Viet Nam, *q.v.*

The text of this communication seems worth recording, and has prompted a search for other evidences of placentophagy in other cultures.

I was working as head of the Pathology Department at the Hospital of Czechoslovak-Vietnamese Friendship at Haiphong from September 1958 to December 1960. The group of Czechoslovak specialists. . . including physicians, nurses, laboratory technicians, engineers, and administrators. Soon after my arrival, I was told by the Czech chief nurse-midwife from the Ob-Gyn Department that "they eat placentae." After my inquiry I got the following explanation: Several Vietnamese male and female nurses (mid-wives) in the department used to eat placentae, delivered by patients. They would not eat any placenta, but only those delivered by a young, apparently healthy and handsome mother. They stripped the membranous parts away and chopped the cotyledons in small pieces and fried them in a pan, usually together with onions. The Czech nurse . . . showed me the pan with a few pieces of dark brown placental tissue mixed with onions. The ethnic background of those practising this was not Vietnamese; they

belonged to the "minorities" group, tribes of Chinese and Thai origin inhabiting the mountains of North Vietnam.

I asked several Vietnamese doctors in the hospital about it, but they were very reluctant to give me any information, since they already knew the aversion of Czech personnel toward the practice. Actually, Vietnamese doctors in the Ob-Gyn Department tried to suppress any information about it and also tried to prevent their personnel from eating placentae. . . I am not really able to tell whether the observed placentophagy was a widespread cultural habit among these tribes nor whether placentae were also eaten by the mothers who had delivered them.⁵

It is tempting to consider that the placenta was eaten to supply additional protein to a protein-poor diet in underdeveloped areas. Perhaps protein was more limited in the mountains whence these nurse-midwives originated than in plains where cattle might graze or in coastal regions where fish and sea food would be available. If so, the practice might have the sanction of regional mores. But evidence for placentophagy is scanty. Annalists and chroniclers accepted childbirth as a natural quotidian event and did not record the circumstances connected with it. Moreover, parturition was the quintessence of muliebrity, and, partly from superstition, partly as a defense against a male-dominated society, women tended to exclude men from its mysteries. Most ancient medical writings supply only superficial, often inaccurate and misleading accounts of obstetrical phenomena. Not until the 16th century do we find iconographic representation of a woman in labor, and even then much is concealed by drapery. Archeological materials furnish only limited insight; the statuette of the Aztec birth goddess Tlazoteotl correctly shows the squatting posture in delivery, but surely the intercrural face presentation is the sculptor's distortion of nature (Figure 1). Likewise, literary allusions are few and indirect. Reliable ethnographic evidence was not collected until the mid-19th century, and even in that corpus data relating to childbirth and the fate of the placenta were not usually recorded.

The earliest known representation of the placenta is seen on the frequently reproduced palette of King Narmer, a well preserved stele found at Hierankopolis at the end of the 19th century. The uppermost panel on the reverse side shows Narmer in ceremonial procession preceded by royal standards; to the right are piled decapitated bodies of his enemies. The standard nearest the king has the shape of a bilobate disc with a streamer hanging down (Figure 2), and has been interpreted as the king's placenta and umbilical cord,⁶ the prototype of flags carried into battle with their

