

# The Placenta in Lore and Legend

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**S**PECULATION regarding the meanings and mechanisms of "Birth, Copulation, and Death" has intrigued not only philosophers and priests, scientists, poets, and artists, but all Mankind. Possibly there are no other topics that have gathered about them such a welter of imaginative conjecture, ritualistic formality, taboo, and downright misinformation. Whether we are nearer understanding these mysteries is controversial metaphysics which concerns us greatly, but not here. Whether we are nearer understanding the mechanisms of these things surely demands the reply that we are, but not much.

The depth of ignorance concerning the mechanisms of birth and death is a curiosity itself. Even the most fundamental of all facts concerning human reproduction, that it requires the conjugation of two members of the same species but of opposite sex, is not universally known. Indeed aboriginals living along the Pennefeather River in Queensland (1) entirely disassociate sexual intercourse from procreation. They believe that a spirit causes conception in women by placing mud babies in their wombs and that it imbues them with vitality derived from the placenta of another child. The Trobriand Islanders in New Guinea also disassociate sexual intercourse from pregnancy and childbirth and believe that children originate only from the spirit world.

In the days when Man was young it seems that the placenta as an independent organ passed unnoticed or at least unrecognized, perhaps because of its uninspiring appearance overshadowed by the wonder of the birth of a new being. The anomalous presence of this undistinguished appendage in highly dramatic circumstances must have been most troublesome to explain. Clearly the organ was no part of the new man because men lived well without it, and yet equally clearly it was of importance to the child because the latter was physically attached to it. It was no part of the mother, because she had discarded it. Therefore it is hardly surprising that the wildest and most extravagant theories arose concerning its function, and its disposal was often accompanied by most bizarre ritual.

For these reasons the view arose that the placenta and child were in some way related and that they were linked by an invisible cord of magic

and kinship as well as by a visible connection. Views on the exact relationship of the placenta and child vary considerably.

#### PLACENTA AS THE MOTHER OF CHILD

The Ostiak and Vogul tribes who live in the Ural Mountains refer to the placenta (2) as "the nourishing mother of the child"—a shrewd piece of physiology. Before the anticipated birth, a small shirt is prepared together with other infant clothes and used to dress the placenta in a manner appropriate to a close relative.

#### PLACENTA AS BROTHER OR SISTER

The belief that the placenta is a brother or sister of the newly born child (3) would be more plausible from the point of view of a simple people but rather less pleasing to the physiologist. The people of Parigi in the Celebes Islands believe (1) that the placenta, despite its later delivery, is the elder brother. They preserve it carefully in a pot which is wrapped in white cotton and hidden under the sarong of the mother. She buries it, and the spot is marked with palm trees planted to honor the occasion. During this ritual the mother keeps her eyes tightly closed and is led by another woman, for she believes that if she looked to one side or the other the child would squint, since it is closely linked to her by sympathetic magic at this time through the brother-placenta. On the mother's return from the ceremony she is sprinkled with water, and all connection with the child is broken.

In other regions of the southern Celebes the placenta and the umbilical cord both are treated as brothers or sisters. When a prince is born, the two additional siblings are awarded elaborate care and are placed with salt and tamarind in a rice jar and wrapped in a new garment to keep off evil spirits. Lamps are lit and placed before the pot, and twice a day rice is placed along the rim of the jar as food for the little brothers. Palm trees are planted and watered with washings of the cord and placenta, and forever after the child's destiny is associated with the welfare of these trees. When the little prince is taken out, the two brothers go with him, wearing state robes and shielded by an umbrella. Similar beliefs regarding the brother-placenta are held in Java and Bali.

The Toba-Bataks in northern Sumatra hold (4) that the placenta is the younger brother of the newly born child and that in the placenta rests one of the seven souls which a man possesses. This particular soul remains with the buried placenta but can leave it periodically to warn the child of threats and danger. If the child behaves well the placenta-soul gives encouragement, acting as a type of "conscience."

People living in Achinsk, Siberia, have similar beliefs and hold that

the placenta is a girl's sister or a boy's brother. Sickness of the infant denotes that the buried placenta is ill, and the grave is therefore treated with medicaments or the placenta reburied in a more "comfortable" site. The soul of the placenta can leave to play with the child, an event they believe to have taken place when the child laughs in its sleep.

#### PLACENTA AS COMPANION

In Timor, off western Australia, the inhabitants consider (1) that the relationship is less definitive and that the placenta is merely a companion of the child. It is preserved in a covered pot, "fed" for three days, and then buried in silence.

