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Cross-Cultural Practices of Pregnant Belly Massage



ONLINE CLASS

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For ONLINE CREDIT:

- ❖ This is part of the required reading and viewing for the MotherTouch Online Course: **Abdominal Massage During Pregnancy.**
- ❖ READ this article and WATCH The video using the link at the end!
- ❖ At least one question from this article will be included in the Quiz at the end of the course.

Learning Objectives: After reading this article, the student should be able to:

1. Describe 5 reasons mentioned for doing belly massage in 3 different cultures
2. Discuss how these midwives' belly massage may influence a woman's psyche and prepare her for birthing.
3. Consider one's own cultural influences in bodywork and birth practices in one's local community.

Cross-Cultural Practices of Pregnant Belly Massage

MotherTouch is concerned with the acknowledgement and preservation of traditional birth practices and wisdom around the world, and the integration of this knowledge with access to emergency medical skills and supplies. Midwives are being ousted by allopathic medical models worldwide, including in the USA. Traditional birth knowledge, developed over thousands of years of practice, is being lost as women are encouraged or in some cases forced to go to health clinics to have their babies. This is not always a better option, as it requires women to leave their communities and children, often walk or ride motorcycle or horse for hours or days, then face harassment and sometimes abuse at clinics, and not uncommonly, village women will die there. It is not an easy choice; birthing at home in a village also has its risks. If HIV is prevalent and no gloves or other protective equipment is available by midwives, the virus can be spread easily. If there is an emergency, there will be no access to emergency transportation. I worked in Uganda where all of this was true. There was plenty of tragic birthing stories there.

The knowledge of plant allies, spirit practices, and touch-massage practices that have often helped women safely survive this intensive birth rite (including belly massage during pregnancy) may be lost forever. In my travels to Uganda, Myanmar, Cambodia, Mexico, Peru, Indonesia, I have spoken with traditional birth attendants and midwives. Their concern and knowledge of the women in their villages, their efforts to pass on their knowledge is deeply moving, and the current political/societal limitations on their ability to do this is quite disturbing.

Please read about and watch some techniques of belly massage used by midwives in Samoa, Malaysia, and Mexico. This text is made up of excerpts from other's writings, focused on care of the belly during pregnancy. **My notes are in this color through the text.**

Excerpts From the Book: Healing Practices in the South Pacific

“The antenatal care offered by a fa’atosaga (traditional birth attendant) extends from the time when a woman seeks confirmation of her pregnancy. *The fa’atosaga identifies pregnancy by gentle abdominal massage. Using massage, an experienced fa’atosaga can feel the slightest change in the mass of the uterus—this increased mass she identifies as the placenta.*

“During a woman’s months of pregnancy the fa’atosaga will massage her abdomen and lower back on many occasions. *The massage is intended to relieve any discomfort, to determine the position of the foetus, and to change it if necessary.* Clark warns against “the danger of “abruptio placentae” (abruption) but the antenatal massage I observed was always very gentle, and the fa’atosaga constantly asked the woman whether she felt any pain.”



Leslie’s Note: “abruptio placentae” or placental abruption is when the placenta pulls off the wall of the uterus while the baby is still in the womb—a highly dangerous, life-threatening situation for both baby and mother. It is usually due to some pathological condition, high blood pressure, or blunt trauma—the latter of which is what the ‘Clark’ was expressing concern about. One would have to be using a lot of force to cause the abruption of a healthy placenta, but if there were already risks for it to do so, abdominal massage would be contraindicated, at least by my recommendation as a standard of practice.)



***Male Midwife in
South Pacific
Islands***

The above text was from the book: **Healing Practices in the South Pacific** Edited by Claire D. Parsons. ISBN-13:9780939154562. Publisher: Institute for Polynesian Studies. Publication date:08/01/1995. From the Chapter: Midwives and Midwifery in Western Samoa pp 204-205

Belly Massage in Malaysia

The Malays are steeped in customs concerning pregnancy and birth. Most Malays have now embraced Islam, so many of the rituals are assimilated with Islamic elements such as prayers and doas. In Malay culture, a firstborn receives extra attention through a ceremony called “Melenggang Perut”, literally meaning "swinging the tummy". This is done when the expectant mother is seven months pregnant. The ritual is presided by a traditional midwife and aims to ward off any ill-fate during birth. It also involves a massaging the stomach to ensure the right position for the baby for birth.



Leslie's Note: There are reasons for the many prayers and rituals for healthy birthing, and the desire to ward off 'evil spirits' or ill fate. Birthing is risky business; women and babies die, and have always been at risk to die during childbirth or during pregnancy or postpartum. This is especially true in places where emergency medical care is not readily available. In Uganda the maternal mortality rate is 310 deaths out of 100,000 women giving birth. Prayer or rituals may not prevent death, but they may give a sense of hope, connection, and relief to women who participate in them.

We are not immune in the USA from maternal and infant mortality. An estimated 700-900 women may have died in the USA from childbirth related causes 2016 according to this article:

<https://www.propublica.org/article/lost-mothers-maternal-health-died-childbirth-pregnancy>)

When a woman is pregnant, several ceremonies, practices and taboos have to be carried out. The purpose of the ceremonies *are to pray for the safety of the pregnant woman and her foetus so that they can both be healthy and protected from all kinds of misfortune. The Malays believe that a happy pregnant woman will give birth to a happy and healthy baby. Hence, a pregnant woman is prohibited from hearing, seeing or talking bad things.*

Leslie's Note: There is more and more research confirming these "old wives tales" about protecting the pregnant mother from exposure to negative words or sights or experiences. A mother's experiences, emotions, and resultant stress hormones have an impact on the baby's brain development in the womb. Massage to the belly may have a small influence on the baby's experience as well, through actual tactile sensations through the womb, and through the experience of the mother's hormonal adjustments as she relaxes and connects energetically with the baby residing in her body!