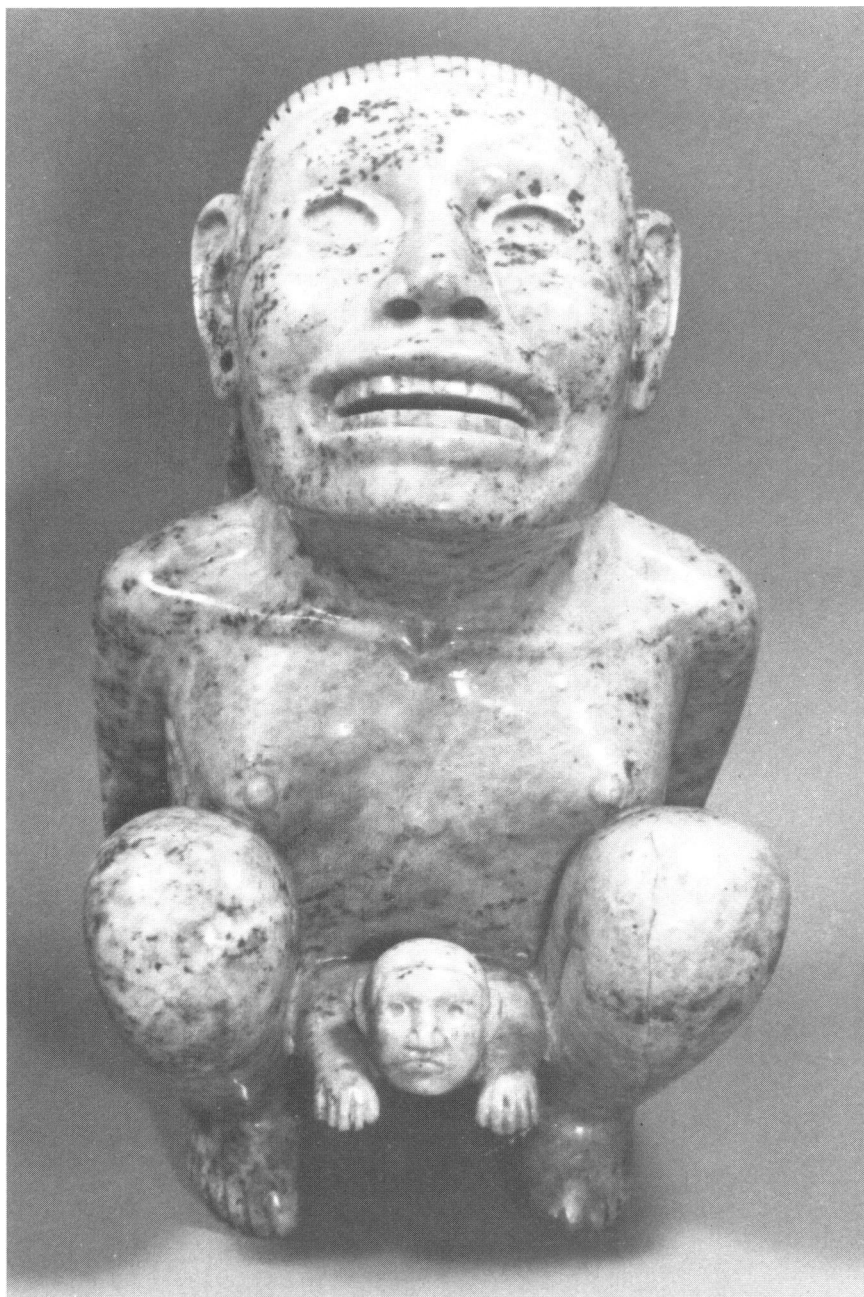


Fig. 1. Aztec statuette of Tlazoteotl, the Mexican goddess of childbirth. In another aspect she was regarded as the goddess of carnal sin and licentiousness, but as Eater of Refuse she consumed the sins of mankind. Her priests heard confessions and granted absolution after due penance and, in addition, had the important functions of casting horoscopes and of naming the newborn.



Fig. 2. From the palette of King Narmer (c. 3500-3100 B.C.) showing the king in ceremonial procession preceded by standards. The standard nearest the king represents his placenta and umbilical cord. Reproduced by permission from G. Elliot Smith: *Human History*. New York, Norton, 1929.

streamers of red, white, and blue. As did many primitive people, the ancient Egyptians believed that a child was formed in its mother's womb from blood not shed during gestation and that accumulated unused blood formed the afterbirth or placenta, a reserve of vital material. From this belief stemmed the idea that the placenta was the child's "secret helper," a quasi-twin; hence it would be reasonable for a king or his troops to carry a representation of it into battle. King Narmer was a predynastic ruler during the transition period between Neolithic and Chalcolithic settlements and the First Dynasty. He followed such cultures as the Tasian, Badarian, Amratan, Gerzean, and Semainian, and his palette dates from the dawn of history, probably between 3500 and 3100 B.C. We know little about these cultures and nothing about their obstetrical practices, let alone the fate of their placentas. What may be relevant is that they did practice human sacrifice; cannibalism and even placentophagy, especially in an agrarian society, would be a logical sequel.