#### PLACENTA AS DOUBLE

A most elaborate belief in which the placenta is recognized as a second child, the double, is held by the Baganda of Uganda (1). Not only has the child a double, the placenta, but the double has a ghost. The ghost resides in that portion of the umbilical cord attached to the child, which must be carefully preserved if the child is to be healthy. The placenta itself is wrapped in plantain leaves and buried by the mother at the root of a palm tree. If the child is a boy, the species of palm is chosen which is used to make beer; if a girl, the species of palm is chosen of which the fruit is eaten. The tree then becomes sacred until the fruit is ripe, and only the child's paternal grandmother may approach. During this time all the child's urine and feces are placed around the roots. When ripe, the tree is cut by the grandmother and beer or fruit prepared to be consumed at a sacred feast to which the paternal relations are invited. When it is over, the child's father must have sexual intercourse straight away with his own wife, the child's mother. Otherwise if the father indulged with another woman, the child's spirit would go to her and not to the mother.

In the case of a prince of royal blood, the placenta is preserved and carried in procession in a manner reminiscent of the customs in the southern Celebes. The placenta of the king is carried by a high-ranking officer, the Kimbugwe or second officer of state, distinguished by his shaven head and face. The remarkable similarity of this custom to that of the ancient Egyptians, also of Hamitic blood, is discussed later.

The curious practice of carrying the placenta in reality or in representation is again seen in Konigsburg, where it was usual to carry the placenta to church at the baptism of the child.

#### PLACENTA AS SEAT OF SPIRIT

The placenta was believed to have supernatural properties as opposed to merely physical relationship to the newborn. These properties appear

in their simplest form in certain beliefs held by the Icelanders, who imagine (1, 3) that the child's guardian spirit or part of its soul resides in the placenta—hence its name “fylgia,” meaning “guardian angel.” The placenta must not be thrown under the open sky lest demons get it and work the child harm, nor must the placenta be burned; otherwise the child would have no guardian angel, a situation almost as bad as having no shadow. It is usual to bury the placenta under the floor, so that the mother steps over it as she gets out of bed. If it is thus treated, the child will later have a guardian spirit in the shape of a bear, a wolf, an eagle, an ox, or a wild boar (whichever animal most resembles his disposition).

#### THE NEUTRALIZATION OF THE PLACENTA

Many curious customs have arisen because burial of the placenta does not seem adequate to protect the child or others from harmful influences which could be exerted. For this reason the placenta must be neutralized or “killed,” after which it becomes harmless. In Norway the mother herself stabs the placenta with a knife (3) so that a horrible monster would be prevented from taking her life at a later date. The placenta is burned publicly by the Copper River Indians and by the Negritos in Luzon. The Transylvania gypsies also believed that both placenta and meconium must be burned; otherwise wicked fairies could turn them into vampires who would attack the child.

#### PLACENTA AS A SEAT OF SYMPATHETIC MAGIC

Sympathetic magic is the ability to influence by imitation, a belief so ancient and so widespread that the majority of superstitious practices derive from it. The old English country cure for warts is an illustration. A small bag of attractive material containing a pebble for each wart is dropped beside the highway. The first person who picks it up will acquire the warts. They have been transferred by imitation.

The highest flights of imagination are seen in customs related to sympathetic magic applied to the placenta, because of the indisputable connection with the child. Many rituals are based on the idea that appropriate treatment of the placenta (and often cord and membranes) will lead to prosperity of their owner. An old Chinese medical work (1) states,

the placenta should be stowed away in a felicitous spot under the salutary influences of the sky and the moon, deep in the ground with the earth piled over it carefully in order that the child may be ensured long life. If it is devoured by a swine or a dog, the child loses its intellect. If insects or ants eat it, the child becomes scrofulous. If crows or magpies swallow it, the child will have an abrupt or violent death. If it is cast into fire, the child incurs running sores.

A similar belief (4) is recorded in Spain, where great care is taken to pre-

vent any part of the placenta being eaten by an animal; otherwise the child would be possessed of all the bad qualities of the beast.

On the other hand, in the New World the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia (1) bury the placenta of girls at high-water mark so the girls may be expert at digging for clams. The placenta of boys is exposed to be eaten by ravens so that they may acquire the ravens' prophetic vision.

A particularly elaborate ritual (1) takes place in islands of the Dutch East Indies. Here the midwife buries the placenta and strews flowers upon it. Lamps are kept burning for three or seven nights over the place so that no harm may come to the child. Some people in these islands preserve the placenta in a pot covered with white cotton. The pot is then taken out to sea, a hole is knocked in the bottom, and it is cast into the ocean by the midwife, who must look neither to the left nor right while the ceremony takes place, lest the child squint. Likewise the man rowing or steering the boat must keep a straight course; otherwise the child would be a gad-about.

In New Zealand, Maori women commonly refuse to enter European hospitals for obstetrical care (5) because they are not permitted to dispose of the placenta according to their traditions. They believe that the after-birth should be buried in a secret place and that any other treatment harms the child.

