

TRADITIONAL PREGNANCY AND CHILDBIRTH PRACTICES AMONG THE BILAAN

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Conception

A Bilaan mother knows she will have a baby when menstruation stops. When a Bilaan woman starts to feel dizzy and gets morning sickness, which is termed *gansab* or *amlalo*. Any person who asks whether a woman is pregnant or not would be accused of *amdal* or shame. It is nobody's business to ask publicly about a woman's pregnancy. It is considered *le-e* (taboo) for him. *Gansab* does not show any visible changes except for a predisposition to sleep and at times to be a bit lazy. Though there are times when a woman experiences dizziness, known as *langal muta* and *tasu kal yelo*, she still continues to do her usual chores. She looks after the family's needs, weeds the cornfield, gathers firewood, and fetches water no matter how far she may have to walk. The traditional Bilaan mother is shown no special attention by her husband during this stage.

The educated Bilaan mothers of today take extra care of themselves by refraining from doing heavy work. Some take advantage of their stage of pregnancy to be lazy, craving and asking for special foods from their husbands. Two young mothers were distressed when they were not able to get the food they asked for and had miscarriages.

At the conception stage, the traditional Bilaan mothers have many *le-e*. One of these taboos is not to eat twin bananas. They believe that to give birth to twins is *tasu bagi*, (bad luck). They believe the babies would compete for food and attention so strongly that one will soon die, and a little later the other will die too. Another *le-e* is eating the blood of chickens and pigs. Their blood is suggestive of death. One *le-e* of traditional Bilaan mothers during conception is being

careful and extra cautious not to allow ugly people to pass behind them, lest the baby be born ugly. The same belief goes for persons with physical defects. Another *le-e* is to play with a rope. The rope is likened to the umbilical cord, so if a mother plays with a rope at an early stage of conception the child's umbilical cord might get entangled and endanger the fetus. Similarly, it is dangerous for a pregnant woman to wrap her *kumut* in *klonfof*, a style of holding the *kumut* in place around the waist by bundling the loose parts in front and forming a little pocket. Another *le-e* forbids a pregnant woman to make a visit to the house of a dead person. The traditional Bilaan mothers believe that since the corpse is cold, the pregnant woman will later find the contraction during delivery cold, and labor pains will last longer and be more painful. In Bilaan, they term this *kuk'mulang sawo mati*, literally meaning a shrinking as in death.

Care During Pregnancy

When a pregnant woman becomes sick, she is taken to a *tu fulong* (learned man) or to a *toadmango* (a person who palm-measures the arm to know who or what caused the sickness) who prescribes either of these rituals: *asbulong di abo* (done inside the house near the hearth) or the *asbulong di tana*, done on the ground. The latter ritual is accompanied by dancing women.

A traditional Bilaan mother is not aware how long she has been carrying the fetus in her womb. All she knows is that, at the start of the pregnancy, the fetus is like a *tafong mama* (receptacle of a betel nut). The mother notices that her belly is becoming bigger after three or four months. At this stage, if a woman wants a boy for a child she has to carry certain round objects in the *klofey* (folds) of her *malong* (skirt). When traditional Bilaan mothers take a bath they let the waterfall "massage" their bellies to exercise them. This requires, according to one old Bilaan woman going under the falling waters and stretching out towards the sky with the belly directly under the falling waters. Another exercise is to go waist deep into the water and rub the belly under the water.

All traditionally-oriented Bilaan mothers want a boy for a first

child. On the other hand, it is popularly maintained that a Bilaan husband wants a girl because of the *sung-god* (dowry).

Childbirth

Unlike other mothers from other tribes, the traditional Bilaan mothers do not prepare any clothing for the baby even when their belly is very big, ready to give birth. Bilaan mothers fear that if they prepare their child's clothing the delivery will be premature or they will have a miscarriage.

The young mothers of today, however, prepare the baby's clothing even at early stages of pregnancy. They have come to realize from the elders' mistakes that when the baby is born, there must be available decent clothes in which to wrap the newborn baby. In the past all a traditional mother did was to wrap the newborn baby in a *kumut* (piece of cloth that serves as a blanket). When the baby is wet on one side, the *kumut* is turned to the dry side, until the entire *kumut* is wet. Only then would the *kumut* be changed. That is why the babies have offensive odors. The danger is for the babies to be taken with a chill because of the wet *kumut*. Because of the somewhat cold weather in Bolul, a common illness of newborn babies is broncho-pneumonia. The exposed umbilical cord, and the wet *kumut* increase the baby's predisposition to ill-health. Moreover, when the baby is left alone, it moves about rubbing the umbilical cord against the *kumut*. Many babies have died of serious infections because of this early lack of health care.

The Bilaans do not have an extra *kumut*, each member of a family has but one which is washed only when soiled.

Bilaan mothers have a strong tolerance to pain. Most of them do not detect that they are having labor pains. One mother related that she first felt the pain when she was digging for sweet potatoes in the field some three kilometers away from her house. She related that when the pain stopped at intervals she continued her digging. When she went home the pain was still there but she continued to work, fetching water, looking for firewood, boiling sweet potatoes, and serving the family's meal. When she lay down, the pain persisted.

Even though her husband was asleep beside her, she endured the pain quietly. There was no moaning, not even a soft sigh. She just kept pressing on her belly when the muscles would contract. Thus, alone, she helped the baby come out. Only when the baby had been delivered did she wake her husband who almost stepped on it because of the darkness.

Traditional Bilaan mothers do not use any light when they are having labor pains because they do not want to show anyone the pain they must endure. Also, they do not want to call the attention of the other members of the household. The mother who makes a noise during delivery thinks that she is bringing shame to her husband. Some husbands get angry at a woman who makes noises during childbirth. The reason the husbands gave for this is "when we made the baby there was complete silence. So why should there be noise when we have the baby?"

There are some precautions or taboos practiced during delivery: a) a delivering mother should not lie across or against the direction of the bamboo flooring, b) hanging objects like dresses and clothes should be taken down, c) and as much as possible no calling of other people's attention so that the pain would be easy and short.

The position a Bilaan mother takes when giving birth is lying down against a pillow supported by an *alongan* (trunk of clothes). Her legs are separated and flexed. She waits for the intense pain to come and readies herself for the delivery.

The baby is helped out of the womb by pressing on the upper portion of the belly. The mother just waits for the baby to come out, and then carefully places it next to the placenta. A vine is tied around the mother's waist to prevent the belly from swelling and over inhalation of cold air. When the placenta is completely out, the umbilical cord is rubbed against the belly of the child, measured down to the child's feet and then cut with a *salban* (bamboo splint). This portion of the umbilical cord is rolled up and knotted at the end with a piece of *lutay* (abaca string). Then the tip of the umbilical cord is rubbed with ashes or scrapings from a coconut shell. Right after the umbilical cord is tied, the baby is bathed in cold water. Today's young Bilaan mothers refrain

from using a bamboo splint in cutting the umbilical cord. Instead they now use a sterilized knife or a pair of scissors. And instead of using coconut scrapings or ashes, the young mothers apply merthiolate or alcohol. The traditional practices of using a bamboo splint in cutting the cord is fast disappearing, even among the traditional Bilaan mothers. After the bath, the mother lays the baby down and wraps the child in a *kumut* and places it upon a pillow. Only then will the mother be attended to by some members of the household.

In ordinary cases the mother is given an herbal concoction right after delivery. She is made to drink this to forestall *blatan* (a relapse). Her elbows, wrists, knees, shoulders, and head are also rubbed with the same.