Myths about Childbirth

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"Deitar ao mundo é também viajar através da sua própria história e talvez através da longa história das mulheres" \(^1\)

Leite de Vasconcelos, Tradições Populares de Portugal, 1882

Scientific knowledge does not spread through all social classes and all places at the same time. This fact explains why ancient wisdom and traditions have survived the centuries up to the present time.

Throughout pregnancy, labour and childbirth, women and their newborns have always been protected by society. Due to the organic instability of these life periods, societies have created individual as well as collective rules of behaviour which, passed down from one generation to the next, have sought to safeguard the gestation and development of every new being. Dating back to ancient times, these rules have slowly and imperceptibly been modified by the introduction of more innovative practices. However, the process of knowledge formation and transformation has never eliminated those old customs entirely. By reading the bibliographical sources of different periods of medical history, we can identify the roots of that knowledge and of those practices which were later relegated to the ambits of magic and religious medicine.

The early Greek Naturalists developed a critical spirit and pondered over matters such as life, health and disease. They explained all diseases as the imbalance of humours and prescribed the necessary procedures to regain humoral balance. The human being was a microcosm that followed the same rules as the macrocosm and was therefore a reflection of the universe. The logos named the entities and established benign or malignant connections between them. The similarities of the signals (shape, colour, function) provided the basis for medical practices. These signals, when spreading

\(^1\) To give birth is to travel back through History itself and through the long history of women.
from one entity, or body, to the next, gave rise to an event. Though discredited by medical science, these concepts have dominated popular thinking up to the present.

It was formerly believed that women needed to regain humoral balance every month through the discharge of a surplus of humour. This turned women into impure beings who transmitted this condition to everything they touched during their menses. A balance was desired between the woman’s body and the social body and consequently, birth control depended on the community, which defended itself against any excesses. Infertility was the woman’s fault and led to the development of magical and religious practices in order to re-establish the unconsummated union through calling a saint’s name that stood for the aqueous medium of the maternal womb or because of its phallic symbolism. According to James George Frazer (1854-1941), the two laws of magic revealed two ways of understanding how bodies caused things to happen to each other, in the image of a world where all things make up an interrelated whole. Thus, bodies came into “contact” and gave rise to “similarity” effects. This was the principle followed by barren women who drank beverages made from mandrake root or tea of pomegranate seeds.

**Pregnancy**

“Women whose skin darkens during pregnancy will have beautiful babies.”

“The pregnant woman can hide a three-month pregnancy, but not a four-month pregnancy.”

“A pregnant woman’s unsatisfied cravings may cause a miscarriage.”

“The woman in the lying-in period must not be left alone at night because she is under the influence of bad spirits or because a fairy may visit her and change her baby for another.”*

“The pregnant woman must not disclose her pregnancy before the 5th month if she wants her baby to be beautiful.”*

“The pregnant woman must see beautiful women and men so that her baby will be beautiful too. Also, she must avoid looking at ugly old men and women, strange and peculiar people.”*
“The pregnant woman who is carrying a baby boy has a clear face and a protruding stomach; the one who is carrying a baby girl has dark spots on her face and wide hips. Babies born on a Sunday are lucky for the whole of their lives. So will the ones born on Christmas day.”*

“The woman who is pregnant must have her stomach wrapped up with a white sheet in order to have a beautiful baby. Preferably, all her sheets must be made of silk and kept for a whole month after birth!”*

“Pregnant women «lose calcium from their teeth» to form the baby’s teeth.”

“Tooth decay is higher in pregnancy because teeth become «weak», which gets worse because «pregnant women cannot see the dentist during pregnancy».”***

“For a successful childbirth, go under a processional palanquin.”

“For a happy childbirth, the husband must tie as many knots as possible in his shirt-tails and ride a wooden horse around the house.”

“For a happy child delivery, the husband must have put a hat on his wife’s head.”

The pregnant woman had a higher social standing because she generated and developed the foetus, a dependent and important being. The unknown led to divination practices of which the pregnant woman must be unaware. The pregnant woman’s actions and emotions materialised in birthmarks on the infant’s body. A big concern in all times was to predict the foetus’s gender. Signs on the pregnant woman’s body were looked for, such as the shape of the abdomen or the moment when the first foetal movements were felt. The pregnant woman’s response to unexpected questions was also considered an indicator. The constant debasement of the female gender gave rise to an “art of breeding”, that is, the power to give birth to boys, which prescribed the presence of light during intercourse after an interval of no sexual activity. The external signals on the pregnant woman’s body were examined in order to know the physical condition of the foetus and eventually of the newborn child.