In Japan, the placenta is removed in a specially made cylindrical cedar-wood box (3). The priest indicates a spot beneath the house, and the box is buried at a depth of seven feet, together with a writing brush and ink in the case of a boy or a needle and thread in the case of a girl.

In Dalmatia, Yugoslavia, the placenta is buried under a rosebush so that the child may have rosy cheeks, and in Austria it is interred beneath a green tree so that the mother may continue fruitful. The Hopi Indians keep the placenta for twenty days, until the child is ceremonially named; then it is buried.

#### PLACENTA AS MAGICAL CHARM

Some beliefs concern the evil which the placenta can work on outsiders rather than the good which it can work on the child. In Sumatra the placenta is washed and placed in a pot (1) which is then either buried or thrown in the river in order to avoid any unfavorable influences which the placenta might have. A person might otherwise have his feet or hands chilled by it. Some peoples in the interior of Java believe that the placenta has the power to propitiate evil spirits and have developed the pleasant custom of making a small raft on which the placenta is placed, surrounded by fruit and flowers. Oil lamps are placed around the edge of the raft, which is floated down the river at dusk as an offering to the crocodiles or rather to the spirits whose souls inhabit crocodiles.

In parts of Northern Europe, the placenta of a black cat is useful to exorcise evil spirits, and in Galicia, Spain, the owner of a cow will cast its placenta into a stream to ensure a good milk supply. A remarkable custom (6) in the Province of Obolonskii causes the placenta to be tied firmly to the head of the child, who has been washed in the mother's urine as a cure for convulsions. It is also believed that the newborn may be made to breathe by stroking with the placenta.

The placenta is thought to have special properties affecting fertility and ensuring quick labor. A woman in Kalocsa, Hungary, who wants no more children burns the placenta and places the ashes in her husband's drink. On the other hand, Javanese women eat the placenta as a means of increasing their own prolificness. In Moravia (now part of Czechoslovakia) and Morocco (7) also, the placenta is thought to be an excellent cure for infertility.

There are many curious customs concerned with the eating of the placenta. All carnivorous animals consume the afterbirth, and it has been said that this habit would prevent a predatory beast from recognizing that a birth had recently taken place and that a newly born animal and a weakened mother were in the vicinity. Female chimpanzees have been seen (6) not only to eat their placentas but, during and after labor, to drink their urine. Among the human species, Chinese women are given dried placenta to hasten labor and have great faith in a draught of boy's urine, while in Italy women may eat parts of the placenta (3) to aid lactation and to prevent afterpains.

A seventh century Chinese book (3), entitled *Collection of 10,000 Feats of Magic*, advocates use of the placenta of a live-born girl for use in a spell intended to turn oneself into a young girl. Hungarian countrywomen are known to bite the placenta to hasten the completion of labor, and in the Province of Chkalov in Russia the placenta is used as a form of birth control (3). After careful burial with the umbilical cord upwards, the woman will continue to be fruitful. If dug up and turned with the cord downwards, she will have no more children. The procedure can be repeated at will.

In Styria, Austria, and also parts of Italy, blood of a fresh placenta (3) is used to remove birthmarks and scars, and powdered, dried placenta is an infallible remedy for epilepsy. Until around 1835, the dried placenta of a first-born child was sold by pharmacists for this purpose, and there exists a report that a few years prior to 1884 in Saxony an individual consumed a fresh placenta in secret, beneath the gallows of a criminal, to cure himself of the same condition.

Gypsies who lived in Transylvania, Rumania, had faith in the power of placental bloodclots (3) to cure infant ailments and believed that whoever ate the clots would not feel the cold.

## PLACENTA IN RELATION TO TREES

Trees have always been thought to have a particular significance in relation to human and spiritual beings. Examples range from the Legend of the Golden Bough (1), imprisonment of spirits in trees (the immurement of the sprite Ariel by Sycorax in *The Tempest*), and the Mexican "Tree of Life" (3), to the modern practice of planting a tree to commemorate an important event. It is not surprising to find magical lore of the placenta redolent with similar references. Customs such as that practiced in Yorkshire, England (1), of hanging the placenta of a newly born foal from a thorn bush in order to secure luck and the custom of certain German peasants of hanging a calf's placenta from an apple tree lest the cow not calve next year are unsophisticated in conception.

In certain small islands of southwest Timor, the placenta is variously disposed of. One method involves placing it in a basket and hanging it high in a palm tree to fertilize it. The person who disposes of it must look neither to the right nor left and must be joyous, gay, and singing. He must climb nimbly up the tree so that the child will be agile and lucky. In other parts of these islands the placenta is buried under a coconut palm, which then becomes the property of the child.


So close is the relation between man and tree believed to be in some communities that a tree is thought to be or to contain the external soul. In Baganda (1) if a stranger eats the fruit or drinks the beer from a sacred tree, he is thought to carry off the ghost of the child's placenta. In Bali and occasionally in Russia, France, Italy, Germany, England, and places as far apart as New Zealand and Calabar, Nigeria (4), a tree is planted when a child is born. This grows up with the child and becomes its "life-tree."

