

CHAPTER II

PRENATAL INFLUENCES AND BIRTH CUSTOMS

FOR Ibibio women motherhood is the crown of life, and therefore "jujus" thought to have the power of granting fertility or removing the curse of barrenness are held in greater reverence than all others.

Juju is beyond all else the force which dominates the lives of people such as these. The word itself is said to be taken from the French *joujou*, and was given to the fetish images everywhere seen because early traders of this nationality looked upon them as a kind of doll.

Many West-Coasters use the terms juju and fetish as if they were interchangeable, yet there would seem to be a distinct difference between the two. The latter appears to apply only to objects inhabited by the indwelling power of juju, which "includes all uncomprehended mysterious forces of Nature. These vary in importance from elementals so powerful as to hold almost the position of demi-gods, to the 'mana'—to use a Melanesian term—of herb, stone, or metal. In another sense the word also includes the means by which such forces may be controlled or influenced; secrets wrung from the deepest recesses of Nature by men wise above their fellows, or merci-

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

fully imparted to some favoured mortal by one or other of the deities." *

The word fetish is " derived through the Portuguese *feitico* from the Latin *facticius—facere*, i.e. to do. This shows the original conception at the root of the word." (It) " was probably first applied to images, idols or amulets made by hand, and later includes all objects possessing magical potency, i.e. bewitched or 'faked.' " †

Holy pools and rocks, many of which are regarded as the earthly manifestation of Eka Abassi, and are often connected with the rites of her son and spouse, Obumo the Thunderer, hold first place among jujus, in the opinion of the greater number of Ibibio women. True it is that her fame and glory have—save to a few initiates—long since been eclipsed by his. Yet " water, earth and stone, the three great 'Mothers,' are almost always to be found within the grove of the All-Father. Each of these is thought to symbolise a different phase of motherhood. The first, for instance, may perchance be taken as a representation of the Ibibio Aphrodite. She is all that is soft and alluring, while the fish which teem in her waters are the sign of boundless and inexhaustible fruitfulness. She never grows old or parched, neither may she be roughly used, burnt by fire, nor torn and cut by hoe and spade, as is the case with her homelier sister the Earth. This second member of the trilogy may perhaps be described as the working mother. She it is who produces the crops to nourish her children

* "In the Shadow of the Bush," p. 49. P. Amaury Talbot.

† " Magic and Fetishism," pp. 66-7. Dr. Haddon, F.R.S.



A JUJU SHRINE, WITH JUJU LEAVES IN THE FOREGROUND

Prenatal Influences and Birth Customs

in life, and provides their last long resting-place when work is done." *

A term in common use for expressing the approach of death is to speak of the time "when my mother shall take me," because all men are laid to sleep in her gentle arms. It is for this reason, above all others, that Ibibios cling with such jealous tenacity to their land and so fiercely resent the least hint at a change of tenure. The proudest landowners of our own northern climes, who, at no matter what cost of poverty or hardship, hold to ancestral acres, can hardly be moved by so intense a passion at the thought of their loss as are these poor sons of the soil at the merest hint of a change in the land laws. Such a thought seems like outrage aimed at a loved one; for to them, Isong, the Earth Mother, is, in a way, nearest and dearest of all.

Stones and rocks again are also looked upon as givers of fertility; mostly in conjunction with Obumo himself. The genius of the stone is sometimes named Abassi Ma, and is looked upon in a special sense as the consort of the Thunder God. She it is who, more than all other manifestations of Eka Abassi, is thought to have the power to remove the curse of sterility from barren women, or send new babes to desolate hearths. It is naturally hard to induce primitive peoples to explain fundamental ideas such as these, yet, from what could be gleaned in the matter, it seems not over-fanciful to think that the trilogy of motherhood symbols may be taken to represent three aspects of womanhood—mistress, attracting and allur-

* *Edinburgh Review*, July, 1914. P. Amaury Talbot.

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

ing ; house-mother, drudge and provider ; and consort, the sharer of dignities and honours.

Of the sacred pools, some two score in number, which we were privileged to be the first "white men" to view, that of Abassi Isu Ma, near Ikotobo—a rumour of which was first brought to my husband's notice by Mr. Eakin of the Kwa Ibo Mission, who, later on, induced a guide to lead us thither—is perhaps the most famous. In his company, one Sunday afternoon, we set out, and at length, after passing along a narrow path through thick "bush," reached the farthest point to which ordinary mortals had hitherto been allowed access. Beyond this only the head priest had been permitted to penetrate, in order to lay offerings within a hole in the sacred rock which faces the entrance and is the outward visible sign of the Great Mother herself.

"Low down on the face of the stone, beneath its veil of moss, and about a foot above the surface of the water, loomed a circular hole, partially filled by offerings laid there by the Chief Priest."