More specific allusion to the ancient practice of placentophagy is found in Deuteronomy, Ch. 28 (AV). The chapter begins with 14 verses describing the material blessings that will befall the Israelites if they hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord their God. The concluding 54 verses warn them of the condign punishments they will incur if they do not

observe the Lord's commandments and statutes. Verses 52 to 57 admonish the Israelites of what will happen when their cities are besieged and the enemy within their gates, viz., the men will practice cannibalism: "And thou shalt eat the fruit of thine own body, the flesh of thy sons and thy daughters," and the women will practice placentophagy:

The tender and delicate woman among you, which would not adventure to set the sole of her foot upon the ground... her eye shall be evil toward the husband of her bosom, and toward her daughter. And toward her young one that cometh out from between her feet, and toward her children which she shall bear; for she shall eat them for want of all things secretly in the siege and straitness....

Choosing the *Targum of Aquila* as their authority, the translators of the Authorized Version employed the trope of euphemism. In the Greek text the phrase "that cometh out from between her feet" is written as *chorion*, and in the Vulgate it appears as *secundinae partes*, clearly the placenta. In Aramaic codices the phrase is *u:ve-shilyatah*, from the root *shilya* which means placenta, cf. *uvishphir shilyeta* (placenta and membranes) in the *Targum of Jerusalem*, which is translated as "that which issues forth from the place of shame at the time of birth." (For "the place of shame," cf. *puenda*.) The 1917 translation of the Jewish Publication Society of America, based on the Masoretic text, correctly uses the word "after-birth."

What Jehovah seems to be telling the Israelites is that if they do not obey him, He will reduce them to the level of the beasts. If we accept the idea that Biblical imagery and metaphor reflect the culture of the time and place, it is reasonable to infer that the passage refers to a remote tribal memory, now suppressed, of a period when placentas were eaten, at least in times of famine. We have no written record of the customs of such coexistent tribes as the Hittites, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Amalekites, or even of the Philistines, but one may speculate whether this practice was not uncommon in the prehistory of the Levant and Mesopotamia where drought and crop failure were familiar and recurrent events, even as in the Nile basin. Anthropologists have often posed the question of what distinguishes man from the beast. Several criteria have been proposed, the most popular that man has the power of symbolic speech. But this is not an absolute distinction, for many animal species have been shown to possess elaborate systems of communication. An equally plausible distinction might be that man, that is, civilized man, does not eat his own placenta.

Hunger pangs may not be the only motive and cue for placentophagy.

The placenta has both medicinal and magical properties, and its ingestion may be connected with either or both. Considering the many priorities assigned to Chinese civilization, it is not surprising that the *Great Pharmacopoeia of 1596* by Li Shih-chen recommended a mixture of human milk and placental tissue for an ailment known as *ch'i* exhaustion, an ill-defined entity characterized by anemia, weakness of the extremities, and coldness of the sexual organs with involuntary ejaculation of semen.⁷ The Chinese *ch'i* was a vital force very much like the Egyptian vital material inherent in the placenta, though not necessarily derived from accumulated blood. The recommended treatment gave on alternate days doses of Virtuous Birth Elixir followed by Connected Destiny Elixir. The latter consisted of three wine-cups of human milk into which a dried powdered human placenta was stirred and warmed in a saucer by exposure to sunlight. Precisely how old and traditional this remedy was in 1596 is not known, but it was no less effective than medications offered a few decades earlier by Paracelsus in Western Europe.

The magical properties of the placenta have been widely known since Frazer's magisterial summary appeared just before World War I.⁸ But none of Frazer's examples cited eating or ingesting placentas or placental extracts. Later ethnographers reported isolated instances of placentophagy by primitive people, and in the light of the above exposition it seems now convenient to review them.

A few points of congruence and a pattern of behavior emerge from this literature. In parts of Indonesia the placenta is thought to be a "younger brother" (cf. "secret helper") and is buried with care.⁹ It is preserved during the first year of life for use in case of sickness to supply the missing life force. Quite commonly, in primitive societies the placenta is buried, often by the father, sometimes by the midwife, often with ceremony approaching ritual, sometimes secretly and silently. The usual explanation for burial is to prevent its being eaten by animals, in which case the life or health of the child would be imperiled. An unusual variation is the custom in parts of Java in which the placenta, decorated with flowers and little lights, is set afloat on the river at night as food for crocodiles.¹⁰ In some cultures the placenta or a segment of umbilical cord is preserved as a protective amulet or good luck charm. In parts of rural Poland peasants "...dry it and use it in powdered form as medicine, or the dried cord may be saved and given to the child when he goes to school for the first time, to make him a good scholar."¹¹

