Hupa Birth Rites

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Introduction. The Hupa are a small Athabascan-speaking tribe living in Northwestern California. They live in a broad, sunny valley stretching about eight miles along the Trinity River. The yearly salmon run and the abundant acorn crop are their main sources of food. Their culture has been well described by Pliny E. Goddard in *Life and Culture of the Hupa,* published in 1903.[1] The material given here was collected during two field trips, in 1945 and 1946, and a brief visit this summer.[2]

Pregnancy and Prenatal Influences. Pregnancy is revealed to a Hupa woman only by the cessation of the menses, there being no other recognized signs. Immediately precautions are taken for the benefit of the developing child. The prospective mother is especially careful in her diet. She eats sparingly in order to keep the foetus small and to insure a quick and easy delivery. If this is her first child a young mother is abstemious to the point that frequently she starves herself to avoid having a big baby. No meat is eaten as this is considered fattening. Acorn mush—"because it will make lots of milk"—and dried salmon are her principal nourishment. She is also cautioned against drinking too much water because it will cause a hard birth and might also result in loss of hair for the infant.

A woman continues to work throughout her pregnancy except for short periods when work is impossible such as when spells of nausea and giddiness overcome her. Not only is laziness in women ridiculed by the Hupa but work, it is believed, keeps the foetus small. However, heavy work is lessened as she approaches the end of her term.

Medicines are constantly employed throughout pregnancy with a view also of keeping the developing child small. Formulas are recited—either by the formulist or by the pregnant woman herself[3]—over various growing young shrubs. The tender shoots are then picked and chewed and the juice, which is swallowed, is thought to assure easy delivery.[4]

No attempt is made to influence the sex of the child because both male and female children are equally desired. Nor do the Hupa have any methods of predicting the sex of the foetus. There are no beliefs regarding prenatal influences. The foetus is unaffected by the mother staring or looking at any unpleasant object.

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[1] Additional facts may be found in Kroeber 1925 and Driver 1939.

[2] Goddard's and Driver's statements about childbirth were checked with informants and in most instances were corroborated. Disagreements are noted in subsequent footnotes.

[3] Goddard 1903, p. 50 states that the prospective mother during the first four months of the term made medicine for herself.

[4] Goddard 1904, p. 275-7 gives two formulas.

The father is subject to no special rites or food taboos during his wife's pregnancy other than continence. As soon as pregnancy is ascertained, sexual relations cease because it is believed to injure the foetus and intercourse is not resumed until the child is able to walk.[5]

If the woman dies during pregnancy, the foetus is removed as the Hupa consider it "not right to leave it inside her." Should the foetus still be alive, a cord is tied tightly about the deceased mother's abdomen to kill the unborn child which is then removed. Such a foetus, as well as a miscarriage may not be buried inside the cemetery but only at its edge.

Birth. At the end of the nine months and with the onset of labor pains the woman goes into the dwelling house.[6] She calls or sends for "a woman who knows about such things" to help her in the delivery. She sits with a hide or a blanket beneath her so that the newborn baby will not touch the earthern floor. During her travail, the woman grips a leather strap suspended from the roof beams. She also may be given a slender stick upon which to clench her teeth during labor. This helps to keep her from crying aloud and thus spares her from subsequent teasing and ridiculing, as it is considered a sign of weakness to cry out during labor.

Should the birth be difficult, medicine is brewed by the midwife (not a doctor). Herbs are boiled in water and formulas recited during the preparation. Some of these decoctions are taken internally; others are massaged on the mother's body.

After delivery the navel cord is cut off short—in the old days with a white stone knife—and the end attached to the newborn infant is tied with a leaf.[7] The afterbirth is disposed of without any special observances and is simply burried outside the village. In the event of a stillbirth, the dead child is buried outside the cemetery.

A caul is considered "lucky" and although it is removed very carefully it is buried with the afterbirth. Physical abnormalties are known but occur rarely. Such an infant is kept, given as good care as possible and "sometimes, when it gets older an Indian doctor may be called in." Deformities, including even minor ones as birthmarks, are not attributed to any mystical prenatal influences but are believed "to be inherited." Infanticide is not practised. Twin births are known but the Hupa have no special attitude pertaining to them; they are

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[5] Goddard 1903, p. 52 states that "the grandmother, if one lives in the house, ties a small dentalium shell to the ankle of the baby. This remains until the mother's relations with her husband are resumed. The mother is taught that ill luck will come to the child if the shell be allowed to remain longer. It is therefore a sign to the old people that the law, which separates a nursing mother from her husband during the first year is being kept."

Driver 1939, p. 350 states that continence lasts 24 months after birth.

[6] Goddard 1903, p. 51 says that birth took place in the menstrual hut. This hut seems to have disappeared early and is not remembered by any of the present day Hupa.

Driver 1939, p. 348 says birth took place in dwelling house.

