

## The Views of Primitive Peoples Concerning the Process of Labor\*

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THE most profuse notes to be gathered from the literature of the medicine of primitive man have to do with childbirth. There is probably no one assertion made in regard to him, which is so well known to the generality of civilized people as that which declares he is brought into the world with infinitely less of the travail of maternal suffering and with less of the pomp and circumstance that attends the arrival of an heir to our present first families. A careful examination of the testimony establishes much reason to believe that this is true, especially as to the pain suffered by the parturient woman. The impression to be gathered is that this belief has arisen fundamentally from phenomena exhibited by the primitive mother dependent upon her psychology and environment, and upon the general attitude of primitive man towards pain. There can be no doubt that close contact with a nature whose processes are governed by laws unmodified by the culture of civilized man, which to some extent has abolished avoidable physical pain, but to a larger extent has rendered man more susceptible to unavoidable physical suffering, lies at the bottom of this difference, but it is not everywhere apparent. However, it will be well to mention first the testimony which exhibits the childbearing woman in low social cultures as apparently standing in no pressing need of the luxuries of chloroform and "twilight sleep." However that may be even in the reindeer period of culture in Europe there was a need felt by parturient women for help at the time of childbearing. Upon a reindeer bone Piette has discovered a scene delineated which is called the "Rite of the stride over the pregnant woman."<sup>25</sup> A male reindeer is standing over the prostrate form of a woman in labor lending her strength and efficiency in the bearing of a child by his presence. The soul of the reindeer we may find, quoted by Mr. Fiske<sup>26</sup> from Tylor apparently, as being decoyed into a sick Lapp or Chukchee to act as a tonic for his recovery and in this picture we see that useful animal again exerting his beneficial powers.

Williams<sup>27</sup> in 1858 said of the Fijian women that generally they suffer little in parturition. The Tongan mother on the birth of the child gets up directly and bathes in some pond or river and on her return eats freely of food, but the Fijians profess to keep to the house

\*See Review of Literature on Menstruation in this Journal, January, 1921, on Conception and Puerperium, May, 1921.

a few days and some lie at their ease a full month. The Australian black women are pounded and speared and cut and knocked and abused, until no doubt the bearing of a child or two is a mere drop in the bucket of their miseries which they make light of. Among the cannibals of Australia "the birth of a child does not seem to give the mother much trouble. She goes a short distance from the camp, together with an old woman, and when the interesting event has taken place and the child has been washed in the brook, she returns as if nothing had happened, and no one takes the slightest notice of the occurrence."<sup>28</sup> Curr<sup>29</sup> in his résumé of the accounts of the Australian races says: "Aboriginal women generally suffer less, on the whole, during parturition than white women do. I attribute this to their bodies being allowed to develop in childhood without the restraints and injuries which result from the use of stays, corsets, and other civilized appliances." Roth<sup>30</sup> quoting from Davies says of the Aborigines of Tasmania: "When a woman was taken in labor, the tribe did not wait for her, but left her behind with another woman and she afterwards followed as best she could." In the Andaman Islands "no instances of difficult delivery are known"<sup>31</sup> and they rarely suffer much. In New Guinea "the pregnant woman works in the fields until the beginning of the labor pains."<sup>32</sup> Sometimes the woman stays a month in the hut after childbirth. "I have seen one of them walking around with her new-born child two days after delivery." Among the Malays "delivery, as a rule, was attended by very little difficulty, the woman usually resuming the ordinary avocations after three or four days' seclusion."<sup>33</sup> Brown<sup>34</sup> speaks of delivery among the Melanesians and Polynesians as "generally easy," the woman being soon able to busy herself about her domestic duties, sometimes even a few hours after the event. Of the Bedouins of the desert Burckhardt<sup>35</sup> said in 1831 "their women suffer but little during parturition and they are often delivered in the open; when this occurs the mother rubs and cleans the child, as soon as it is born, with earth or sand, places it in her handkerchief and carries it home. If she feel the symptoms of labor while mounted on a camel, she alights and is delivered behind the camel, so that no person may see her, and then immediately remounts." In Alaska "the majority of Thlinget women suffer very little, and some not at all, when their children are born. They have been known to give birth while sleeping."<sup>36</sup> Schoolcraft<sup>37</sup> has this to say of the North American tribes: "Parturition, with the Indian female, is seldom attended with severe or long-continued suffering; it is generally very much the contrary, and leads to but a slight interruption to her ordinary pursuits. To linger back a few hours on a journey in the forest, is often the whole time required by the confinement; and there appears in most cases to be but little, if any premonition. A wife has been known to sally into the adjoining forest in quest of dry limbs for firewood, and to return to the wigwam with her new-born child, placed carefully on the back-load. The wife of Saganosh was passing with her husband and family in a canoe, along the precipitous sand-cliffs of Lake Superior, which are called Grandes Sables. There is, in general, but a strip of beach between the precipices and the water, and the scene is nearly as denuded of trees or bushes as the deserts of Arabia. But she landed in haste, and described a few bushes in a depressed spot, which sufficed for her accouchement chamber, and in a few hours was in her canoe again with the newborn babe. Their exemption from the

usual sufferings of childbirth may be said to be the general condition of the hunter state, and one of the few advantages of it which the female enjoys above her civilized sister. But it will be seen to be the simple result in obstetrics of the continued exercise in the open air of the Indian woman, and her consequent hardihood." Again he says: "It is an established rule, that pregnant women be entirely alone at the time of delivery; and this rule is rigidly adhered to. Nature seems to have fortified them with strength to undergo the operation without assistance. On the 12th of December, 1790, four women came from the white ground, ten miles from Little Tallassie, to sell horse-ropes to the beloved man. The day was cold and rainy, with a sleet of snow; they stayed all night. About midnight one of them, a young woman, was taken in travail; her mother was with her, and immediately ordered her to take some fire and go into the swamp, about thirty rods from the outhouse where they slept. She went alone, was delivered of her child, and at ten o'clock next morning, being bare-footed and half-naked, took the infant on her back, and returned home through the rain and snow, which still continued to fall, without the least apparent inconvenience."

