

MATERNITY SUPERSTITIONS OF THE FILIPINOS.

BY

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SUPERSTITIONS are, of course, not peculiar to any one people or time. There are certain general superstitions which, in a slightly modified form, are practically of world-wide distribution; there are others peculiar to ages, times, and races; and there are still others peculiar to countries and localities.

In common with other countries, the Philippines has its share of medical superstitions and its own particular brands of magic for the cure of all ills. Being a young country with less experience in the customs of modern civilization, many of the superstitions are of very primitive character. Some of them are dangerous, but many of them are harmless, except where they interfere with the application of scientific methods in the relief of suffering.

During the last few years the more subtle methods now in vogue in older countries are being introduced, so that this is fast becoming

a fruitful field for patent medicines, pseudoscientists, cultists, and others who hold sway in other countries.

There is a belief among the Filipinos of the lower class that children become sick of fever as a result of extreme pleasure coming to some other person or when the child has been frightened by an animal. In order to discover the person or animal causing the disease, "tawas" is performed which consists in putting a piece of alum on the fire and the person or animal is guessed from the different figures formed by the smoke. If the disease is caused by a person, an invitation to call at the house of the sick child is made, and this person deposits a small amount of his saliva in the mouth of the child who then is rapidly restored to health. "Tawas" is practised rather extensively, and it is possible that it is means of transferring communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis and syphilis.

There is also a belief that eruptions, especially scabies, should not be cured, because if cured they may reappear in the internal organs.

In a certain district in Tayabas province, the people of the lower class believe that new-born babies should not be cured of illness for they are angels, and that if they become sick and die it is because God wants to keep them near Him.

Midwives in this locality believe that the fetus of the eleventh pregnancy attended by them should die, in order that they may be considered good midwives. "From this I infer", the physician making this report says, "that the majority of midwives, if not all, have committed infanticide which is, of course, a crime that should be prosecuted."

Recurrences of illness of any kind (binat) are prevented by burning fowl feathers beside the sick person.

One of the most extensive therapeutic customs in the Philippines is the so-called "buga" which consists of masticated herbs—frequently betel leaves, areca nut, lime—mixed with saliva; it is applied directly from the mouth to the different skin eruptions, such as, eczema, erysipelas, and impetigo, and especially those eruptions of serpiginous character which are called "abas" (snake). Children covered with scabies from head to foot sometimes die from septicemia in consequence of the practice of "buga."

In the provinces over 90 per cent. of all deaths occur without medical attendance; some people do not call a physician on account of being poor and unable to pay for his services, while the majority believe that medicines from drug stores are not suitable for them in view of the fact that they are being fed almost exclusively with vegetables, and for such there is no better remedy than the herbs

prescribed by "mediquillos" or by some neighbor. The "mediquillos" are trying for their own benefit to keep this belief alive among the common people. In most places in the Philippines, the "mediquillos" are more frequently called than the physicians, and sometimes they succeed in making small fortunes at the expense of ignorant people. They usually charge from 50 centavos to 2 pesos or more per visit, and they are frequently paid in palay, hens, eggs, fruit, etc.

There are many persons in Manila as well as in the provinces who die without medical attendance, but whose funerals are held with pomp and ostentation. If the family is out of money, their clothes, jewels, house, lands, or draft animals are pawned in order to get money to meet the expenses of the funeral and to celebrate a feast during nine consecutive days (diaruhan 6 bankayan) or only on the fourth day (apatang arao) or the ninth day (katapusan).

In Tayabas there are persons who have pawned their farms or their cocoanut plantations in order to secure money for the expenses of weddings, baptisms, or funerals. Sometimes they become unable to redeem their properties, and as a result they are compelled to become tenants instead of landlords.

It is a custom in the Philippines among the poor class to help the family when one of its members dies. The neighbors come to the house of the deceased and deposit in a dish, especially prepared for the occasion and placed near the cadaver, 10, 20, or 50 centavos, or more, according to the financial standing of the visitors, in order that the family may be able to pay funeral expenses. While the sick person is still alive, no one cares for him even if he has nothing with which to buy medicine or pay for the medical service. The kind feelings of the neighbors are only shown when a member of society has already disappeared and whose life might have been saved if the kind feelings of the relatives and neighbors had been shown in due time.