The foetus was important to society. There were norms to be followed throughout pregnancy. The pregnant woman could not eat rabbit or hare meat, nor drink from a cracked glass, lest the infant be
born with hare lip. Any object that she carried might leave a trace on the infant’s body, so she could not hold scissors or keys in her hands. As the baby’s body was a reflection of the mother’s, the use of necklaces was discouraged as they could make the umbilical cord wrap around the foetus’s neck. In pregnancy, women have no menses and are unstable and extremely sensitive. If their cravings were neglected, there could be terrible consequences for their unborn babies and for those who did not satisfy them.

It was recommended not to disclose the pregnancy till after the first trimester, because other people’s stares or even the pregnant woman’s sight of animals or plants exerted an influence on the development of the new being. Women needed to be acquainted with a number of interdictions, learned from the interaction with other women, whose vast knowledge was based on personal experience and not theory. Due to the laws of “contact” and “similarity” followed by all things in the universe, these interdictions were almost infinite. Therefore, the pregnancy had to be hidden from view and the interdictions had to be obeyed, particularly during the last two months, when childbirth preparations took place. These preparations included physical and posture exercises, hygiene rules and feeding habits, as well as the use of objects with religious significance and the appeal to certain forces of nature. It is worth noting that some practices could have opposite effects according to the time. For instance, going under some objects or wearing necklaces was forbidden during pregnancy but had a propitious effect on the outcome of childbirth. Religious amulets were chosen due to the virtues of the deities that they represented and for the physical characteristics of the images themselves, which gave protection through a transfer of power. The main patrons of women in labour were Saint Anne, Saint Andrew, Saint Catherine, Saint Martha, Our Lady of Childbirth, Our Lady of Good Fortune or of Bom Despacho, Our Lady of the Angels, Our Lady of O, and Our Lady of Relief. The notion that there was a connection among all living things, whether animal or vegetal, explained the search for the protection of the natural forces. If a woman planted something during pregnancy, the child would not be born until she collected what she had planted. The preparation for childbirth included the husband’s clothes which, like phallic symbols, transmitted the male potency and were a way of relating the father-to-be to the delivery, not only due to his garments but to all the other practices that only he could do to make labour easier – some of these took place during pregnancy, others shortly before childbirth, but all of them made up a whole aiming at a smooth childbirth.
“In childbirth there is pain and in raising a child there is love”

“Each delivery is an adventure.”

“A family member must go up to the roof of a church or chapel, turn a roof tile and leave it like that forever.”

“For a woman in labour to have a smooth delivery, nine maidens named Mary must toll the bell nine times, pulling the clapper chord with their teeth.”

“Baby girls are always born after difficult and painful childbirths.”

“Whoever is born on a Sunday will be happy, whoever is born on a Friday will be miserable.”

“During birth all the doors of the house must be unlocked and open so that the birth is easy.”*

“Those who love will suffer.”

“Holy Saint Margaret
I am not pregnant nor lying in!
Remove this rotten flesh
from inside my belly!”

“If a woman drinks from a glass from which another woman has drunk, her breast milk will dry out.”

“The Eagle-stone of red mineral, use by the midwives, protects mother and child during birth.”**

“A tree planted at the time of birth (chilod-tree) protects the child and predicts major events in his/her life.”**

Pain during labour was a rite of passage that, once over, gave the woman a new status, that of being a mother. The ways of expressing pain reflected the culture of a community. Labour was seen as a ritual for better integration of the new being into the community. Different symbolic elements combined in childbirth through which all the community took part. It was a social event. The womb was sacred and therefore, like a church. The act of turning a church roof tiles was associated with the
foetal position, in order to make childbirth smoother. The connection to the church also worked as an amulet to convey the sacred forces found there. The element of sound was often associated with labour: the church bell tolls. The husband or an uneven number of maidens named Mary tolled the bell. Tolling the bell was like moving the child within the womb so it could go through the birth canal. Cutting or biting the clapper chord stood for the cutting of the umbilical cord, thus turning mother and child into two separate beings. This was how the husband and the community participated in childbirth. A virgin had been a symbol for fertility from ancient times. The evocation of Mary sought a transfer of power and the guarantee of a successful delivery. The uneven number of participants was a magic formula. It seems that the passage from an aqueous to a terrestrial medium depended on the combination of all these elements.

Other practices involved a fusion of sacred and profane elements - in one of these the woman in labour swallowed red ribbons previously offered to a religious congregation. The ribbons were some sort of lucky charm that allowed the woman to incorporate the power of a patron saint.

Labour was a dramatic time. In addition to the symbolic elements, a number of vegetal products were believed to have special properties as well as a psychological influence. The introduction of some breathing techniques, precursor of the “painless childbirth”, made expulsion of the foetus easier.