[7] Driver 1939, p. 349. Driver's informants state that a buckskin string is used. One of them said a vegetable fibre string also is employed.

welcomed and treated as other children. Triplets are unknown.[8] Mothers frequently die in childbirth and stillbirths and miscarriages are also common.

Post-Delivery Customs—Mother's role. After delivery the mother lies down in a shallow pit. This pit, which is dug into the earth floor at one corner of the house, is lined with heated stones and then covered with either damp wormwood or wet sand. The resulting steam is believed to hasten the mother's recovery and to heal all birth tears and injuries. This "steaming" process continues for ten days, during which time the mother's needs are attended to by a kinswoman or neighbor. At the end of ten days she resumes her daily routine. However, she continues to eat apart from her family for 40 days if she gave birth to a boy and 50 days for a baby girl.[9] The new mother refrains from drinking cold water and eating fresh meat or fresh salmon for varying lengths of time. She is, however, encouraged to eat acorn mush.

Father's role. The father, whose only contribution to the welfare of his expected child was continence, leaves the dwelling house at the time of delivery. If this is his first child he goes up a mountain alone, builds a fire of green pine boughs and, smoking himself, prays for the well-being of his newborn infant. He does not do this, however, for subsequent offspring.

The father eats alone for the first few days after the birth of his child and avoids meat, fresh salmon and drinks thin acorn soup instead of cold water.

During the first five nights he stands guard outside the dwelling house in order to "chase the Indian devil away so it will not witch his child."[10]

The Infant. As soon as it is born, the infant is held upside down by the feet and shaken and patted by the midwife until a deep breath of air is initiated. The baby is then bathed by the midwife as it lies in her lap, the warm water being gently sprinkled and spread by hand over its body. The infant is next placed in a small, flat, openwork basketry tray (kaitel) and held over a steaming pot of herbs and hot water. These herbs are procured from a doctor. During the first ten days of its life the infant is frequently steamed and numerous formulas

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[8] Driver 1939, p. 350 says that twins are feared and twinning is considered contagious disease. For the neighboring Yurok, Kroeber 1925, p. 45 states that if twins of opposite sexes were born, the Yurok smother one of the pair, usually the girl. They had a dread of such births, which they explain on the ground that if the twins lived they might be incestuous. Boy twins were believed to quarrel all their lives, but were spared. Once triplets were reported among the Yurok, which caused much excitement and talk of killing them as it portended sickness.

[9] Goddard 1903, p. 51 says that for a miscarriage the restrictions apply for 60 days.

[10] Goddard 1903, p. 51 says that the infant's first 10 days of life were subject to attacks from evil spirits, and the fifth was thought to be especially dangerous.

are recited to protect it from all danger, to give it strength and to ensure a long life.[11] The infant suffers a great deal during the ten day medicine-making period and many are said to die as a result of the "cooking" treatment.

For the first few days the newborn baby is not put to the breast but is fed a thin gruel of mashed pine nuts and water. Only after the mother has eliminated the colostrum from her breasts is the child given mother's milk. Thereafter, however, the baby is nursed whenever it shown signs of hunger and is allowed to have as much milk as it wants. Nursing is continued until the child walks.

If the mother should die in childbirth, every effort is made to find a wet nurse who will take over the feeding of the infant. The pine-nut soup, meanwhile, is continued. Mothers without milk are rare, if not unknown, because according to a Hupa adage "acorn mush makes lots of milk."

The navel cord, which dries and falls off the baby in two or three days, is put in a little bag made from the tip of a bear's ear and thus is hung about the infant's neck until the father takes it up the mountain.[12] The father splits a young pine tree and places the dried navel cord inside and binds the tree back together. The fate of this pine is carefully observed by the family for it is believed "as the tree grows so will grow the child." The Hupa avoid cutting such trees for firewood.

Friends and relatives, visiting the mother and new-born infant during this ten day period, bring presents such as a baby-basket or a fine buckskin. The gifts are given to the child, not to the mother.

No name is given the child at this time, it is simply called "baby", "little one" or some term of endearment.

On the tenth day the baby, wrapped in a soft buckskin, is laced into the sitting cradle (xea-kai). Here it remains—save for brief bathing and exercise periods—until it can walk alone. Also on the tenth day the infant's hair is singed with a hot coal.[13] The odor of his burnt hair brings him to the attention of the dieties who previously were unaware of the child's existence. Thus, officially begins the career of a new Hupa individual.

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[11] Goddard 1904, pp. 286-298 gives three formulas, one to make the child grow fast, one to make it grow strong, and one to cause it to reach old age. These medicines were made on different days of the ten.

[12] Driver 1939, p. 349. Driver's two informants disagreed between themselves on the disposal of the naval cord.

[13] Goddard 1903, p. 51 says "the infant's hair was cut off and put in the fire."

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