"A strange superstition has grown up around the rock. To it, or rather to the place of sacrifice just below, for, as has already been mentioned, the spot itself is too sacred for the near approach of ordinary mortals, come wedded couples to pray that babes may be born to them. Barrenness is regarded, not only as the greatest curse which can fall to the lot of man or woman, but also as a sign that the bride was a disobedient daughter. When a maid refuses to obey her mother, the latter says :

" ' Because you have been a bad daughter to me

Prenatal Influences and Birth Customs

no child shall be born to you, that thus atonement may be made for your undutiful behaviour.'”*

This idea is surely near of kin to the warning voiced in the “Maxims of Ani”:

“Give thy mother no cause to be offended at thee, lest she lift up her hands to the god, who will surely hear her complaint and will punish thee.”†

A little earlier in the same interesting document a man is bidden “to be most careful how he treats the mother who suckled him for three years and carried bread and beer to him every day when he was at school.”

When an Ibibio woman has transgressed in such a manner, and punishment has in consequence befallen, her husband leads her down to the sacred pool. At the place of sacrifice they give offerings to the priest. Thence the woman wades up stream almost to the entrance of the sacred pool, where she makes obeisance and prays:

“O Abassi Ma! Keeper of souls! What have I done to anger Thee? Look upon me, for from the time I left the fattening-room in my mother's house I have never conceived, and am a reproach before all women. Behold! I bring gifts, and beg Thee to have pity upon me and give me a child. Grant but this prayer, and all my life I will be Thy servant!”

The priest then takes an earthen bowl, never before used, dips it into the sacred water, and pours some over the woman, who bends down so that face, arms and body may be laved by the stream.

* “By Haunted Waters.” P. Amaury Talbot—to be published shortly.

† “Osiris and the Egyptian Resurrection,” p. 216. Dr. E. Wallis Budge.

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

When she rises again the little party climb up the steep bank to the place where the rest of the offerings lie. These are cooked and eaten by husband, wife and priest; after which the suppliant returns home, strong in the hope that Isu Ma will take away her reproach. . . . When a child is granted in answer to such a prayer, custom ordains that he or she shall be named 'Ma,'* in gratitude to the Great Mother. This fact alone would appear sufficient refutation of the charge that love and gratitude play no part in West African religions.

So soon as an Ibibio woman discovers that she is about to bear a babe, old wise women of the race gather round her to teach the thousand and one things which she must or must not do in order to secure the well-being of the new-comer.

All over this part of the country grows a herb with blue flowers, the spikes of which bear blooms in shape like those of a giant heliotrope, but of vividest cobalt, while the stems look as if stained with indigo. The under sides of the leaves, too, are often blue veined, and, from a distance, stretches of this plant, which springs up upon old farm-land or any cleared space, look like a splash of summer sky caught in the green of the bush. Large posies of this flower are picked by the friends of the mother-to-be and rubbed over her body that her pains may be lightened.

The greater number of *tabu* imposed at such times relate to food. For instance, no snail, especially the great *Acatina marginata*, may be eaten, lest the babe

* "By Haunted Waters." P. Amaury Talbot.

Prenatal Influences and Birth Customs

should be afflicted with a too plentiful flow of saliva. Nor may an expectant mother eat pig, lest the skin of her child should become spotted in consequence, nor of the fat white maggots to be found in palm trees, lest its breathing powers should be affected. The *tabu* on pig, which is strictly observed here for mothers, is much like that reported from Guiana as imposed upon fathers, whose "partaking of the agouti would make the child meagre, or eating a labba would make the infant's mouth protrude like the labba's or make it spotted like the labba, which spots would ultimately become ulcers." * So far as could be learnt, however, an Ibibio father is not under the necessity of abstaining from any kind of food.

When a woman on the verge of motherhood chances to pass along a path crossed by a line of ants, she may not step over them, lest her unborn babe should be marked with a bald line round the head, supposed to resemble the "ant road." To avoid such a catastrophe she must first pick large leaves and lay these over the spot where she means to cross. Next she should collect sand and strew it over them, for only when the leaves are thus almost covered may she step across.

Mr. Elphinstone Dayrell informed us that among the natives of the Ikom District, of which he was Commissioner, the curious superstition obtains that should a man or woman chance to tread upon a millipede no further children would be born to them. Among Ibibios, too, these creatures are regarded as the harbingers of misfortune.

* "Magic and Fetishism," p. 13. A. C. Haddon, F.R.S.