Superstitions regarding conception and childbirth are particularly common among the less educated people, in consequence of the superstitions many queer maternity practices are encountered.

The more usual superstitions and the faulty maternity customs as practised in most countries have been published and exposure of the irregularities has been an important factor in improving midwifery practices.

It is no reflection on the educated class of Filipinos to discuss the faulty and frequently dangerous customs of their own ignorant classes, which after all are no worse than those encountered in older

countries; and just as has happened elsewhere publicity should lead to better service for the poor.

Most of the irregular, dangerous and queer superstitions of the Filipinos have been published in various scientific journals and books. These publications have been consulted and freely quoted in this article.

Particular mention should be made of the exhaustive report of the Government Committee on Infant Mortality which acting under special law, with special appropriations and under the Chairmanship of Dr. Musgrave spent two years in accumulating data on all phases of infant mortality. One chapter of this book is devoted to "Medical Superstitions."

Dr. Rebecca Parish, Dr. F. Calderon, Dr. Acosta Sison, and others have published articles on this subject and extracts and quotations from these are freely used here.

Among the most common superstitions regarding pregnancy and childbirth are the following:

When a woman suffers from any disease during pregnancy or an accident takes place during labor, it is said "na amuyan" (she has been smelled). It is believed that there is an enormous animal whose sense of smell is so powerful that the odor of a pregnant woman is recognized by it at a long distance and that when such person is discovered by this animal she suffers death during pregnancy or during labor.

It is said that a pregnant woman must not stop at the door when she enters her own or another's house, otherwise the fetus will not come out when the time of delivery arrives; she must not lie down across the grain of the wood or bamboo forming the floor, because a transverse presentation of the fetus will be the result; that in cooking rice she must not scorch anything in the fire, in order to avoid bowel movement during labor; that wood must not be placed in the cooking stove top end first, so as to avoid breech presentation of the fetus; that she must not tie a handkerchief around her neck, in order to avoid twisting of the cord; and that she must not sew the clothes for her body, to avoid imperforated anus in the child.

To facilitate the expulsion of the placenta, a pot cover is placed on the head of the parturient; to restrain a puerperal hemorrhage, red silk is tied around the thumbs and big toes. Besides this, the midwives compel the parturient to assume a squatting position and a very strong knot of the hair is made, with the object, so they say, of preventing the blood from running toward the head.

Frequently during the months of gestation the ignorant woman's

peace of mind is constantly disturbed by the many superstitious beliefs that are recounted from generation to generation, and are steadfastly adhered to and heeded. The young women especially are in continual mental terror lest some of these things be violated, and the consequences are dreadful to contemplate.

If any one stands in the door in the presence of a pregnant woman it is a sure sign that at the time of her labor the child will also stop in the door of the uterus.

The prospective mother must not step over the tether of a pony, while out walking, or a difficult labor will surely result.

Very tight belts and strings, worn about the waist during pregnancy, will insure an easy delivery and will also prevent the child growing too large.

Many times the pregnant woman is forced to engage in the most arduous exercise, a favorite one being grinding ricē; this causes an easy delivery and is certainly effectual, as the babe is sometimes born at the mill.

During the course of even a normal pregnancy it is necessary for the midwife to make frequent examinations, and not infrequently she considers it proper, to "change the position;" or "place the baby," and she receives 10 centavos for each such service.

Perhaps the most prevalent and terrifying of all the superstitions is concerning the "aswang," an imaginary being, half man and half beast; indeed, there are many "aswangs," and it is said that in Tayabas Province there was an entire family of beautiful girls, all of whom suddenly became "aswangs" one night. This creature prowls around at night and is the terror of the patient and all her relatives, because he watches to get the blood of the patient and to steal the child; and as he lives both in the air and upon the land, and is guided in his night depredations by a bat, it is next to impossible to feel free from him at any time. During the latter months of pregnancy it is necessary for the women to sleep under a black cover, so that the "aswang" cannot see her; and frequently there is a fire kept burning under the house, so that the smoke may keep him away. It is exceedingly dangerous to be out after dark, and if the woman does go out at this time it is necessary to wear the hair loose down the back, which is her protection against the "aswang" influencing her child and causing him also to be an "aswang."

