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THE COUVADE

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The term "couvade" has been applied both to a symbolic lying-in by the father of a newborn child and to the observance of series of taboos by the father before and after the child's birth.¹ It is only in the second sense of the definition that South America may be considered to be the classic land of the couvade. Since the custom in one form or another is almost universal on the continent, one may surmise that wherever it has not been recorded, as among the *Araucanians*, it existed formerly but died out before it was observed.

In most tropical tribes, both parents refrain from eating certain foods, generally animal flesh, an avoidance usually based on the belief that some unfavorable characteristic of the animal or plant could be sympathetically transmitted to the infant. A great many activities that might endanger the child's life (e. g., hunting, swimming, or the handling of cutting implements) likewise are tabooed for a time after its birth.

The fact that the father takes to his hammock at childbirth need not be viewed as a symbolic lying-in; in most tribes where the couvade has been observed the woman herself is not especially confined and resumes her normal activities a day, or even a few hours, after giving birth. The hypothesis that the husband reclines in his hammock principally because there are no activities in which he is permitted to take part, cannot be dismissed as a mere vagary. In all the literature about the South American couvade there are only two statements that definitely suggested that the custom actually is an imitation of childbirth. Dutertre (1667-71, vol. 2) writes, "The father begins to complain and takes to his hammock," and Yves d'Evreux describes the event:

He [the husband] lies-in instead of his wife who works as usual; then all the women of the village come to see and visit him lying in his bed, consoling him for the trouble and pain he had in producing this child; he is treated as if he were sick and very tired without leaving his bed as women here keep their beds after childbirth when they are visited and taken care of. [Yves d'Evreux, 1864, p. 89.]

It is not unlikely that the two writers have given us an interpretation rather than an exact description of the custom. Yves d'Evreux himself admits that he had in mind the European pattern of childbed.

¹ Various observances of the second kind among North American Indians have been called "semicouvade" in anthropological literature.—EDITOR.

Characteristically, the South American *couvade* is based on the belief that a powerful bond exists between the father and the child which prevents the former from doing anything that might harm the infant until it is strong enough to stand the strain or avoid the danger.

Prenatal taboos.—Among a considerable number of tribes the series of taboos that constitute the *couvade* begin during the women's pregnancy. Both parents avoid eating or even touching plants and animals with characteristics that, if transmitted to the unborn child, might impair its appearance or temperament. Other taboos serve to prevent a difficult delivery.² For example, among the *Pilagá*, a prospective father abstained from eating armadillo meat to prevent breech presentation, tripe lest the infant be strangled by its navel cord, stomach lest it be born wrapped in the matrice, legs lest it be born with deformed legs, and brains so that it will not be born with an open skull. In addition, the father could not carry on certain normal activities, such as saddling or riding a horse, playing hockey, cleaning a pipe, handling a weapon or cutting implement; nor could he use new pots lest the child remain glued to the mother's womb. Some of these restrictions continued after birth, generally until the child's navel cord dropped off.

Postnatal taboos.—The observance of postnatal taboos by the father probably is universal in South America; the most common one is abstinence from some food. Cobo (1890-93, vol. 4, p. 175) writes about the ancient Peruvians, "When the women were in childbed, their husbands, and often they themselves, would fast and refrain from certain foods."

Both *Yahgan* parents observed certain food and other taboos for some time before and after a child's birth. Sometimes, especially in the case of the first-born, the father remained quietly in the tent, abstaining from most work, while relatives and friends supplied the family with necessities. Under the same circumstances, *Alacaluf* parents only drank water for 2 days. Among the *Ona*, the father merely kept a light diet. There is no information about the *couvade* among the *Tehuelche* and *Araucanians*.

An *Abipón* father at first fasted and lay in bed covered with mats and skins and then for some time refrained from shaving his eye-

² The *Carib* and *Acawai* gave the following reasons for abstaining from eating certain foods: "The acouri is thus tabooed lest, like that little animal, the child should be meager; the haimara also, lest it should be blind; the labba, lest the infant's mouth should protrude like the labba's or lest it be spotted like the labba, which spots would ultimately become ulcers; the marudi is also forbidden, lest the infant be still-born, the screeching of that bird being considered ominous of death. Both the above tribes and the *Waraus* [*Warrau*] consider it their duty to abstain from venison after their wives are confined, lest the child on arriving at manhood be found wanting in speed, exemplified by the slow pace which the female deer when she has a young fawn at her feet is obliged to observe" (Brett, 1868, p. 355).

brows, snuffing tobacco, eating capybara flesh, riding horseback until he perspired, tasting honey taken from places in the earth that had been stepped on, and swimming across rivers.