In pregnancy, mother and foetus were two symbiotic beings. Childbirth meant the separation of mother and child. Though the two beings are autonomous and differentiated, their bond is still very strong.

The midwife was a mother old enough to be experienced, whose fertility cycle was over, and capable of helping other women to give birth. She used her bare hands and lubricants, but no instruments. Her job was to conduct the delivery and take care of the newborn, whom she carried to the church to be christened.

Childbirth was surrounded by an environment of profound religiosity and high emotional tension, as it was a time of life/death that could lead to joy or grief. It often took place in the home and was assisted by women who had already gone through the same experience. The father indirectly participated by carrying out propitiatory actions but was not at the scene. The women in the community participated verbally or through gestures during the expulsion and postnatal periods. The favourite part of the home was near the hearth – because of its warmth, like the maternal womb, the
hearth favoured the development of the newborn and provided a transition environment into a world full of stimuli.

The womb was compared to a home. The foetus had to have a cephalic presentation, otherwise it was a sign of trouble. The birth of a baby girl was socially stigmatized and considered a bad omen.

Regarding the woman’s position during labour, a vertical position (squatting or crawling) was preferred until the 16th century, when lying, reclining or sitting positions began to be preferred.

Until the birth of the placenta, the woman was not supposed to boil anything that belonged to her, lest the placenta not be expelled. As already pointed out, everything that the woman did while pregnant was believed to have an influence on the second and third stages of labour as well as on the newborn.

After the infant was born, the next concern had to do with the expulsion of the placenta and with excessive bleeding. Several magical and religious practices were carried out to smooth the progress of this stage, like blowing through a bottle neck or placing a fried egg on the woman’s abdomen. Following the law of similarity, just as the egg had completed its cycle, the woman was expected to reach the end of the process by expelling the placenta. If the woman did not feel pain during this stage of labour, the pain would be transferred to the newborn. However, the belief in the transfer of actions between men and animals offered a solution to this problem – it was recommended to put the afterbirth on a fox skin in order to stop the contraction pain.

After the placenta was naturally born, it was important to decide what to do with it, as it was a part of the woman’s body and could have an evil influence on her. It was often buried next to a tree due to its alleged fertilizing properties – after being related to human fertility, it was placed into a new relationship of vegetal fertility. Burying the placenta next to a vine tree could cause a drinking habit. The human world had a permanent parallelism with the natural world.

After the third stage, the uterus was expected to contract. By analogy, right after the expulsion of the placenta, all windows and doors were closed so that the uterus could contract and “the woman’s body would close”.

**Puerperium**
“After childbirth, women must not change their linen for a month.”

“While «doing the month», women must not leave their beds without their husbands’ hats on.”

“After giving birth, women need to eat all the time.”

“Do the month and you will gain another two or three.”

“The woman in the lying-in period must not go out for forty days after birth; and if she does, she must mix ashes before she comes close to her baby. Of course, she must return home before sunset.”*

The postpartum period had a variable duration, depending on the established conventions and on the baby’s gender. It was supposed to be longer after the birth of a boy, as the mother had been subject to greater organic pressure. It was a period of impurity, characterised by the discharge of lochia, and a time for the woman to recover. During her confinement, the woman was more vulnerable to all types of influences and transformations. Her abdomen was wrapped with bandages enclosing a variety of aromatic herbs, believed to keep evil away, as well as to purify and enclose her body. The clothes worn after the delivery could not be changed, becoming a protective second skin. If by any chance she undressed, she had to wrap herself into her husband’s worn clothes.

Feeding habits during this period were extremely important, as the baby’s nourishment depended on the woman’s physical wellbeing. Her food was offered by other pregnant women, who would in time get the same treatment. Fatty chicken, broth, eggs, whole-wheat bread, sugar, chocolate and wine were often recommended. Inappropriate food included milk, pork, veal and vegetables. Sexual intercourse was forbidden and failure to comply with this rule brought serious health problems on her partner.

The Newborn

“I christen you
With this cross.
I bathe you
And the Lord Bless you.”

“Here is the young woman with child,
She will give birth to her child,
He will name the child Emanuuel
He will eat honey
Till he can choose Good and reject Evil.”

“When washing the infant’s clothes, these MUST NOT BE WRUNG, or the infant’s growth may be twisted.”

“Moon, moonlight
I have a daughter to raise;
I am a mother, you are a nanny,
You raise her,
And I will breastfeed her.”

“When the newborn’s stools stick on its diapers, it will grow up to be thrifty.”

“Before their christening, infants should not be kept in the dark.”