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

Amid both Efiks and Ibibios the ancient custom still obtains that locks should be undone and knots untied in the house of a woman who is about to bear a babe, since all such are thought, by sympathetic magic, to retard delivery. A case was related of a jealous wife, who, on the advice of a witch doctor versed in the mysteries of her sex, hid a selection of padlocks beneath her garments, then went and sat down near the sick woman's door and surreptitiously turned the key in each. She had previously stolen an old waist-cloth from her rival, which she knotted so tightly over and over that it formed a ball, and, as an added precaution, she locked her fingers closely together and sat with crossed legs, exactly as did Juno Lucina of old when determined to prevent the birth of the infant Hercules.

Sir James Frazer, in the "Taboo" section of his wonderful book "The Golden Bough," gives many examples of similar beliefs. To quote a few instances:

"In north-western Argyllshire superstitious people used to open every lock in the house at childbirth. The old Roman custom of presenting women with a key as a symbol of an easy delivery perhaps points to the observance of a similar custom."

"Thus, among the Saxons of Transylvania, when a woman is in travail all knots on her garments are untied, because it is believed that this will facilitate her delivery, and with the same intention all the locks in the house, whether on doors or boxes, are unlocked." *

"The Lapps think that a lying-in woman should

* "*Volksthümlicher Brauch und Glaube bei Geburt und Taufe im Siebenburger Sachsenlande*," p. 15. J. Hillner.

Prenatal Influences and Birth Customs

have no knot on her garments, because a knot would have the effect of making the delivery difficult and painful. In ancient India it was a rule to untie all knots in a house at the moment of childbirth. Roman religion required that women who took part in the rites of Juno Lucina, the Goddess of Childbirth, should have no knot tied on their persons." *

The temptation to quote from Sir James Frazer, which besets one at every turn, must, however, be resisted as far as possible, since, did one but yield to it, even to a comparatively small extent, such is the charm of style and vast learning of this great anthropologist that one could no longer venture to claim for this little record that it was written "without intervening male influence."

* * * * *

Throughout the whole of her life no Ibibio woman may eat of a double yam or double plantain lest she bear twin children—the dread of which misfortune looms so large as to darken the existence of Ibibio women. Wretched indeed, in the old days, was the lot of any unfortunate mother of twins, since, though most of the men now deny this, averring that twin babes were only hated and feared as something monstrous and unnatural, a considerable number of women confessed that they, like those of many neighbouring tribes, believed that one of the pair at least was no merely mortal offspring but that of some wandering demon.

Till a comparatively short time ago such a birth was followed by the death of both mother and babes,

* "Taboo and the Perils of the Soul," p. 294. J. G. Frazer.

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

and, except where the fear of the white man is too strong, twins are not allowed to live even now. The custom is either to fling both little ones into the bush to be devoured by leopards or other fierce wood-folk, to offer them up on the beach to be eaten by vultures, or to kill one of them outright and starve the other, the bodies being then flung into bush or river.

Of late years this cruel custom has been modified to the extent that, after bringing about, or at least consenting to, the death of her babes, the woman is allowed to seek refuge in a town set apart for twin mothers. There she is still obliged to undergo "purification" for a period of twelve moons before being allowed to mix again with her fellows. In such circumstances it is customary, in some parts, for the husband to build a hut for her and take food thither once a week.

On one occasion not very long ago a wretched twin mother, driven out of her town, made her way to the nearest "twin village." It happened that most of the inhabitants had almost "cleansed" themselves, that is to say, had passed through the greater part of the twelve moons during which they were forbidden to mix with their fellows. Contact with another woman who had but just borne twins would have rendered them unclean once more, so they drove forth the wretched mother, who, weak and almost despairing, managed to reach the town where Mr. Eakin, of the Kwa Ibo Mission, was staying at the time. The unfailing charity of this good friend provided all that was necessary for the moment; then,



BEACH ON WHICH TWINS WERE FORMERLY OFFERED UP

Prenatal Influences and Birth Customs

as soon as the woman was sufficiently recovered, they set out together for the nearest "twin town."

It was midnight when they arrived, and none of the inhabitants would open their doors to this sister in misfortune. So soon, however, as they understood that she was no longer alone, but accompanied by one whose word they had long since learned it was best to obey, a great clatter arose. A woman, whose time of "purification" was almost at an end, turned out every pot, pan and chattel from her dwelling, lest they might be contaminated by the new-comer, and bore them to the house of a neighbour whose year of seclusion was also all but over. The sick woman was then allowed to take possession of the deserted dwelling.