As a rule, the Filipino woman is very indefinite as to the time when her pregnancy will terminate, and consequently she is rarely prepared for this event; however, very little preparation is required,

except the "midwife," who is considered quite sufficient for her needs, and in many instances she cannot afford this luxury. In some provinces, it is said that men act as assistants and are better for this purpose, as they are stronger and can apply more force in kneading, pressing, squeezing, pulling, and pushing, as all of these operations are considered essential. Short stout clubs, made of wood, stone, or burned clay, sold in the public markets, are used a great deal for pressing, pushing, and kneading, and are considered much more effectual for the purpose than is the hand.

To ease the labor pains, "bagabaga leaves" are burned near the patient, that she may get the odor. The waist is tied about tightly during labor, to make sure that the child passes downward instead of upward.

In some cases, the delivery of the placenta is awaited before the cord is cut, but if the placenta is not expelled within an hour, at least, it is pulled away by traction on the cord, and if this proves too difficult the cord is severed and the placenta is left in the uterus. Guava leaves soaked in warm oil and placed on the abdomen are said to aid in the expulsion of the retained placenta.

The placenta with a paper and pen, buried under the house, will insure a bright and intelligent child.

It is said that a soup made from small pieces of the placenta and given to the mother as her first postpartum nourishment, prevents fever, weakness, and other forms of illness.

The mother is given large quantities of rice and urged to eat, so that the abdomen will be filled, as it was so large before. The waist is tied after labor, to prevent the abdomen filling full of wind when the patient breathes deeply, and also to prevent the blood from coming up and out of the mouth. The bones of the sacro-iliac joint are separated during labor; therefore a strong band is placed about the hips and tied tightly by two men, one bracing himself on either side, with his feet against the patient's body. Sutures are not required, because an external douche of an infusion of bayabas leaves will heal lacerations in three days. The patient's abdomen is rubbed with oil for twenty-five days, so the uterus will become soft and send out the blood, thereby becoming small. Hemorrhage is encouraged by propping the patient up with pillows (sometimes as many as seven); this also prevents the uterus going high in the abdomen, and causes the bad blood, which must be gotten rid of, to drain better. Frequently the patient is almost exsanguinated, and death from hemorrhage may occur without any effort being made to check the bleeding.

Sleep is not allowed, because it produces a tendency to insanity. Frequently the patient is allowed to sit up and even to stand, within a day or two after delivery. After-pains are greatly helped by the patient's getting the odor of burning deer skin. After three days, the procedure of "replacing the uterus" takes place. For nine days it is thought bad to eat salt or drink cold water. About the tenth day the woman is bathed with a little warm water, and smoked by having a mat enclosing her and a jar of burning leaves; following this, if there is a suspicion that the uterus is still 'raw', a fire is made of charcoal in a large earthen pot, and the patient stands astride this, surrounded by blankets and supported by her friends. It requires an hour of this treatment to cause the uterus to "dry-up."

For three months the woman should not put her hands in cold water, drink cold water, nor take a cold bath. This rule evidently does not apply to laundresses, whose occupation calls them to the river or spring.

No antiseptic precautions are known; old rags, old clothing, and the family bedding are used about the parturient.

Recently, I saw a woman who gave a history of eclampsia, with the following treatment: While she was unconscious she was placed in a sitting position on a red-hot stove; when she regained consciousness she was suffering from a severe burn, which produced extensive loss of tissue and scars larger than my two palms. It is said that this hot-stove treatment is quite common.

All sorts of superstitions are in vogue concerning the care of the infant; it must be guarded from the "aswang" and must be fed with curios concoctions. The cord is dressed with ashes, powdered cocoanut shell, or hot tallow. I saw one new-born child with many little cauterizations about the umbilicus, made with a hot bamboo, as a cure for convulsions.

In cases of continuous crying of the child, which is considered the premonitory symptoms of convulsions, a piece of alum is rubbed on the frontal region, on the palms of the hands, and on the abdomen. The alum is then burned, and they observe with attention the course of the smoke, from which they decide the kind of disease the child is suffering from. The carbonized alum is then dissolved in water, and a certain amount of it is administered to the child.

It is not the custom of the people to celebrate fiestas (nine days) when the dead person is a child under seven years of age, but from seven years and up it is considered an adult, and such nine days of fiestas are required.

