

Having a Baby the Malayan Way

THE MALAYS have a tremendous fondness for children, and perhaps nothing emphasizes better the hold that their old-world customs have upon them than their common saying, "*Biar mati anak, jangan mati adat,*" which means "Let the child die, but not the custom."

Among the strange customs are those pertaining to the period of pregnancy and childbirth, which is believed to be a time of increased activity of evil spirits, a time of great hazard. From the time of conception, an expectant Malay mother will thus take precautions to avert imaginary dangers to herself and her unborn child.

The spirit most feared in connection with pregnancy is the "Pontianak," supposedly the ghost of a stillborn child. The shape of this spirit is thought to be a vampire that claws into the belly and kills

the woman and infant. Another vampire is said to be the "Langsuyar," a beautiful woman whose long hair conceals an aperture in the back through which the internal organs may be seen. The "Langsuyar" is commonly held to be the spirit of a woman, sometimes unchaste, who died in childbirth. Not to be overlooked is the "Penanggalan," viewed as a human head with long entrails, a vampire that sucks the blood of the victim. When a woman dies in childbirth, eggs will be placed under her armpits and needles in her palms, in the superstitious belief that she will not be able to fly and thus become a vampire.

A Malay woman during pregnancy will wear an iron nail in her hair or carry a sharp instrument such as a knife or a pair of scissors, in the belief that these spirits of the dead will flee at the sight

of iron or sharp metal objects. Another repellent used is lime juice, which the mother-to-be applies to herself.

Weather conditions, together with lunar and solar eclipses, are given considerable regard. A pregnant woman must not venture out in hot rain or yellow sunset, as these are times when spirits are supposed to become very active. Various rituals are carried out if there is an eclipse of the moon. In the State of Perak, during an eclipse of the moon, it is common for the woman to be taken into the kitchen and placed beneath a shelf where the domestic utensils are kept. She will be given a Malay-made wooden rice spoon to hold and must remain there until the eclipse passes. The spoon is supposed to ward off the spirits. In the case of an eclipse of the sun, the mother must bathe beneath the house in order that her child will not be born half black and half white.

A father, too, takes certain precautions to safeguard his wife and unborn child. During the first three months of his wife's pregnancy he takes special care in his treatment of birds and fish. According to the superstition, if he were to lame a bird or accidentally slit the mouth of a fish in re-

moving the hook, retaliation could result to his child by its being born lame or with a harelip. Homeward bound, a father-to-be would take a roundabout way, so as to lose any trailing spirit.

When the time comes for the birth, the local *pawang* or wizard will select the place for the birth by dropping a sharp-pointed object and marking the first place where it lands. There the birth must occur. At that point the *bidan* or midwife, who is given great respect in the community, takes over, and her word becomes law.

The selected place of birth will be surrounded with thorns and thorny leaves and bitter herbs; the thorns to scare off the vampire who will be afraid to entangle her entrails thereon, the bitter herbs because they are unpalatable. Nets will be hung about the house because the complexity of them is bound to confuse the spirits. Palm leaves are plaited and dressed as dolls to divert the attention of the evil eye from the baby. Perforated coconuts will be hung in the doorway, in the belief that the multiplicity of entrances and exits will misdirect the spirits. Never to be forgotten is the placing of iron nails between the sheets or under the childbed.

Long labor is attributed to the wife's sins against her husband and can include the act of adultery. It can be easily seen how such superstition can cast doubt on the good morals of a woman and bring suspicion and unhappiness to the home.

To protect the newborn infant from spirits that are believed to cause disease, the midwife will take a mixture of betel juice, areca nut juice and oil in her mouth and spit on the baby. She will also give the child a name, which will be permanent only in the event that misfortune, such as illness, does not come upon it. In that case the child must be renamed to mislead the spirits. After the cord is cut, the child is washed in cold water and wrapped in a black cloth to ward off evil spirits.

If a boy is born in a caul, a membrane sometimes enclosing a child at birth, it is a good omen. Probably because it is reputed that one born in a caul can attain a hardness of body which will make him impenetrable to weapons and, upon death, to decay. The caul is preserved and may be ceremonially disposed of. In royal births it is anointed with gold dust or cut across a gold ring to symbolize power.

If a boy resembles his fa-

ther, it is a cause of consternation. Malays believe in reincarnation, and this resemblance is an indication that the vital spark is about to leave either the father or son. The child's ear is immediately pierced to distinguish him from the father. Conversely, if a male child resembles his mother and a female the father, it is considered a good omen.

To determine the future prosperity of the child, it will be placed on a brass or tin tray on which are weighed an amount of rice, seven cloths and an iron nail. Each day one cloth is removed, and on the last day the rice is weighed again. If there is an increase in weight, it is thought that the child will be prosperous.

During the first weeks, the child is still considered to be in particular danger from the attacks of the spirits, so he will be spat on morning and evening and his bed will be smeared with sacrificial rice. These and many more customs are carried out by the Malays to carry them safely through the period around childbirth.

The Malays make up about 40 percent of Malaya's population; of the remainder, about 38 percent are Chinese and about 11 percent are In-

dians. The Chinese have absorbed some of the superstitious practices of the Malays and hold many in their own right. When a Chinese baby is one month old, he must be given a taste of whatever food is cooked in the home that day so that when he grows up he will have a strong stomach and be able to take all kinds of foods. On that day, too, he must be taken outdoors so that when he grows up he will not be afraid of the spirits. Another Chinese custom is to shave the head of a young child so that it will not gray prematurely. It is common for a Chinese baby to have one of its ears pierced immediately after birth to protect it against evil spirits.

The Indian, like her Malay sister, may wear a sharp nail in her hair to protect herself and her unborn child from evil spirits. In addition she may wear around her neck or waist containers enclosing prayers or perhaps a bracelet of ginger on her wrist.

Much importance is attached to the physical appearance of the Indian babe.

From his birth the head and nose bridge will be molded to give them good shape. Arms and legs will be stretched for good physique. Soot in castor oil is applied to the eyebrows to cause growth. A black or silver cord tied around the stomach is believed to protect the child from evil spirits and dangers, and it is not uncommon to see a little dark-brown body running about, clad only in a black cord about the tummy. The first hair of an Indian baby is spoken of as "God's hair" and must be cut only by a priest on a festival day.

Government spokesmen repeatedly urge the people to take advantage of the benefits of modern medicine. Throughout this country are to be found many medical centers and hospitals where treatment of disease can be obtained. However, because of the many superstitious beliefs prevalent among these diverse peoples that sickness and death are the result of attacks by spirits, many times modern medical treatment is rejected in favor of the *bo-mohs* or local medicine men who practice the magical arts.

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