At stated intervals markets are held by the unhappy outcasts, to which, under certain restrictions and precautions, others may come to buy or sell. On the way to one of these markets, should a "twin woman" meet one not defiled like herself, she must spring into the bush and remain hidden till her more fortunate sister has passed by, so that the "clean" woman may not be soiled by contact with one so befouled. Perhaps one of the saddest effects of this cruel superstition is the dread with which "twin mothers" regard their own offspring. Mr. Eakin told us that once, on entering a house to which he had hastened on learning of the event which had just taken place there, he found a pair of new-born twins lying in a little basket. The wretched mother shook with fear whenever her glance fell upon them. It is difficult indeed to persuade such women to

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

nourish their unfortunate babes, which are often only kept alive by the charity of Christian natives, or of women from other tribes who have come to settle in the neighbourhood. Such a case happened near Awa, in the western part of the district, where Mrs. Etete, a Christian woman from the Gold Coast, brought up to us twins and their mother, whom she had saved from death the year before.

Sad indeed is the lot of girl twins rescued from the fate ordained by the law of their race; for, unless some fortunate chance takes them away from their own country, they are shunned through life. No matter where they may strive to hide their secret it somehow gets known that they are "twin women," and no man would dream of approaching such with thoughts of love or marriage, save those who have absolutely no regard for their reputations. Only a short time ago a libel case was brought before my husband in one of the native courts. In this the plaintiff claimed heavy damages for defamation of character. During the course of the evidence it transpired that the words so bitterly resented had been—"He said that I was such a man as would be willing to marry a 'twin woman'!"

The gravity of this statement from the native point of view can readily be understood when one remembers that, by Ibibio law, any man found guilty of intercourse with a "twin woman" could be put to death. Even now it would be looked upon as sufficient cause for granting divorce to a wife if she could prove that her husband was keeping a "twin woman" as his sweetheart.

Prenatal Influences and Birth Customs

Also, should such a charge be proved against a member of the Idiong Society—one of the most powerful secret cults of the region—he was immediately expelled. On August 21st, 1913, a case in point was brought up before the Native Court at Ikotobo. In this, Ekkpo Akpan, son of the head priest of Idiong, stated on oath :

“The Idiong Society has a law that if any member should take a ‘twin woman’ as sweetheart he must be expelled. It was found out that Nwa Adiaha Udo Ide was a ‘twin woman,’ and therefore we decided that her husband should be turned out for having married her. In revenge for his expulsion the woman came and said that I also had been her sweetheart. She made this charge because my father is the head priest of Idiong, and she wished to be revenged upon him, through me. Formerly she had accused my brother of the same offence. The case was tried in this Court, and the members decided that her statement was false. Judgment was therefore given in my brother’s favour.”

With great difficulty and after much persuasion a woman of the tribe was induced to impart to me the secret reason which lies at the root of this dread of taking a girl twin in marriage. Shaking with fear at the thought of even mentioning so abhorrent a thing, my informant said in a voice so low as to be barely audible :

“Since the girl herself is not as other women, but part offspring of a demon, so the souls of children born to her go, sooner or later, to join their kindred, the evil devils. When the husband dies also, and

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

comes to the ghost town, he finds the spirits of his accursed brood waiting to claim him as their father, and shame him in the sight of all the shades."

In this there would seem to be an echo of the ancient Babylonian and rabbinical belief "that a man might have children by allying himself with a demon, and although they would naturally not be visible to human beings, yet when that man was dying they would hover round his bed, and, after his death, would hail him as their father." *

No "twin mother" may pass through, or even near, a sacred water. This prohibition would seem also to apply to their offspring, but, as so few of these latter have hitherto been allowed to live, no case of actual transgression by them has come to our notice.

Once, in passing through the Okkobbor country near the town of Ube, we came to a little dell crossed by a raised path from the higher land beyond. On either side of the road was marshy ground, and, towards the middle of the glen, a stream of water flowed right through the earth beneath the path.

We were looking at this and wondering how it had been formed, when a group of women and children passed by on their way back to Ube, their native town. When questioned about the water, they threw out their hands with the graceful gesture usual among this people in disclaiming knowledge, and answered, "Mi ifiokka," i.e. "I don't know."

It was quite obvious that they knew but would not tell. The prettiest and most richly dressed among

* "The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia." R. C. Thompson. Vol. 1., p. xxvi. See also "Burial Customs."



THE PATH OVER THE MAGIC WATER WHICH SHRANK UNDER-
GROUND TO AVOID THE POLLUTION OF A TWIN WOMAN

Prenatal Influences and Birth Customs

them was wearing four silver bangles, each bearing the emblems of Faith, Hope and Charity; so her reason for disclaiming knowledge was easily read.

My husband asked if she were a Christian; whereon she at once, and proudly, answered in the affirmative. He then said, smiling and holding up an admonitory finger, "But Christians may not tell lies!" Whereon they all burst into laughter, and she began to speak:

"In the old old days long ago, a magic water lay between the little hills, and through this no 'twin woman' might pass. Mbiam Ube was the name of the spirit of the pool, and to him the people of Ube used to bring offerings of palm-wine and rum, white hens and black cocks; for this was a strong juju for the granting of prayers.