A similar custom exists among the Swahili of East Africa. After the birth of a child, the placenta and cord are buried in the courtyard and the spot marked. Seven days later the hair of the child is shaved off and placed on the spot together with finger and toenail clippings. A coconut palm is then planted, and the child, as the tree grows, will point to it and say, "This palm tree is my navel."

The Hupa Indians who inhabited northern California used to split a small Douglas spruce (4), and the placenta and cord were inserted in the cleft. The tree was then tied together and thereafter acted as an index of the child's health and fortunes.

## THE PLACENTA IN ANCIENT EGYPT

There exists a substantially accurate record of the anatomical features of the placenta dating back, if not to prehistory at least to pre- and proto-dynastic Egypt. Early Egyptian beliefs concerned the duality of souls (8), one of which inhabited the individual and the other, his placenta. Be-

cause of their Hamitic origins, it is not surprising that there is a great resemblance between the customs surrounding the royal placenta of the Baganda and of the Egyptians. Some of the elaborate Baganda customs have been discussed, in particular the practice of bearing the royal placenta on important occasions in procession before the king. A similar processional custom was employed by the Egyptians, although the placenta was carried in representation rather than reality. There are several depictions of a standard, born before the monarch, the earliest of which (9) is at Hierakonpolis. Again reminiscent of the Baganda, the bearer of the "meat" (placenta) standard is clean-shaven, in distinction from other standard bearers, who are bearded. The custom, first observed in the records of the Old Kingdom, continued through the Twelfth Dynasty down to Ptolemaic times. From the anatomical point of view, interest resides in the accuracy of observation recorded in the standards, which show a bilobed organ with cord attached (detached and symbolic in later dynasties). That these were indeed representations of the placenta rests upon evidence (8) that it is depicted as a bilobed organ with cord of correct proportions and showing membranes folded back; that it is of correct color—dark brown tinged with red as depicted in the Nesinekht-taui papyrus; and that its hieroglyph  resembles a transverse section of the human placenta showing the villous spaces.

The cult of dualistic souls accounts for many instances of duplicate construction of tombs; for example, the Step Pyramid of Saggara was built by Neter-Khet of the Third Dynasty, whose body was buried at Bêt Khallâf. Menkau-Ra of the Fourth Dynasty built Her, the smallest of the three Great Pyramids at Giza, and a second tomb where he was interred at Abu-Roash. Remarkable as it may seem, there can be no other explanation than that the royal placenta was buried in an individual tomb. So magnificent, lavish, and gigantic a resting place for this small but miraculous object must give us pause, particularly as we now dispose of this organ by wrapping in newspaper and incinerating in the hospital furnace.

We may conclude that the early Egyptians were aware of the placenta as an entity, knew something of its anatomy, recognized its importance, and guessed its function. Knowledge of the Egyptians concerning anatomy and physiology of the placenta was therefore accidental and incidental, since these practical people in their medical learning were more concerned with cures than causes.

#### THE PLACENTA AND THE BIBLE

It is interesting that from the vast collection of folklore recorded in the Old Testament there is but one direct reference to the afterbirth. This occurs in Deuteronomy 28: 57 and refers to the eating of the afterbirth by the mother in the time of siege. On the other hand, it has been pointed



out by Sir James Frazer that the words addressed to David by Abigail (I Samuel 25: 29)—“Yet a man is risen to pursue thee, and to seek thy soul: yet the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God”—may mean that there was belief in an external soul which could be housed in a safe and secret place. Margaret Murray accumulated considerable evidence (10) that the “bundle of life” refers to the Egyptian custom of wrapping the royal placenta in a sacred bundle with which the king’s health and destiny were linked. When the king became old, ritual murder commonly took place. Originally the king himself was killed; later a substitute victim was sacrificed, and the “bundle of life” containing the royal placenta was opened and rewrapped, an act symbolizing the re-birth of the king. A high-ranking official was appointed to perform this ceremony, known as “the Opener of the King’s Placenta.” Abigail’s words to David therefore may imply that David’s safety was assured because his “bundle of life,” as well as his soul, was in the keeping of the Lord himself.

The strange superstitious and religious practices connected with the placenta are elemental because they concern the very survival of the species and because they are invariably the outcome of a genuine but mis-directed search for truth. If we cannot doubt the intellectual sincerity of the beliefs, we cannot question their importance. A custom that is comical when viewed from our position of less ignorance was once profound; a practice, both evil and disgusting to our prejudiced refinement, was once essential. Understanding the antecedents of knowledge cannot fail to sharpen our perception, and whether these antecedents are religious, scientific, or metaphysical ultimately becomes insignificant.

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