The practice of the "intruders" in Tagalog provinces is different

from that used in Ilocano provinces. In the former, a solution of cogon roots is used as an oxytocic, and in many cases when the head of the fetus is noted in one side of the hypogastrium, which is the normal position, the pregnant woman is subjected to a method known as "buncal," which consists in changing the position of the fetus by placing the head in the median line. At the time of the childbirth, ordinarily an assistant known by the name of "salag" intervenes. The "salag" pulls on the fetus to facilitate its expulsion, and this person may be a man or woman. The result of this practice is in many cases, the laceration of the perineum.

If the expulsion of the fetus is not obtained by means of "salag," the parturient is put in a sitting position on the edge of a chair and then the perineum is compressed, after which the parturient is again placed on the bed.

Obstetrical complications, such as eclampsia and puerperal mania, are attributed to the "aswang," and evil spirit, and to the "mang-kukulam," a witch, said by superstitious persons to be the torment of parturient women.

In cases of puerperal hemorrhages, the intruders order that pieces of bamboo be burned under the house, in order to keep the parturient warm; and in one known case the house caught fire as a result of this practice.

After childbirth a tight band is put around the waist, then compression is made by two persons, one sitting on each side of the parturient and pulling on the ends of the band, it is said, to close the genital line. This practice is known as "el sara."

It is believed that a person who menstruates must not stand on a mat of the parturient, because it causes colic to the sick woman, and that a person standing by the door of a house prevents the expulsion of the fetus.

Massage lasts eight days, at least, in the case of the mother, and is so strongly made that the patient suffers a great deal, weakening her unnecessarily.

Hemorrhages and septicemia are frequent complications in the provinces, and prolapsus is produced by untimely massages.

The parturient must not take a bath before thirty days, which is the puerperal period to them.

The "saclap" is seldom used by the Tagalogs, but hot baths are frequently used.

After birth the child is washed in lukewarm water; some use cocoanut oil instead of lukewarm water to clean the grease away.

The children are not fed during the first three days, but a purgative

of castor oil is given, pure or mixed with "jarabe de ruibarbo," or "achicorias" (10 grams daily of the mixture), and after ten days the purgative is again given, but the dose is increased. After the three days of purgative, maternal or artificial feeding is given and continued irregularly until the age of six months, when cooked rice or any other available food is substituted. Young children receive the treatment of "mainit," which consists of hot applications to the scrotum and umbilicus.

The Ilocana woman takes a bath immediately after childbirth and during sixteen consecutive days. Immediately after bathing, she stays for the whole day beside a hot stove, in order to heat the pelvic regions. The "mainit" in this case consists of a piece of clothing moistened with alcohol, which is placed over the perineum and tied around the waist. This is called "bahag." The "saclap" consists of a receptacle with burning charcoal, on top of which is placed a kitchen utensil known as "diquin," over which the parturient is put. This is not practised in bad weather.

In addition to the loss of life due to incapability of delivery on the part of the mothers, children attended by these midwives usually die, either at the time or after the childbirth, the cause being the untimely purgative and awful treatments to which they are subjected. Plenty of purgative, massage, "amorgoso" juice, and "upus" plaster constitute the therapeutic measures of these intruders.

In cases of apparent death of children when they are delivered, the umbilical cord is squeezed from the placental juncture to the abdomen, and then the placenta is burned. Sometimes the index-finger is introduced into the infant's mouth and strong pressure over the palate is made to open the nasal fossæ.

When a child is born face downward, another operation known in tagalog as "boyon boyon" is made, the purpose of which is to induce the expulsion of excrement of greenish color, known as "sawan" in tagalog and "calamayu" in Bicol, which is, so they say, the cause of convulsions. The operation is made in the following form: The hands and feet of the child, joined together, are raised, leaving the spine on the bed; a quick extension is then made, after which the hands and feet are loosened in a rough way.

Inguinal hernia is avoided by hot applications to the testicles. This is usually made every day during the first week after birth, and after the bath during the remaining few weeks.

When a child of tender age is attacked by convulsions, burning pieces of cocoanut shells, which have been previously cut in a triangular form, are applied around the mouth, and after this

operation a small amount of "boa" (snake) gall or iguana gall diluted in milk or water is given.

Not all of these customs are wholly bad; even some of the most crude are primitive expressions of a pathetic struggle after the light and a blind effort toward self-preservation and the perpetuation of the race.