In at least one culture the flavor of the placenta was valued. The Kurtachi of the Solomon Islands preserved it in the lime-pot that contained the mother's supply of powdered lime for chewing with the areca nut.¹² But in a larger number of cultures the placenta's medicinal value was prized. The Mirebalais in Haiti buried the placenta itself but preserved part of the cord. If the child became ill, the cord was boiled and the supernatant broth given as medicine.¹³ Somewhat less specific is a report that among the Sierra Tarascan Indians the cord, too, is usually buried, but one midwife asserted that it was preserved and used for unspecified remedies in case of illness.¹⁴ More specific is Robert Redfield's study¹⁵ of Topotzlan, a Mexican village, in which the umbilical cord was used as a remedy for eye trouble. Two decades later Oscar Lewis¹⁶ confirmed Redfield's observation and noted that the same practice prevailed in nearby Mitla. Perhaps related to this is Loeb's earlier observation that Pomo Indians in California keep a remnant of the cord as medicine for the child and find it especially useful for snakebites.¹⁷

Crossing from the North American mainland into the Caribbean and South America, we learn that in Jamaica the placental membranes (caul) were used to prevent convulsions ascribed to irritation of the child by a ghost.¹⁸ In this instance the tissue was carefully parched over a hot brick and a bit put into the infant's tea. The Araucanian Indians of Argentina dried the umbilical cord, ground it to a powder, and gave a little to the child whenever it was sick.¹⁹ A much earlier report from Peru noted the tribal custom of letting an ailing infant suck on the preserved cord.²⁰ Adults who fell ill were given the cord to chew, but it was important that it be the patient's own cord; another person's was not considered effective.

Moving eastward across the Atlantic, we learn that in Tanganyika the Chaga continue what may be a survival of parental cannibalism. The placenta is put into a receptacle and placed for two months in the attic to dry. Then it is ground with eleusine (a plant) into a flour from which a porridge is made. This is consumed by the old women of the family, who claim that it is a way of preserving the child's life.²¹ Further to the East, the Kol tribe in Central India relate the placenta to reproductive function. A childless woman, by eating a portion of either the placenta or umbilical cord, may dispel the influences that keep her barren, but in so doing injury or even death may occur to the family from which she received by stealth the required parts.²²

Apart from the Vietnamese nurse-midwives mentioned earlier, none of

the other examples of placentophagy indicate that it was eaten with gusto and relish. For the Israelites it was a punishment, and in primitive societies magico-medical motives prevail. What may be the future of placentophagy? One recalls Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) where fertilization and gestation were accomplished *in vitro* and there were no placentas. Does the recent delivery of a "test tube baby" presage a gestation carried to term entirely outside a womb and without the need of a placenta? But Huxley was aware that, given sufficient motivation, mankind will eat anything. Less than a decade later, in *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939), Jo Stoyte, the archetypical American tycoon, was willing to emulate the fifth Earl of Gonister and ingest triturated raw carp entrails as an elusive elixir in his quest for longevity. Advertising copy for a cosmetic cream now in the marketplace advises us that "We have added, at the behest of our researchers, a pure organic placenta composite. Placenta contains concentrated levels of hormones, nutrients, and natural protective agents."²³ Another company manufactures not only a skin-moisturizing cream containing Vitamin E and placental extract but also a shampoo, a hair conditioner, a "Placentene" hair-setting product, and a "Gift of Life" face cream. There are at least 29 different cosmetics on the market in which human placenta extracts are used. Some are named Placenta Plus, Golden Placenta, and Placentally Yours. The active ingredient is often lyophilized bovine placental tissue. These commercial products are expensive, but it may be only a question of time before the American female consumer puts her mouth where her money is.

But hunger is probably the strongest motive for eating what under normal circumstances would be considered inedible. Perhaps if the ominous prognostications of pundits terrified by untrammelled population growth come true, one can imagine a world in which each member of humanity crouches on his sternly allotted sand pile and presents his plastic card at the state-controlled commissary for his weekly ration of fish protein. At such a time the placenta may well become a delicacy of haute cuisine. In that far-off day mankind may find useful the valedictory used by the Toradja natives of the Celebes who hang the placenta in the fork of a large *Ficus* tree and on departing address it: "You, afterbirth, do not say that I do not love you; we love you. Do not tickle the soles of the feet of your little brother (sister) and do not pinch his (her) stomach."²⁴

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