Among the ceremonies and rituals to be carried out during pregnancy are as follows:

1. *Book the midwife (Menempah Bidan)*
2. *Touch the stomach (Menjamah Perut)*
3. *Roll the stomach (Melenggang Perut)*
4. *Bathe the stomach (Mandi Melenggang Perut)*
5. *Consult the spirits (Mengadap Semangat)*

Book the midwife (Menempah Bidan)

When the woman is 7 months pregnant, her mother-in-law will make preparations to book the midwife to perform certain rituals and ceremonies. Usually this ceremony is carried out at the end of the month, between the 21st and 29th day of the Muslim calendar. *The purpose is to ensure a reliable and responsible midwife is available to handle the birth of the baby.*

Touch The Stomach/Belly Wagging (Melenggang Perut or Kirim Perut)

The midwife plays an important role in performing this ceremony. Among the items required for this ceremony include 7 pieces of batik cloth (various colours), one medium-size coconut, one cup of white rice, one plate of glutinous rice flavoured with turmeric (nasi kunyit) and a knife or a spoon.

The midwife (bidan) spreads and piles the seven pieces of cloths on the floor. The expectant mother *lies on the cloths to let the bidan massage her belly with coconut oil to correct the position of the foetus*. At the start of the ceremony, the midwife will chant invocations in the name of the Holy Prophet 3 times to ask for blessings and she grooms the pregnant lady. After that, she will say mantras. Rice flour mixed with water solution blesses the face and turmeric rice grains are sprinkled all over the woman. Then the coconut (with outer layer peeled) will be rolled on the pregnant woman's stomach towards her legs. When the coconut rolls to her legs, the pregnant woman will give it a hard kick. It is believed that this will result in a smooth and easy childbirth. If the "eyes" of the coconut turn upwards when the coconut stops rolling, the baby is believed to be a boy (and downward= a girl).

Next an egg will be rolled on the pregnant woman's stomach as a symbol of getting rid of all evil spirits. Then the *nasi kunyit* is placed on the stomach, also symbolic of chasing away evil

spirits. After that the midwife will rub the spoon on the pregnant woman's stomach, with the belief that this will make the new born baby's face smooth and pretty.

Leslie's Note: While these techniques may sound 'primitive' or silly to someone outside this culture, each object and part of the ceremony has a particular significance, power, and impact to someone from that culture. If the mother feels relaxed and secure after the ceremony, a good thing has been accomplished! In a similar way, we might massage a pregnant woman's belly, talk to the baby through the belly, and help the client envision relaxing from our touch and words. If we use special oils or creams, help her envision healing scenes, or use certain music during our massage, we are effectively doing a similar process as these Malaysian midwives, without the depth of an actual cultural ceremony. Consider, why do you choose those oils and scents and music you do for your massages—what effect are you hoping for? "Melenggang perut" is defined as an act in the Malay culture to adjust the position of a baby (in the womb). However, a midwife observes that its most important function is to promote a sense of well-being about the impending delivery. The midwife also notes that new mothers feel better prepared after the ritual.

Leslie's Note: Most traditional midwives use touch throughout a pregnancy to ensure baby is in good birthing position. Breech deliveries, or non-optimal positioning is more a rarity in these cultures than in those where midwives don't have this skill.

Bathe The Stomach (Mandi Melenggang Perut)

The midwife says mantras in the name of the Holy Prophet to ask for blessings. She will then trim the hair of the pregnant woman, with the belief that the newborn baby will not be hairy. This is followed by kaffir lime bath for energy cleansing. The pregnant woman wears a sarong above the bosom and the midwife, assisted by several people, will pour water from the pitcher onto her body. As the water flows over the body, an egg will be placed in the folds of the wet cloth and then released. This symbolizes an easy birth. Then the pregnant woman will be bathed with water from 7 wells and sprinkled with 7 types of flowers.

Leslie's Note: The use of symbols in this way can influence a woman's psyche and aims for an easier or beautiful birth experience. What might be relevant symbols that help pregnant women in your culture relax?

Consult The Spirits (Mengadap Semangat)

In the olden days, this ceremony takes place on a small, decorated dais (seat of honor) where the pregnant woman will be seated, facing the spirits. This ceremony is only attended by women folk. Food will be put into small containers as offerings to the spirits. The pregnant woman will taste a pinch of salt, with the belief that her newborn baby will be physically normal, without any handicap.

Edited Text from the following sources:

<http://www.jkkn.gov.my/en/malay-community> and <http://ethnofahana.blogspot.com/>
and <https://www.facebook.com/malaysiancustoms/photos/pb.375805462808322.-2207520000.1481527661./381374842251384/?type=3&theater> October 12, 2016 .

MOTHERTOUCH ONLINE COURSE: ABDOMINAL MASSAGE DURING PREGNANCY

Now Watch part (7 minutes) of this VIDEO on Youtube: [SOBADA & MANTEADA](#)

Watch at least the required Minutes: 2:13-8:57

Set the curser at 2:13 minutes and watch until 8:57 (@7 minutes)

Here is the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRKsdlMwX1I>