"One day there came a 'twin woman' who was proud and of a bad heart, and paid no heed to the old laws. Right through the water she walked, but it shrank away from the touch of her, and since then has only flowed through the earth, beneath the road, that it may no longer be polluted by the feet of such as she. To this day no one drinks of the stream lest he should die, but offerings are still made to the indwelling juju, for fear that he might otherwise grow angry and harm our town."

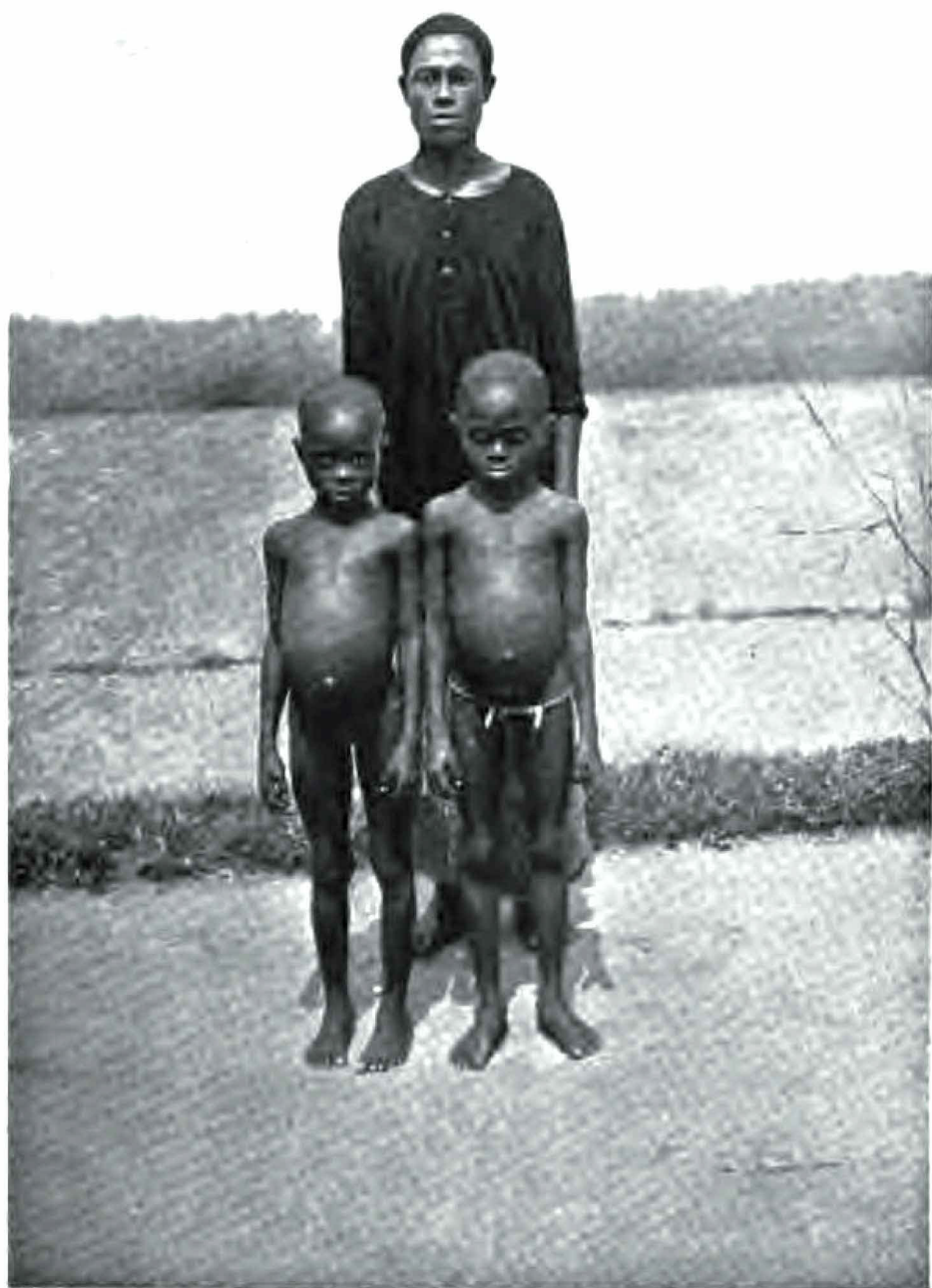
Fortunately missionary effort and the influence of white rule are now beginning to make headway against this dread of twins.

Once, near the end of our tour, on returning to Eket, the son of the head chief of a neighbouring town came to bring us the news that his wife and

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

sister-in-law had each given birth to twins on the same day, only a few hours before our arrival. He is a Christian, and knew himself and his family secure in the protection of Government; but his dancing eyes and happy air showed that, in his case at least, the old horror of twins was a thing of the past.