“If a baby’s nails are cut earlier than 12 months after birth, it will become a thief when it grows up.”* 

“Babies who are born at 3:00, 6:00, 9:00, 12:00, 18:00, 21:00 and 0:00 are considered to be very lucky; when they grow up they will theoretically be more gifted intellectually.”* 

“If a baby is born with teeth, it is supposed to become very selfish when it grows up.”* 

“If a baby is born with an open fist, it will be very generous.”* 

“If newborns keep their fists clenched after birth, they will grow up to be stingy.”

“If an infant is born after a seven-month pregnancy with a cleft palate, he may be clairvoyant, but it will not be known before he is seven years old.”
“A piece of chorion covering the baby's head (bonnet of fortune) predicts a happy life for the child.”

The disposal of the umbilical cord after it was clamped could have beneficial or terrible consequences for the infant. It was often burnt, because “if an animal ate it, the child would run away from home and have a fate similar to that of the animal”, or “it could be used for witchcraft”. In some places, it was customary to make the child, when s/he was old enough, cut the cord to pieces under a fruit tree. Thus, children became independent from their mothers and established a protective and fecund relationship with mother-earth. This symbolic act stood for a return to the aqueous medium from which the infant had come. Sometimes, the cord was placed near someone whose profession was desired for the child. The afterbirth was very often dried and used in witchcraft, the purpose of which depended on the witch’s intentions. The baptism signalled the infant’s integration into the social world and protected it from the animal and vegetal world through the act of naming.

Infancy was a world of danger that required special protection. High infant mortality rates called for all possible care.

Being born in the caul was a sign of maternal protection for life. The cord also had the properties of maternal protection and determined the infant’s destiny.

Umbilical healing and the size of the belly button were constant concerns that lead to varied practices, all showing a certain anxiety for the infant’s fate.

The newborn’s first bath was given by the midwife who had done the delivery. This was the first gesture showing concern to give the newborn human characteristics. The secretions found on the scalp were attributed symbolic protective properties. The water of the first bath was used to bless the infant and to represent the transition from the original aqueous medium to the new world. Water was a purifying element and stood for the infant’s destiny. A gold chain was sometimes put into the water to bring about happiness and riches. The female newborn was bathed inside the home to stimulate domestic virtues, whereas male infants were bathed outside to promote outdoor activities. Such were the protective properties of water that some societies gave it to the infant to drink, so as to prevent the evil eye or to stimulate the development of speech. The remaining water could be thrown into the
hearth but could not be disposed of in an impure place, since it represented something that belonged to the infant.

The first baby food was often honey and egg yolk, which were also spread on the baby’s head. These were fertility rites to foster growth, humanisation and integration into the world.

The newborn’s clothes were chosen according to the type of education s/he would be given and to the intended body shape. Everything was to be done. The soft body parts were wrapped in flax bands to shape them and protect the baby from the cold. These bands, together with other pieces of clothing and blankets produced the necessary warmth for the baby’s growth.

The infant’s garments used to be a copy of those worn by adults. As the notion of infancy and of the infant’s body changes, it was no longer a miniature adult and a new concern to adapt clothing to its body began to appear. The newborn’s clothing was like a second skin. Therefore, its care reflected on the baby itself. The laundry of baby clothes had to follow certain rules. According to the law of contact, wringing the clothes had a negative effect on the body and hindered growth. The influence of the moon was also a motive for fear. In order to get the moon’s protection, lucky charms shaped like half-moons were worn and prayers were chanted. Similarly, the law of similarity required that the infant’s clothes could not be extended over green grass, as that produced green diarrhoea. The laundry was always the woman’s task.

Of utmost importance was the time, day and astral conjunction at birth. The newborn’s horoscope determined its destiny, as much as birthmarks and external events. This cosmic conception of life presided over every event of pregnancy and childbirth and defined the infant’s future life. As already pointed out, the moon had the greatest influence on childbirth and on the future of the child. There were other signs taken as good omens, like being born on a Sunday, the day of the Lord, or to be born in the caul, which stood for the womb. Christening was a second birth, a ritual of social birth and protection. Before christening the child was vulnerable and had to be kept away from people’s stares. There were precise rules concerning the baby’s first clothes and the baptismal towel. The first clothes worn by the newborn had to be kept unwashed, and the clothes worn at the baptism ceremony had to be preserved due to their protective properties. The christening bonnet could not be made before the birth so as not to reduce the magical power of a religious act – covering/protecting the baby’s head after being anointed with holy oils.
In all times there have been numerous folk traditions intended to protect the pregnant woman, the
new mother and her child, some of which have been recorded in documental sources throughout
history. We are certain that much of today’s scientific knowledge and practices will eventually be
replaced by others, although they will remain in popular customs, making up several chapters in the
history of humankind.

Folk sayings kindly provided by Fani Anatolitou, President of the Greek
Society of Neonatology (*); Michael Obladen, Neonatology Unit in Freifurg,
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