

*On some Customs of the People of Old Calabar
relative to Pregnancy and Parturition.* By ARCHIBALD HEWAN,
L.R.C.S.E., Medical Missionary at Old Calabar.

(Read before the Obstetrical Society, 8th June 1864.)

THE paper that I have before me refers to some of the customs of the Old Calabar people relative to childbearing; but, before proceeding to the reading of the paper, I should mention how it is

that I have the honour to stand here before you this evening. In a communication that I had from Professor Simpson lately while in Old Calabar, containing instructions regarding a patient of his out there, he requested to know something of the customs of that people in pregnancy and parturition. I made a few notes, therefore, and handed them to him the other day; but, instead of taking them, he suggested that I should come here and read them to your meeting this evening. To that proposal I hesitated to consent, as the notes were so few that it seemed to me like making game of the Society to stand up to read them; but as Dr Simpson urged the matter, I could not resist him.

On thinking over the matter since, it occurred to me that it might not be uninteresting, nor perhaps altogether out of place, to add a few notes, by way of enlargement, relative to the customs of the women *before* pregnancy, and the treatment of their children for some time after birth.

The betrothal of a Calabar female (among the upper classes) takes place for the most part very early, sometimes so soon as within a few days after its birth,—and this betrothal is not necessarily to a young man of a corresponding age, but rather, and very commonly, to a man who is already a father of a family, and a husband of many wives; and by no means unfrequently is it to a greyheaded grandfather. I have thus seen a strapping man, in the prime and vigour of life, dandling on his knees and kissing a baby some two or three weeks old that he expects to become his wife, and mother of his children, some fifteen or twenty years after. Pointing to her, he says, "You see my new wife." The poor little thing is thus, willingly or not, made over to him—"dashed" to him, as he says. He in turn "*dashes*" it many little things, comes now and then and nurses it, is entertained by its prattle, watches over it, and fulfils in great measure the part of a guardian. The child gets to know him, and perhaps to *love* him (they learn early to know each other's temper), and when she grows up and becomes his wife, she calls him *Father*. The term *father* is the common one given by Calabar wives to their husbands. The presents which the guardian-husband makes to the child-wife constitute in a great degree a part of the marriage-contract, so to speak, which the father and the mother dare not break without being liable to *Elgbo* law,—paying back every item of present that may have been given, and a great deal more; which is sure to be demanded by the bereaved husband.

At about the seventh or eighth year, the process of fattening for marriage begins. For this there are at least two periods, and sometimes three. The little girl is taken away from the town to a plantation or farm. There she is placed under the care of some experienced woman, whose pride and anxiety it is to give her new charge a development and form creditable among her sex. She now dwells in a dark apartment, and is daubed from head to foot with a thin paste made of clay, or marl and water. This chokes up the

pores, and as she is not permitted to exert herself in any way, she never perspires. It is said, moreover, that the clay keeps the body cool. For food, she has placed before her constantly a large supply of yam and plantain beaten soft like mashed potatoes; and as she has nothing else to do, she amuses herself by making out of this mass balls of a convenient size for swallowing. This she does between the palms of her hands, dips them into a kind of soup in which palm-oil predominates, swallows them one by one, never chewing, but bolting them as one would do a pill. After she has taken a number of them, she takes a few mouthfuls of water, which helps to fill up the interstices. A certain quantity of food must be taken every day, or she is punished. Having reached the desired dimensions, she is washed, and decorated with beads and a thick roll of worsted around her loins, and is taken to call on her husband and her friends, who congratulate her on her development and beauty. The roll of worsted alluded to is her only covering. It extends all round the loins, is from two to three inches in diameter, and is made out of Kilmarnock night-caps of various colours teased down and twisted. They make the different colours harmonize very beautifully, and viewed abstractly, one would say it was a very pretty dress.