How different were matters before the coming of white men, is proved by the fact that one of the first acts of the "African Association" after building their factory at Eket was to establish, on their own grounds, a place of refuge for "twin mothers." This afterwards grew into the Eket "twin town."



ORON MAN, WITH TWINS WHOSE LIVES HE SAVED

CHAPTER III

BIRTH CUSTOMS (*continued*)

THE rumour of another "twin town" of a very different kind has lately reached our ears. It is given on the authority of Akpan Abassi of Ndiya, who asserts that he visited the place with five companions. Certainly his fame as a magician has been greatly augmented since this visit. The following is his story :

"About three months' distance from Ndiya on the far side of the Kwa Ibo River, when one has journeyed past Opobo and past Bonny which lie to the leftward, after marching for many miles to the north-west, one comes at length to a part of the land where white rule is unknown. Here there is a town called Ekeple Ukim, where none but women live. It is a famous town, and the women who dwell there know 'plenty medicine too much.' That is why strangers go thither, because they seek to learn both magic and healing from its inhabitants. Our people call the place by another name, namely, Obio Iban-Iban, i.e. the Town of Women.

"By the side of the road grows high bush, which, as the town is neared, arches over till the view is quite shut out. So thick are the bushes, that towards the end of the way one cannot walk upright,

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

but must bend down and in places even creep, especially where the bamboo clumps grow thick and high. When we had passed through this leafy tunnel, the prospect suddenly opened before us, and we saw the town, girt round with hundreds of giant cotton trees.

“Near to the main entrance bubbles a spring, the water of which is white like milk, because it flows over chalk. This the townswomen drink; but we refused it. Luckily, near by grew clumps of a cane, something like sugar-cane to look at, but with acid juice. This we cut and sucked, and its sap served us instead of water.

“When we entered the town the women left their occupations and ran up, crowding round us and asking by signs, ‘What do you want?’ Adding, ‘No man may come here!’

“As we did not know the language of the country we could only talk by signs like deaf and dumb people at home. When we tried to explain why we had come, an old wife said further :

“‘If you would live among us, even for a short time, each of you must sacrifice a fowl to our juju, otherwise you will die.’

“To this four of us agreed, but the other two said to themselves, ‘What these people say is mere foolishness. We are strong and well, and have our own jujus; therefore we will not sacrifice to theirs.’

“On behalf of the four who made the offering ordained the women prayed to the gods of the town that their lives might be spared; and this prayer was granted. For a month all of us were permitted to stay because the women saw that we were foot-



NDIYA BEACH
history-of-obgyn.com

Birth Customs

sore and weary, so they said that we might tarry for that space to refresh ourselves for the fatigues of the return journey. Longer than this we were not allowed to linger, so at the end of the time all six set forth once more; but the two who had refused to sacrifice died on the homeward way. Every day during our visit the women beat fu-fu and cooked soup, and set it out in a certain place. It seemed to be the custom for visitors to eat this, so we did so, and left money in exchange on the spot where the 'chop' had been found.

"At one place in this town was a great juju, the name of which we could not learn. On the top of it was a man's skull, and many skulls lay around. Hundreds of sheep and chickens wandered up and down in the streets, but not a single goat was to be seen, nor one solitary head of cattle.

"It was a very big town, and we wished to find out the reason why it was inhabited by women only. After a time we learnt as follows from neighbouring tribes:

"Once, long ago, at a town hereabouts, a woman bore twin children—a boy and a girl. Now, it was unlawful for twins, or the mother of twins, to dwell in these towns; so the inhabitants drove them off.

"It happened that the husband of the woman loved her very much. So he said, "If my wife may not live in this place neither will I. I would rather dwell with her in the bush." He therefore followed her, and built a home where they might all live together.

"In course of time the boy died, but the girl grew

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

strong and big. Again the mother conceived, and bore twins once more, a boy and a girl. A second time the boy died and the girl lived. A third time also the same thing happened.

“ ‘Now, all these girls grew up to be fine and tall, and when men passed by that way they wished to wed them. Each time, however, that a male babe was borne to any of these he died, and only girls were left. After awhile, therefore, the habit was formed of sending boy children away when they were still very small; while the girls remained and grew up, until at length they formed a big town. Even now, though they welcome lovers who please them, they will never let these stay for long. Boy babes are sent away to be brought up in the homes of their fathers, but girls must always remain with their mothers in Obio Iban-Iban.’ ”

Perhaps it is wrong to suspect our informant and his companions of other motives in visiting this mysterious town save that of the thirst for knowledge alleged by themselves. An air of retrospective pleasure ran through the man's account, however, possibly due to satisfaction in relating a rare—and indeed for this part of the world unique—experience. Unless my memory deceives me, certain similarities in his description and in that of the town of the Amazons given by Spruce in his book “A Botanist on the Orinoco,” would, I think, strike the most casual reader. At any rate, the lot of these far-off “twin town” women is much to be envied by their unfortunate Ibibio sisters.

