



## **The Indigenous Childbirth Rituals**

by Anne Vecin

Gifted with rich and fertile imaginations, our indigenous peoples wove beliefs and practiced rituals to ensure a safe delivery of a child and welcome the baby. Below are some examples of their childbirth rituals and beliefs.

### ***Igorot***

The Igorots of the Cordillera Central imagine the placenta to be a shawl where the infant is carried by the gods until its birth.

The *Mansip-ok* rite is performed in cases of difficult childbirth. A slaughtered animal, usually a hen, is offered to the protective spirit, Maxil. A member of the family with the best and cleanest bolo carves the langkit when the contractions start. The langkit is a kind of knife or cutter fashioned out from bamboo, which will be used to cut the umbilical cord. No iron knife or sharp blade should be used to sever the umbilical cord, otherwise, the child will grow into an argumentative good-for-nothing adult who draws a knife at the slightest provocation.

### ***Ibanag***

The Ibanag believe in rituals to facilitate birth and lessen labor pains. First, the mother must walk counterclockwise inside the house seven times after which she must kick a cat or a dog so that prolonged labor pains will be transferred to the animal. The tuno or main post of the house can also be kicked in place of a cat or dog. This kicking ceremony is called mappangango. If this fails to alleviate labor pains, the partera or midwife applies the dried skin of the vurilang, a type of local snake on the womb of the expectant mother. It is believed that just as the vurilang had an easy way of getting rid of its outer skin, the mother, too, will not have a difficult delivery.

Ibanags believe that husband and wife are teammates in their married life. The husband is a cavalun or a companion of his wife and must be present during childbirth, an important event of their marriage.

### ***Isneg***

The Isneg are a small ethnolinguistic group who live in the wide mountains of Apayao, north of the island Luzon. Some of their childbirth customs and rituals are:

1. To guard against too much loss of blood at childbirth, a pregnant woman must not eat the moderately hard crusty part of the rice at the bottom of the pot.
2. The mother should refrain from eating shellfish, especially those harvested from a brook. Shellfish are slippery and are believed to cause premature delivery.
3. A visitor must not sit or stand on the ladder or at the door of a house of a pregnant woman, but must stay inside the hut. Otherwise, childbirth will be difficult.
4. A mantle or cowl that will be used to wrap the infant should be kept in a storage chest in the house. The cowl is believed to be a powerful charm that brings good luck to the baby.
5. Fire should not be brought into or taken away from the house on the day of a birthing.

### ***Mandaya***

The Mandaya are the indigenous people of Davao Oriental, south of the archipelago in Mindanao island.

Parents of the expectant mother prepare food to be taken immediately after giving birth. A mat covered with dagmay is laid on the floor or basag where the mother gives birth. Her husband assists the yagnamon or midwife by pushing the baby out when the baby starts to crown. A magpipisal, a master on herbal plants, gives the mother local medication to help her sit down or stand, and walk without causing a relapse.

But, if the mother's life is in danger, her husband must get out to avoid her from accusing her husband with the words: "Da ikaw, kon buku mo, did a ako masigod sin-i." (Were it not for you, this would not happen to me.)

It is also believed that if the mother dies with the baby still in her womb, she might turn into a matianak or a pregnant devil-woman.

### ***Maranaws***

The Maranaw or "people of the lake" come from the province of Lanao in Mindanao.

When a woman is in labor, no one is allowed to sit on the stairs of her house because this forebodes a difficult labor. To avoid a grueling delivery, the father is asked to step over his wife several times.

Labor pains are also believed to earn blessings, according to their Islam religion. Every wave of pain which wracks a woman in labor is one hassana or blessing by Allah. The hassana is equivalent to a minor pilgrimage or umrah.

As soon as the child is born, the azan (call to prayer) is whispered to the baby by an Imam or anyone who can recite the azan. This is the Muslim way of welcoming the child into this world.

## **Maguindanaos**

The Maguindanaos are an indigenous group from Zamboanga del Sur.

A woman on the family way is forbidden to eat shrimp. She is not allowed to sew dresses. These are strictly prohibited because it is believed that these activities will prolong the delivery.

They also forbid pregnant women to walk at night for fear she may bump into the unseen or the tonong, a cantankerous spirit. If the tonong feels the expectant woman respects him and fulfills his demands, then he will help hasten the delivery. But, if he feels rejected, he becomes the worst enemy of the pregnant woman and in one of his foul moods, will make the baby in the mother's womb ill.

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Source: (Photo) a Maguindanao baptismal rite (Pagalungan, Cotabato. Ayala Museum Research Team, 1970.)

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