This being over, she is allowed to go freely about again for a few years, living now mainly among the wives of her future husband. She soon loses all her lately acquired fulness and bloated appearance, and becomes quite nimble and healthy-looking again. But now comes approaching womanhood. The mammae begin to enlarge, and the catamenia appear. This function being fairly established, she is brought under an operation—a surgical one—namely, amputation of the clitoris. The instrument used is a common razor, and the operator is a woman. Here I may state, by way of explanation, that no man except the husband dares touch or come near a betrothed or married woman, not even to shake hands,—a thing not known between the sexes. Hence the women are the chief surgeons; they practise the art freely upon *either* sex, whereas the man can only practise it upon his own. As to the *modus operandi* of removing the clitoris, I am sorry that I am unable to say anything, never having been fortunate enough to see the operation performed. For the most part it is done out of the town. Once I had what I thought a good opportunity of seeing it, but the young lady heard that we were to come, and her native modesty rebelled; so that ere a medical friend and I arrived it was all over. All that we were permitted to see was the instrument—the razor—lying beside her.

Hæmorrhage does not, so far as I am aware, frequently attend the operation. I know only of one case. I was called out of church one Sunday by a guardian-husband to go and check the bleeding which had resulted from an operation of this kind. The operation had been performed in the morning, and the oozing had

continued all day at an unusual rate; but, unfortunately for me, ere I arrived, they had applied some powerful styptic, and the bleeding was stopped. I was not permitted to see it, but they consoled me by saying they would send for me if it gave way again.

This process of cutting off the clitoris is common to all young women, whether betrothed or not. If not done, it is looked upon as a great disgrace; and she loses caste among her sex. So also is the want of circumcision regarded among males. And separation of husband and wife has taken place when, after marriage, the want of the corresponding operation was discovered in the one or the other.

After this operation the great and final period of fattening commences that is to usher in the nuptials. The young woman is again taken out to the farm, and there she goes through a course similar to the first one, somewhat more severe and of longer duration. She is again covered over with the chalky paste, and she eats and drinks incessantly. If the development of the mammae has not taken place sufficiently by this time, it is assisted by means of the cupping gourd. She now soon begins to fatten and to bulge out; her abdomen enlarges; about the loins and waist are seen thick convoluted folds; and the eyes begin to disappear under the enlargement of the cheeks. But matters do not always go on thus smoothly. It sometimes happens that the constitution gives way and breaks down under this rigorous and unnatural treatment, and the patient dies suddenly, or what is almost as bad, becomes feeble, hysterical, and sickly, and she is looked upon as *spoiled*.

Passing over the ceremonies connected with the marriage, let us look at some of their customs in pregnancy.

The principal signs of pregnancy noticed by them are the suspension of the menses, the darkening of the areola around the nipple, and a blanched ash-coloured appearance of the face and upper part of the breast, with yellowish spots scattered over them. The *areolar* sign is a well known one, and is considered pathognomonic. So much so, and so important a sign is it deemed, that one of the main objections urged by the men to the women wearing clothes, which we try to introduce among them, is that this valuable sign would be in a great degree lost to the public—the common covering of a Calabar woman being merely a strip of cloth half a yard broad around her loins.

During the catamenial flow the woman never leaves the house if she can help it. She sits during the day on a night-stool with a vessel underneath. The usual period is from three to five days. They date the commencement of pregnancy from the suspension of the catamenia, and count by *lunar* months, from one full moon to another.

At the third month they administer medicines, *to prove*, as they say, the *value* of the conception. They regard three kinds of conceptions as disastrous: 1st, Conception of twins; 2d, Conception of

an embryo that will die before birth; and, 3d, Conception of one that will die soon after birth; and so for the purpose of voiding these at as early a period as they think that the conception has fully taken place, they administer medicines.