One day, when after a very long march we arrived

Birth Customs

at Okon Ekkpo, or Jamestown, as it is more usually called by white men, we learned from the two lady missionaries stationed there in connection with the Primitive Methodist Mission that an event, rare amid races such as these, had just taken place—namely the birth of triplets to a woman of the town. No sooner was news of this occurrence brought to the Institute than the devoted missionaries set out for the house of the unhappy mother in order to make sure that the new-born should not be sacrificed according to the ancient custom of the tribe. They found the woman in a state of utmost terror, and it was only through constant visiting, and themselves holding and tending the unwelcome new-comers, that the mother was somewhat reassured and induced to nourish her offspring. They noticed that one of the three was stronger and bigger than the others, and to this the mother devoted herself to the neglect of its fellows, which were therefore not long-lived. So far as we could learn this is the first case recorded among Ibibios in which even one out of a triple birth has been allowed to grow up.

To show how rare is such an event among primitive peoples, it may perhaps be well to mention here that among the Ekoi and neighbouring tribes, so far as we could learn, the arrival of triplets had never been heard of, nor would such an occurrence appear to be regarded as within the bounds of possibility. Dr. Mansfeld, a well known German Commissioner in the South Kamerun, told us that once, when questioning a native on the subject, the man had smiled with a superior air and answered :

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

“Aber, mein Herr, mit drei Kindern Niederkommen ist nicht möglich! Eine Frau hat ja nur zwei Brüste!”

Had it not been for the presence of the missionaries and a fear that rumours of the deed might reach the ever-open ear of Government, the mother and her three babes would, in all probability, have been sacrificed. The power for good wielded by such white women as these missionaries can hardly be exaggerated. Young, almost childlike in appearance, the one with wide-open blue eyes and long braids of golden hair falling below the waist, the other with eyes of steady brown set in a face grown pale with overwork and strain, these two heroic women lived alone in a part of the district, which, although we personally have rather a partiality for it, is generally regarded as a kind of Alsatia for the whole region. The “Girls’ Institute,” for which at the time of the occurrence above related Miss Fisher and Miss Elkins had made themselves responsible, was founded some years ago by Miss Richardson, a member of the same mission, who later returned to resume charge of the educational department, while Miss Fisher (now Mrs. Dodd) has accompanied her husband to another sphere of missionary work. To our pleasure Miss Elkins still remained.

In that part of the district which lies round Awa a reason is given for the killing of twins which is quite unconnected with any idea as to demoniacal origin. The following is the local account of the cause of the custom :

“The first pair of twins sent to Earth, so our

Birth Customs

mothers tell, unfortunately came to the dwelling of a family poor and of little account. When news of their arrival reached the neighbouring chiefs and members of great houses, these gathered together in much anxiety at such an unprecedented occurrence, and consulted as to what should be done. 'Behold,' said they, 'this woman first bore one child. Now she has given birth to two together; should she continue to go on in the way in which she has begun, next time she may bear four, and after that six or even eight, and so on until her family surpasses any of ours. If poor people are allowed to grow "strong" at such a rate, what will become of us? We shall have no chance to seize their property on the death of the head of their house, nor to force them to serve us as before when their family was small and of little account and there was none to take their part.'

"That, so our grandmothers tell, is the reason why the murder of twins was started in the Awa country. Had the first twins come to a rich or powerful family there would have been no killing.

"Not long afterwards the king's head wife also gave birth to a boy and a girl, and a meeting of the townfolk was called to discuss the matter. The king and his relatives tried their utmost to save the lives of the babes, but the poor folk combined and said, 'They shall be killed, as were those of our woman.' The more the rich strove to save the chief's twin children, the more did the poor insist upon their death, crying, 'As you did to us and our babes, so will we do also unto you and yours.' That is the reason why twin children were killed even unto our own day. In the

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

country round Awa, however, no 'twin mother' is ever put to death, only driven forth from her town."

With this fear before their eyes, it is natural that women about to become mothers should consult a native doctor some time before the expected birth of their babes in order to learn from him if there is any probability of the arrival of twins. Should he answer in the affirmative, medicine is given by which the danger may be averted.

Next to the dread of becoming a mother of twins looms that of bearing a child into whose body some evil spirit has entered. This may be that of ancestor or kinsman undesirable on account of bodily or mental deformity, or because they come from a family tainted with "witchcraft."