The father's confinement has not been reported among any modern Chaco tribe except the *Tereno*. In all tribes, however, the father refrained from eating foods deemed harmful to the infant, and resumed his normal life only after the child had "hardened," that is to say, after 4 weeks.

A *Tupinamba* father shunned game, fish, and salt for 3 days and did no work until the infant's navel cord had fallen off. Infringement of these rules was believed to cause the mother and child to suffer from diarrhea. The father also placed the baby's carrying sling in a miniature trap as if it were game, shot at it with a small bow and arrow, and threw a fish net over it in an endeavor to make his son a good hunter and fisherman. In the same tribe the father of a newborn child lay in his hammock carefully wrapped up so that he would not catch cold and so impair the child's health; during this time he was visited by friends who brought him gifts. As soon as the navel cord had dropped off he could walk about again, though he still had to avoid violent exertions, like felling trees.

The couvade was probably customary among all the *Tupí-Guaraní* tribes, though it has not been recorded among every one in our fragmentary literature about these peoples. After the birth of a child, *Guaraní* fathers idled in their hammocks until the navel cord fell off. During this time they loosened their bows and gave up setting traps, hunting, and the making of tools or weapons. Modern *Caingúá* and *Chiriguano* fathers merely fasted on the occasion of a child's birth; formerly, *Chiriguano* took to their beds. Only in some *Caingúá* tribes of Brazil is the couvade in the strict sense still in vigor. In this respect, the *Guaranyú* remained quite conservative; there the new father slashed his skin with an agouti tooth, stained his feet and articulations with arucú, and fasted in his hammock for 3 days.

Bororo parents observed food and tobacco restrictions for 10 days or so; during this period they were not permitted to touch their hair with their hands lest it turn white. *Carajá* fathers stayed at home for 6 days; they were not permitted to eat fish or manioc and were obliged to clean their stomach by vomiting every day (Krause, 1911, p. 327).

The *Apinayé* father stayed in bed and abstained from all labor until the navel cord dropped off.

Both parents speak as little as possible, even with each other, and keep a strict diet on manioc flat-cakes baked according to ancient usage on a hot stone slab [Nimuendajú, 1939, p. 101.]

Immediately after the delivery, *Sherente* parents partook only of white manioc flat-cakes and the milky juice of the babassu palm kernels.

The father could not touch an ax for 3 days (Nimuendajú, 1942, p. 39).

In the Xingú region, the father dieted on cassava diluted with water and avoided all foods that, if eaten by the child, might have harmed it (Steinen, 1894, p. 335). *Paressí* parents remained at home for 5 days; the father ate only cassava moistened with water (Steinen, 1894, p. 434). The *Ipuriná* father ended his fast only when the mother returned from her confinement (Ehrenreich, 1891, p. 29). *Culino* men were not permitted to eat paca or tapir flesh for 3 days after the birth of a child. Meat was also taboo to *Paumari* fathers (Ehrenreich, 1891, p. 51). *Miranha* fathers lay in their hammocks for 3 weeks keeping a diet of manioc flour, certain birds, and fish. *Araua* men avoided certain fish, male turtles, and turtle eggs during their wives' pregnancy and after childbirth.

Among the *Guaques* of Popayán, the parturient was confined to a special hut for 3 months. During that time the husband fasted and carried on no activities. At the end of the period the parents smeared themselves with ashes and genipa. (See Albis, 1934, p. 14.)

The *Catawishi* stopped all heavy work and ate neither game flesh nor large fish for a month (Tastevin, 1925, p. 149).

An *Awishiri* couple rested for 2 weeks in their hammocks, avoided work, and abstained from several foods (e. g., meat); whatever they could eat was prepared by other people (Tessman, 1930, p. 484). Among the *Ssimaku* (*Urarina*) the father shared his wife's diet and shunned every kind of heavy work for a week (Tessman, 1930, p. 506). The same type of couvade is reported for the *Yameo*. Among the *Mayoruna*, the father reclined in his hammock in a compartment of the hut from the moment his wife felt the onset of birth pains; he remained confined with her and observed a strict diet for 20 days (Tessman, 1930, p. 376). The couvade of the *Muinane*, *Bora*, *Cashibo*, and *Campa* consisted only of some food taboos. Among the *Candoshi*, the father remained in his hut fasting and singing; his wife meanwhile went to her parents' home (Tessman, 1930, p. 292). Among the *Pioje* and *Nocaman*, the couvade lasted only for 1 day.

