An Overview of Traditional Native American Birth Practices

As I celebrated Thanksgiving this year, I couldn’t help but remember the culture and heritage of America’s indigenous people, a culture mostly lost because of the establishment of European colonies. For Pathways, I would like to highlight one of the lesser-celebrated aspects of the Native American people: their pregnancy and birth practices.

Ancient peoples, not understanding women's menstrual cycles, looked for answers in the...
natural world. They were astute enough to see the correlation between the lunar cycles and the cycles of a woman’s life: waxing (young and nubile); full (middle-age and reproducing); and waning (old and wise). The bleeding time, like the lunar cycles, came cyclically and to fullness often when the moon was most ripe. Many saw menstrual blood as the origins of life and a deep source of wisdom.

Women were given special menses and birth huts in many Native American cultures. In today’s society, we would see this as a disgraceful shunning. Yet, the tribes’ women saw this as a time to rest from their daily chores, to bond with women around them, and to talk about womanly things, such as marriage, sex, birth and childrearing.

The land was seen as feminine: the mountains as breasts, the rivers and streams as the life flow, caves as the womb, and the plains as the body. Women were revered and regarded with respect and dignity, seen as the life-giving and tribe-nurturing citizens.

Pregnancy

The Blessing Way was a Navajo ritual meant to pamper the pregnant woman, bestowing blessings and wellwishes on her for her upcoming birth. Its ritualistic ceremonial cleansing, grooming, gifting, and nourishing lasted nine days, culminating in an all-night “no sleep” ritual, after which the expectant woman would greet the morning sun. The women of the tribe would surround the mother, rubbing her body, feeding her healthy foods, and giving her talismans of strength and remembrance. They would sing their creation song over her, the story of the Changing Woman.

Some tribes believed that pregnant women should not cross their legs, wear tied neckerchiefs, or have sex, and most taught that pregnant women should visualize only good things and should eat pregnancy-specific foods for a healthy baby. For example, the Cherokee recommended abstaining from eating raccoon, speckled trout and black walnuts.

Likewise, a woman was encouraged to walk a lot in order to keep her hips wide and open and to keep their baby small enough to pass through her pelvis. Women were encouraged to wash their hands and feet daily, and to avoid harsh weather.
The Navajo extended these proscriptions to the father as well, forbidding him to tie up animals (which was thought to tie up a baby in the womb, making labor difficult) and requiring that he wash his hands and feet daily.

Some women employed the use of herbs and tinctures to hasten birth, such as a Mahican concoction made of root bark or a Cherokee infusion of wild cherry bark, both of which were drank to bring about contractions. Other tribes used less medicinal means, such as having an elder “scare” the baby out.

Birth

Some tribes, such as the Hopi, required that a woman have a solitary birth, but many more tribes had woman-assisted births. Often, the laboring woman’s mother or grandmother, or an elder tribal woman, would assist during the birth. Some tribes, such as the Kickapoo, allowed men to witness the labor and even assist.

Some gave birth within the sanctuary of the village, either in their homes or in ceremonial birth buildings (the Inuit and Algonquian tribes did this), while others (like the Mi’kmaq and Bella Koola) left the village to give birth in the woods or at the edge of a body of water.

The Navajo called a midwife “the one who holds.” The Inuits called their midwives “cord mothers.” The term midewiwin (“medicine man/medicine woman”) was used universally to some degree or another, and particularly by the Anishinaabeg and Apache peoples.

Women walked, strutted, crawled, swayed and leaned. They remained mobile, moving their baby down, facilitating a faster birth. Laboring women would stand, kneel, sit, squat, hang, dance or otherwise move their babies down; the one position that a woman never birthed in was lying down. Some Native American cultures used smoke baths during birth to help relax the perineum. The smoke was usually created from laurel leaves burned in a small clay pot, which the mother would squat or kneel over. Other times a secondary birth attendant would blow the smoke onto the mother’s perineum.

Sometimes, a birth attendant helped by providing counterpressure on the perineum, or
providing fundal pressure for prolonged labor. Other times, the mother would provide her own counterpressure to her fundus to help bring down a baby by wrapping a cloth or leather belt around her and pulling on the ends during a contraction.

Tribes had different birthing devices to help women to labor down. These included ropes (hung from rafters or tree branches), wooden blocks to squat on, stakes pounded into the ground to press against, low birth stools to sit upon, and others. Many tribes lit birth fires, warmed water for poultices or medicinal teas, and used oils for body or perineal massage. Some tribes used musical gourds, songs and chanting to help the mother during labor; other women would make sympathy sounds to help the woman cope.

More often than not, babies were not “caught” by human hands, but welcomed by the earth. Women would lay leaves under the mother’s bottom and allow the baby to fall out onto the ground. The short drop would act as a stimulus, akin to our rough handling in today’s Western cultures. Babies were generally rubbed vigorously with ashes or animal fats, and were bound tightly soon after birth. Women were encouraged to “discover” their babies and nurse them soon after birth.

Native American women were educated in the use of herbs and other natural means of helping with labor. Black or blue cohosh, red raspberry leaf, partridgeberry, American licorice, broom snakeweeds, buckwheat, black chokeberry, smooth sumac, balsam root bark, birth root, corn smut, wild yam, black haw, hottentot fig, pennyroyal, bayberry, and cotton root were all employed for common childbirth issues, including long labor, postpartum hemorrhage and retained placenta.