So-called "birth-marks" seem to be quite common among this people, although such are here attributed to causes different from those assigned them in northern climes. An Ibibio baby is eagerly scanned for any sign which may reveal the identity of the indwelling Ego. Parents often notice some likeness to a dead friend, or trick of speech or movement in a child which to their minds shows that it is an old spirit reborn in some new body. A striking example of the way in which such deductions are made happened at Ndiya about ten years ago, and was told as follows :

"A man named Osim Essiet married a wife, and a little while before the birth of their first child he was attacked by an enemy and left lying in the bush with his head severed from his body. When he did not return, friends set out to look for him. After some time they found the corpse, bore it home and



VIEW ON THE CROSS RIVER, IN THE EKET DISTRICT

Birth Customs

laid it upon a native bed. When the young wife saw this horrible sight, she cried out and flung herself down by the side of the body, calling upon the name of her husband and entreating him not to leave her.

“Some weeks afterwards the child was born. Round his neck was the mark as of a line at the place where his father’s head had been severed, and, indeed, his neck is still shorter than that of most people. The townsfolk noticed this peculiarity, and felt sure, because of it, that the boy was really Osim Essiet himself come back to life again because he loved his wife very dearly and in answer to her entreaties that she might not be left alone. They therefore gave him, in his new incarnation, the same name as he had borne before.”

A somewhat similar case happened at Ikott Atako, near Eket, and is thus related :

“There was once a woman of this town, Etuk Nkokk by name, who, not long after she had left the Fattening-house, bore a boy. At first the babe was like other children save that he was very weak, but as the years went on he hardly seemed to grow at all, and by the age of twenty was not quite four feet high. One day his mother went out and noticed the fine strong children born to her neighbours. When she came home, she looked loweringly at her sickly son and said, ‘No other woman has a child like you! I wish you might die that I may be no more shamed by the sight of you!’ Not long afterwards the boy sickened and died, and before they brought the coffin in which to lay him for burial the mother said to herself: ‘This piccan gave me too much trouble!’

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

I wish to find some way of punishing him and preventing him from returning to life.' So she took thought, and at length cut off his right hand, saying to herself, 'Now he will surely be ashamed, and not come back into my family any more.'

"A few months later another child was born, but lo! it was the same boy come back again, as was plain to be seen because he had only one hand. When the people went to see the mother and the new-born babe, they recognised him at once for the one who had died, and, seeing the handless wrist, asked 'How could you do such a cruel thing to your firstborn?' She answered, 'It was because I did not want him to come back again, and thought he would be ashamed to show himself among us thus maimed.' The people said, 'It is a misfortune, but it cannot be helped! This is your punishment, and you must just do your best for him.' So the woman took their advice and did everything possible for the child, in consequence of which he grew up and is still alive, a little taller than during his first earth-life, but smaller than other men."

The mother of Chief Henshaw of Oron regards him as an example of reincarnation. The name Nyung, by which he is everywhere known among black people, means "thrice born"—an appellation which she gave him because her two first babes had died, and she believed that at his birth the same spirit came back once more; this time, not in vain.

The dread of the return of "wandering souls," who reincarnate only to bring trouble upon the family

Birth Customs

into which they have chosen to come, is common over the greater part of West Africa. Mary Kingsley thus describes the way in which parents seek to protect themselves against the infliction of these annoying spirits :

“When two babes in a family have previously died in suspicious circumstances the father takes the body of the third baby which has also died in the same way and smashes one of its leg bones before it is thrown away into the bush ; for he knows he has got a wanderer soul—namely a *sisa*. . . . He just breaks the leg so as to warn the soul he is not a man to be trifled with, and will not have his family kept in a state of perpetual uproar and expense. It sometimes happens, however, in spite of this that when his fourth baby arrives that too goes off in convulsions. Thoroughly roused now, paterfamilias sternly takes a chopper, and chops that infant's remains extremely small, and it is scattered broadcast. Then he holds he has eliminated that *sisa* from his family.

“I am informed, however, that the fourth baby to arrive in a family afflicted by a *sisa* does not usually go off in convulsions, but that fairly frequently it is born lame, which shows that it is that wanderer soul back with its damaged leg.”

Mothers seek eagerly for the first sign of resemblance to deceased relatives shown by a babe, and should no likeness be traceable, they watch to see which of the surrounding objects will first attract the notice of the new-comer. This custom is also recorded by Miss Kingsley in her characteristically lively manner.

Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People

“The new babies as they arrive in the family are shown a selection of small articles belonging to deceased members; the thing the child catches hold of identifies him. ‘Why, he’s Uncle John! See, he knows his own pipe;’ or ‘That’s Cousin Emma! See, she knows her market calabash,’ and so on.”