Doubtless this kind of testimony might be increased in amount and perhaps in force. On the contrary, many are the instances related of comparatively painless childbirth by civilized women,—women delivered one day who do the family washing the next. Doubtless also, except for conventional usage and prejudice, considerable numbers of the modern women who now languish for weeks under the fluttering care of the monthly nurse, are quite able to be up and around in a day or two after parturition. While this seems all very probable, it is impossible to calculate the number of women, who under such a regime would perish or would be invalided for life. In other words we simply see here, by this analysis, the process at work, with which we are all more or less familiar, in the popular biological discussions of the day,—the selection of the unfit,—that is unfit for life under savage conditions—perhaps not too fit for civilized conditions. It is not worth while to push the argument further but we may at once turn to the evidence to be gathered which points to the conclusion that the wild woman also has her "bad times," to the evidence presented by selection "in the doing." First a conjecture of Avebury from prehistoric evidence: "From the numerous cases in which the bones of an infant and a woman have been found together in one grave, it would seem that if any woman died in childbirth, or while nursing, the baby was buried alive with her, as is still the practice among some Esquimaux families," This may be due to the vicious habits of indolence, charged against the cave woman as against her of the modern boudoirs. Many of the figurines, found in the caverns, where the Cro-Magnon or the Grimaldi race produced the wonders of the Aurignacian era, when of women, depict her in the enceinte state; her corpulent condition in contradistinction to the representations of man, who is never shown as obese, argues Osborn,<sup>38</sup> intimates her highly fat and nutritious diet and her sedentary habits. As for the Esquimaux: "For a certain length of time after a child is born the mother must remain in her own home, visiting no other tupic or igloo. The period for which this limitation holds good varies, sometimes reaching to the length of two months."<sup>39</sup> Doubtless this limitation is a sort of taboo, and little more can be said for our own "lying in" periods. We have seen the sharp line drawn between

the customs of some of the Fiji women and the neighboring Tongans, as related by Williams. The report of Hale<sup>40</sup> would indicate also that differences exist among the Fiji women as to the time allotted for their lying-in period as they do among us. "Parturition is not usually severe, and some women have been known to go to work within an hour after delivery, others, however, remain under the nurse's care for months. It is the prevailing opinion that hard work makes the delivery more easy. After childbirth the women usually remain quiet, and live upon a diet composed of young taro-tops, for from four to eight days, after which they bathe constantly." We shall see that not only, according to Stuhlmann,<sup>41</sup> in the heart of Africa some of the Wambuba women die in childbirth and that postmortem cesarean section is performed in order that mother and child may be buried separately, but according to Felkin<sup>42</sup> in a neighboring tribe cesarean section is performed on the living woman for difficult labor. In West Africa death from delayed labor occurs, but it is looked on as a disgrace. "The body of a woman dying in confinement is treated with contumely and is burned as is everything else belonging to her."<sup>43</sup> The Papuan women, according to Neuhauss,<sup>32</sup> are so fearful of the pains of childbirth that they attempt to prevent the continuation of pregnancy. Some understanding of the anatomical changes, giving rise to severe pain in parturition is entertained by the Chuckchees of Northeastern Asia. "Immediately after the delivery, the body of the woman is tightly bound around the hips with a cord in order to bring the bones of her body in their former position. The Chuckchee believe that, without this, the woman will become sickly, and that her life will be shortened."<sup>44</sup> In some of the North American tribes<sup>45</sup> the most accomplished of the medicine-men practiced a primitive surgery aided by external manipulation and otherwise in difficult labor. Among the Polynesians generally "any difficult case was attributed to witchcraft, and prayers were offered to the spirits of dead ancestors to counteract the spell."<sup>46</sup> Of the Ainu<sup>47</sup> it is said that especial care is given to childbirth and various magical measures are in use to quiet the afterpains. In Schoolcraft's work, Williamson<sup>48</sup> refers to tedious labor among the Dacotah Indians, for which the rattles of a rattlesnake are shaken to stimulate the sluggish energies of the tardy child lingering in his mother's womb. If a woman of the Lushei Kuki clans<sup>49</sup> in India has difficulty in bringing forth, a fowl is killed and magic rites are practiced to help her.

It seems, from this cursory review of the existing testimony, that it is a question of considerable doubt, to say the least, if, given the greater hardihood in the bearing of pain, the lot of the wild woman in her pains of childbearing is less severe than that of her civilized sister. Much has been said of the smaller heads and the larger female pelves of the primitive races of womankind, but the anatomic studies in support of this have been insufficient. The interference of modern science has ameliorated woman's sufferings and often has saved her life, but there is no reason to suppose that other differences than those of environment exist.

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