



INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTARY SERVICES, INC.

1903 n street, n.w. washington, d. c. 20036

Larry Woodson
Luang Prabang, Laos
November 16, 1964

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During the pregnancy the mother has to observe many rigorous taboos. First she must abstain, in her meals, from certain dishes which she particularly likes: larva from bees, tamarinds, bananas - containing seeds, aubergines. If she should be tempted to eat them she might very well give birth to a child, as turbulent as the honey flies, and the "bladder containing the waters" would be so swollen and hard that the birth would prove to be extremely difficult. She must not step over the head-rope of a horse or an ox lest the child would be greedy, nor to sit on the upper step of the stairs as it might delay the birth, such as the child's head blocking the entrance. Should she want to dry her skirt in the sun, she must see that the bottom of it is placed in the direction of the sun so that the head of the child will come first. If she wants to attend some festivities, she must not dress up or wear make-up, or else the child would grow up to become vain.

When she gets up in the morning, she must hit her loins with her two fist, saying, "Let the placenta fall, may the membrane enveloping the child, be expelled." At the end of the day, when she takes a bath, she must face the setting sun and smooth her hair with stalks of muraena. This will enable the child to come out easily, just as if it were an eel.

On the day of deliverance the man-midwife is sent for. He bows three times before the cup of offerings presented to him and then invokes the master's spirit who taught him the formulas and techniques.

Holding a long rope tied to the roof, the pregnant woman tries to facilitate the descent of the foetus. The man-midwife rubs her and lays on her belly grated tubers; he also tries with a betel's stalk to make her vomit. From time to time he drinks a few mouthfuls of perfumed water which he then spits on the woman's body, to drive away the evil spirits.

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A small bamboo fence is constructed between the mother and the child. Against this fence the witch doctor fixes an oar on which he has drawn in lime a human silhouette for the purpose of frightening evil spirits away. Following this there are additional rituals having to do with re-establishing normal blood circulation.

The next morning, while the young mother gets a bath, one of the child's grandmothers, wearing a huge pointed hat, places on the veranda or at the foot of the stairs a cup of scented water and a bamboo vessel filled with earth, straw, a broken piece of china and a comb. She washes the child with scented water then places his feet on the earth contained in the vessel. This is done to integrate the child in the human and family communities.

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Holding a long rope tied to the roof, the pregnant woman tries to facilitate the descent of the foetus. The man-midwife rubs her and lays on her belly grated tubers; he also tries with a betel's stalk to make her vomit. From time to time he drinks a few mouthfuls of perfumed water which he then spits on the woman's body, to drive away the evil spirits.

As time passes the woman weakens and faints. The midwife tells the parents that they better call for the "Mo Sado" (witch doctor). The witch doctor goes through a ritual and forces some sacred liquid down the patient's mouth.

If one of the child's hands comes out first the witch doctor places in it a little ball of pasty rice and a few grains of salt while saying "Child, not your hand first, but your head." Then he pushes the hand back and tries to alter the position of the child. If the baby sticks its foot out first, the witch doctor quickly gets a hold of an old shoe and softly pats the foot, saying "not your foot first, it is your head you must show first."

After delivery, an old relative specially chosen for his or her honorability and behavior - shall not his character be reflected in that of the child? - cuts the umbilical cord with a sharp blade of bamboo. The placenta is washed and salted and placed in a bamboo tube and buried at the foot of the stairs or abandoned to the current of the river.

Then, the witch doctor places red and black cotton yarn around the mother and child's neck and recites another formula. This is to prevent the return of evil spirits.

The mother is then forced to sit on some salt or in a basin containing a few drops of alcohol so as to speed the healing of the lacerations and wounds.

One of the child's grandmothers takes a rice strainer and after passing it through a flame, stands on the doorstep, and tries to scare away the Phis P'ais (spirits) that kidnap children. The child is then put in the rice strainer, and after placing according to the sex of the child, under the tiny mattress, a dagger or a needle, a pencil, a book or some kitchen utensils, so that when growing up the child should be brave, studious or skilled in household duties.

A small bamboo fence is constructed between the mother and the child. Against this fence the witch doctor fixes an oar on which he has drawn in lime a human silhouette for the purpose of frightening evil spirits away. Following this there are additional rituals having to do with re-establishing normal blood circulation.

The next morning, while the young mother gets a bath, one of the child's grandmothers, wearing a huge pointed hat, places on the veranda or at the foot of the stairs a cup of scented water and a bamboo vessel filled with earth, straw, a broken piece of china and a comb. She washes the child with scented water then places his feet on the earth contained in the vessel. This is done to integrate the child in the human and family communities.

Following this a chicken is killed and various parts of it are used to predict the child's future. The lower part of the beak of the chicken determines the length of life that the child will have. The longer the ridge, the longer the

child's life. The eyes are taken out and examined. If they are not the same size it is a bad sign for the child. The feet are cut off and observed. If the toes curl up but don't cross it is a good sign. If the toes cross it means trouble somewhere during the child's life.

Through the work of missionaries, doctors and others here in Laos many of the witch doctors are going out of business. There are still many here however and the spirits of the Phis (pronounced Peas) still claim the mind and body of most of the Lao.

About one week ago I found that the tin can barrel was full, so I started wondering what use could be made of the cans and bottles. I soon found out that a refugee village outside of town could use them. I found out later that the refugees used the cans for water glasses and the bottles to carry water from the stream and storing it. The same thing can be said for about anything the Americans throw away. The people can make use of almost anything even though we claim it is worn out or no good. At this time of the year the refugees have a great need for clothing.

I have just recently found out that the 4-H club that I was a member of wants to take this as their project and collect clothes to send over to be given to the refugees. During the month of October there were more than 500 of them relocated that had come down from the north.

I will close this newsletter now and let you in on what's to come in the future. During the past week I attended a Meo funeral. Needless to say it was very interesting to me and I think you will also find it interesting. Also, I have traveled down the river with the English doctor and the missionaries to a Leper village. I think my accounts of this might be interesting if not sickening.

Your failure to write will indicate to me that you are not interested, so I will remove your name from the mailing list. I hope that you are interested enough in my work and the people of Laos to drop me a line. Please feel free to ask any questions.

Cordially,

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