The most publicized account of a birth-related Native American medicine is that of Sacagawea. As noted by Captain Meriwether Lewis in The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition:

*About five O clock this evening one of the wives of Charbono was delivered of a fine boy. It is worthy of remark that this was the first child which this woman had born, and as is common in such cases her labor was tedious and the pain violent. Mr. Jessome [a Mandan interpreter] informed me that he had frequently administered a small portion of the rattle of a snake, which he assured me had never failed to produce the desired effect, that of hastening the birth of the child; having the rattle of a snake by me I gave it to him and he administered two rings of it to the woman broken in small pieces with the fingers and added to a small quantity of water. Whether this medicine was truly the cause or not I shall not undertake to determine, but I was*
informed that she had not taken it more than ten minutes before she brought forth, perhaps this remedy may be worthy of future experiments, but I must confess that I want faith as to its efficacy.

The Labyrinth

Native American peoples, especially the Hopi, Akimel O’odham, Tohono O’odham and Yaqui, used labyrinths to symbolize birth, rebirth and transition from one world to the next—emergence. The labyrinths were usually depicted with a cross in the center, representing the four cardinal directions, seasons of change, and sources of spirit and power. Unlike a maze, there is only one way in and out, so there is no fear of losing oneself. Instead, the labyrinth is a means of rebirth and discovery: finding oneself.

The Hopi people used the labyrinth to teach the principle of Mother/Child (Tapu’at). This included the Mother Earth and her relationship with her mortal child; the mortal mother and her relationship/journey to bringing forth her mortal child; and the creation story. The outer walls are the womb, while the lines of the labyrinth represent the twists and turns of life’s journey and the umbilical cord, always connected either physically or spiritually with the mother. The center symbolizes the amniotic sac, the center of life, or the beginning of all knowledge and wisdom.

It is not certain that women walked labyrinths, but we do know that some drew them in the sands as a meditative rite during labor.

Postpartum

Native American women were robust, in excellent physical health, devoid of outside diseases and influences (by and large). They ate a diet rich in fresh produce and seasonal foods. This allowed for a quick and relatively uneventful recovery from childbirth. Although certain welcoming and new-parent rituals were observed, they were often quick to return to regular duties, usually after a short respite and lying-in period. Many women would take an after-birth tonic (of ergot or another remedy indigenous to their area) to expel the placenta and help reduce blood loss.
Many tribes’ customs required a lying-in time where women attended to the new mother and baby, banding together to take care of her house’s needs, while also pampering the mother with grooming, binding, special nourishing, washing, steaming and massaging. Some cultures would swaddle the mother in a warm bed over heated stones, while others would house the mother in special steam huts.

The Shawnee required 10 days of lying-in in which the father could not see either the mother or his baby. The Picuris Pueblo required a 30-day lying-in period, after which the baby was named. Many tribes required that the father and a helper stay with the mother for this entire time of lying-in.

An example of the extent of naming and postpartum rituals is the Hopi purification ritual. The Hopi people require a 20-day lying-in period, during which the mother must not have the sun shine on her. On the night of the 19th day, a great feast is prepared in the mother’s honor, and both she and the newborn are bathed carefully and ritualistically. The baby is rubbed with ash and anointed by the family, who suggest names to the father. The father, in turn, announces the sun’s arrival. The grandmother of the tribe chooses the child’s name and announces it as the baby’s face is shown the light of day for the first time. Then, everyone except the mother returns to the home to feast; the mother goes to the sweat house to complete her purification.

Many Native American tribes cherish the placenta and/or the umbilical cord as sacred or mystical. Navajo tribes require that a baby’s placenta be buried within the sacred four corners of the tribe’s land, essentially binding the infant to the land and the tribe’s ancestors. Likewise, the midewiwin traditionally performed the rites of cord-cutting and naming.

In many Plains tribes, the newborn was presented with a small beaded pouch that contained the remnants of their umbilical cord stump. The child would wear this throughout their lifetime, and many were buried with it in their old age. This talisman was thought to bring connection to the tribe and family unit, and serve as protection.

The Pueblo people would either bury the umbilical cord in the floor of the home (if it was a girl) or in the corn field (if it was a boy). On the fourth day after birth, the infant was presented to the sun. The shaman would name the child, and present him or her with a flint arrowhead or an ear of corn, depending on gender.
The Wichita people had their own postpartum customs. On the morning after a baby’s birth, the elder women of the tribe would take the newborn down to a stream and pray for protection, strength and health, bathing the babe. Other Native American tribes have done similar river-immersion rituals for the first year of life for the baby.

The father had his own responsibility for ensuring a baby’s health in Wichita culture. His first job as a new father was to make a cradling board. It was very ceremonial, with many specifics to adhere to while choosing the willow tree that would become his child’s carrying place. He would offer supplications and prayers while laboring over the hewn wood to ensure his child’s health.

Most tribes required that the father participate in the restrictions postpartum, or he was prescribed his own set of rituals to perform. The Tillamook people, for example, required the mother to have a 15-day lying-in time, during which the father forfeited sleep for 10 days. Likewise, many fathers swore to abstain from intercourse for a time or went on dietary restrictions with the mother of his child.

Childcare

Some women of the plains would grind dried buffalo manure to use as an absorbent powder in their babies’ swaddling blankets. If a baby were to wet themselves, the damp powder was shaken out and new powder was added. Other tribes practiced elimination communication, and were able to move the infant into a position to relieve themselves without soiling the blankets or wrappings.

Women of all tribes carried their babies nearly exclusively for the first year. This allowed for ease of transportation, warmth, and immediate and extended nursing, while assuring that the newborn would have minimal chance of falling into natural harm (scrapes, nicks, falls, infection, puncture wounds, drownings or animal attacks). Babies slept with their mothers for the same reasons.

Carrying it Forward

I hope that you enjoyed learning a little about the beautiful rites of passage that our land’s native people have practiced since time immemorial. One hopes that we, amid our technology, our busy lifestyles, and our impersonal communication practices, could take a step back and
consider a lesson from this group of people. Life is sacred, life should be honored, and life should be cherished through holistic care and ritual.

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