These medicines are administered by the mouth, *per anum*, and *per vaginam*. By way of the mouth, and by enemata, first. If a bloody discharge from the vagina follows, it is assisted by an application direct to the *os uteri*. For this purpose they employ one of three herbs, one a euphorbia, another a leguminosa, and another an amomum. The steminal end of the leaf-stalk of the euphorbia, with its exuding juice, is pushed up the vagina. On the same part of the leguminous one is placed a small quantity of guinea pepper, chewed into a mass with the saliva. This *guinea pepper* is a species of the amomums. In the course of a few days the abortion may take place. But it is not abortion *pure and simple* that is desired; it is conditional, as I have already said. It is only to procure it in the case of one of three conceptions, either of which being, in their estimation, unnatural, they consider to have little or no hold upon the uterus. But it not unfrequently happens that the measures employed are too severe: serious constitutional disturbance and organic lesions take place, and death ensues.

The seventh month is regarded by them as a bad one. Many abortions are said to take place then.

As pregnancy advances the woman is generally sent away to a farm where she can live quietly and free from the excitements and bustle of the town; and more than that, to be out of the reach of witchcraft. Barren women, and women who abort, commonly attribute their misfortune to the evil eye of some neighbour.

With reference to parturition:—While in labour the patient moves about, or if she sits, it is on a low stool or log of wood. The midwife squatting before her with hands oiled, uses steady gentle pressure on the parietes of the abdomen from above downwards and forwards, helping, they say, the child to find its way down. While the child is being born no assistance is given; it passes out, and is allowed to lie between the thighs of the mother till the placenta comes away, however long that may be. The funis is then cut with a razor, and the child is removed. The mother, very soon after, has a large potful of chop placed before her, which her husband had been busy preparing for her during her labour, and she is expected to take a large quantity of it. Around her abdomen is tied what is meant for a bandage. It is simply a handkerchief twisted so as to make something more like a cincture than a bandage, and it is placed right over the hard contracting womb.

The child being removed, is rubbed over with fine sand, after which it is washed with soap and warm water. The juice of the fruit of one of the amomums, pretty acid, is then squeezed into its mouth, after which it gets a supply of tepid water. It is not allowed to suck for two or three days, during which time it gets nothing but water.

Indeed, water seems to form one of the principal portions of its support for some time to come. The mother's breast is generally redundant with milk, dropping out not unfrequently, and the child quite able to suck largely, yet a large quantity of water is given it once at least every day. Every morning while the child is being washed, water is occasionally thrown into its mouth. This is continued for several minutes, during which the child gasps and struggles. It is done, they say, to distend the abdomen, and make it capacious for afterwards taking plenty of milk and food to accelerate its growth. Should the mother be absent any day for a few hours, the child is kept quiet by filling its stomach with this cheap liquid. They acknowledge its great use in this respect. It is a remarkable fact in connexion with the large amount of cold water forced into the stomach of their infants that enlargement of the spleen is very common among them—far more common among the infants and children than among those of greater age.

The period of suckling continues till within a few months of the next parturition. This does not generally take place for two or three years after the last; the husband not cohabiting with his wife for eighteen months or two years. Sometimes, when no subsequent pregnancy takes place, the child is allowed to suck on at his own pleasure till he choose to give it up.

Fruitful wives are reckoned the favourites. Those who do not bear give their maidservants to bear for them, and count the offspring as their own.

In the middle of the doorway of a house, where there has been a birth, may be seen a bundle of green leaves suspended by a string. This is the way they take to advertise a birth.

Twins are looked upon as monsters, and are destroyed: the mother herself taking the initiative in their destruction. An earthen vessel, such as they use for carrying water, is brought to her. She then lifts them up one after the other, and places them in the vessel. An attendant then carries them out to the woods, and there they are left to perish from exposure, or to be devoured by wild beasts. More frequently the voracious ants that go about in large colonies find them out, and eat them up in a few minutes.

Should the mother die in childbed the living infant is buried along with her.

Such are some of the customs of the old Calabar people: very curious and very cruel they are; but I am glad to be able to add that they are now being considerably modified and abolished under the teaching and influence of the missionaries.