In the Guianas both parents remained in their hammocks until the navel cord had dropped off. Among the *Macushí* they were separated by a mat wall. They ate only cassava cakes and manioc soup and for 3 or 4 months they could not work. Since a man could not use any sharp instrument he had to give up hunting, fishing, felling trees, carving wood, and similar activities. Among the ancient *Galibi*, the new father subjected himself to flagellation and to the bite of venomous ants. Moreover, in several Guiana tribes he was not permitted to scratch himself with his fingernails, but used for this purpose a splinter, especially provided, from the midrib of a cockerite palm (Schomburgk, 1847-48, pp. 313-314). The *Palicour* father was not permitted to cut

cipo or drink its sap, cut tauary, or allow game to rot; besides he had to be careful not to fall from a tree lest the child would get a big belly. The father remained with the women for 10 days, during which time he could eat only a little tapir and piranha fish. The mother stayed at home for 2 months and ate only uéua fish (Nimuendajú, 1926, p. 83).

A *Conibo* father did not keep a diet, but could not undertake any heavy labor for 4 days after the birth of his child (Tessman, 1930, p. 214).

A *Yagua* father was confined to his hammock; he was forced to refrain from cutting "any creeping vegetation or touching chambita yarn other than his hammock. He was not allowed to sing or to play the panpipes or drums for a period of 10 days." Until the child could walk, neither parent could eat fish or other river game (Fejos, 1943, p. 71).

Until his child could walk, a *Jívaro* father avoided animal and plant foods containing tsarutama (magic stuff) for, "such foods had power over the spirit of the child and could wreak harm upon it" (Stirling, 1938, p. 111).

Among the *Siusí*, the parents lived in isolation for 5 days without working or washing themselves and ate only manioc wafers and pepper. On the fifth day the maternal grandfather recited a charm and enumerated the foods which could then be eaten (Koch-Grünberg, 1923 a, p. 116).

At the conclusion of the couvade period among the *Cubeo*, the headman of the sib or some other old man charmed all the fish and game so that they could cause no harm to the child; he said, for example, to a spiny fish, "Let no spines lodge in the throat of our little one."

Among the *Island Carib*, the father of a first-born child was confined in a small hut. During the first 10 days he ate only dry cassava and water; later he added some ouican or manioc beer. He ate only the center of the wafers and saved the rest for the feast which ended his fast. He could leave his hut only at night; no one who had partaken of fish or beer could visit him. After 3 months, two shamans took him to the plaza, where he was made to stand on two cassava wafers while they incised his skin with aguti teeth and washed the wound with a decoction of urucú, red pepper, and tobacco. The baby's face was rubbed with the blood to make it courageous. Then the father sat down on a red-painted bench and was offered food as if he were a small child; he could taste only some fish and drink while his neck was supported like an infant's. The shamans distributed the cassava rinds to the crowd, and the father ate the wafers on which he had stood. After this ceremony, the father rested for several days. For 6 months more he refrained from eating turtles lest the child become deaf, parrots lest it have a long nose, crabs lest it get long legs, and

many other meats for similar reasons. After the birth of subsequent children, the father only kept a diet for 5 days (La Borde, 1886).

The observance of "couvade" restrictions often have been interpreted by the Indians themselves as an expression of the close bond between the father and the infant's clinging soul. An *Itonama* father never bathed in deep water lest the baby's soul drown; to prevent the soul from following him, the women tied the baby's legs (Nordenskiöld, 1915, p. 112). When a *Palicur* father went to the bush he carried a miniature bow and arrows for his child's soul; if he had to travel in the forest at night, he always hung a cord from his left shoulder for the soul (Nimuendajú, 1926, p. 83).

The reason why a *Carib* father in Dutch Guiana remained at home for a week without working was that the child's body might ache.

The second week he will go out to the woods, but not too far for otherwise the child gets too tired. If the path divides itself, he will cover up one path in order that the soul of the child will not take the wrong path and lose its way. Near a creek he will not come at all, lest *okoyumo*, the water spirit, should take his child, and yet during the first 2 weeks the baby is with its mother in a little room especially built for the occasion. She is not allowed to take it out. The father himself has not yet seen it. [Ahlbrink, 1924, p. 223.]

The *Betoya* told Father Rivero (1883, p. 347) that if the father were to walk, he would step on the child's head; if he were to split wood, he would cleave its head; if he shot birds, the arrows would pierce its body.

The identity of father and child is expressed in the name given the infant by the *Bacãri*: "little father."

This mystic bond between the bodies of parents and children does not cease entirely with the completion of the couvade rites. Among the *Sherente*, for example, married persons of either sex refrained from sexual intercourse when their parents were seriously sick, for they were convinced that it had an unfavorable effect upon the patient (Nimuendajú, 1942, p. 39).

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