



## Spiritual Meaning of Placenta Disposal

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The placenta was expelled after childbirth. Major functions of the placenta include the exchange of metabolites between the mother and the fetus, gas exchange, and immunological support for the fetus. How is the placenta, which played an important role in the development of the fetus, treated after its expulsion?

In Japan, a regulation implemented in 1948 ensures that designated operators incinerate placentas. However, prior to its enactment, various procedures have been implemented to dispose them. During the 8<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, placentas were placed in an unglazed pot or wrapped in hay, and buried either on a mountainside or under the floor of a building. Before burial, placentas were also covered with salt or alcohol [1].

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According to previous study on the traditional disposal of placentas in Niger, "The placenta is very important. In a sense, it was prioritized over the treatment of a newborn child. The placenta was washed and buried in accordance to custom. It was washed after the umbilical cord is cut and before the child is cleaned. An elbow-deep hole is dug in the ground, and a nest is built. The placenta was placed on the right side of the hole facing north if the newborn child is a boy, and on the left if it is a girl. Next, it was covered with shattered pieces of an unglazed pot and goat excrement. The hole is then covered and watered, three times for a boy and four times for a girl. The baby is then washed before we wash ourselves [2]." Other studies also report that cultural factors influence the disposal of placentas [3-8].

In 2008, we conducted an interview with 36 midwives in the Republic of Benin regarding the disposal of placentas.

Based on our interviews the following report reviews the significance the Beninese place on placentas. The customs for handling placentas, involving detailed procedures of traditional disposal, was preserved in most regions, and local medical facilities and staff respect these methods. After the baby was delivered at a hospital or health center and the placenta expelled, a midwife receives a covered plastic bucket from the baby's family. She places the placenta in it, coats it with a chlorine-based bleach commonly used in local households, and returns the bucket to the family.

According to the interviews, approximately 100% of the families

take the placenta home. A public health regulation implemented in 1987 prohibits the burial of animal remains within one's property, but the bill does not specifically mention the burial of placentas. Thus, the state ultimately respects the traditional customs of its people.

Most interviewees specified a "showering area" as the burial site. Some interviewees from southern Benin, cited a "yard or the home's entrance," while others from the southwest cited their "farm." In the northern Patargo arrondissement, one replied, "The Peulh tribe members don't bury placentas at home. We throw them away." Many cultural groups in Benin are farmers, but the Peulh are often nomads. Nomads do not have a permanent settlement and move their home several times throughout the year, raising cattle to generate income. Tribes that have a permanent settlement carefully preserve the placentas at home, while nomads without a permanent settlement do not have a specific ritual. This difference in lifestyle correlates with the difference in disposal and significance that was placed on the placenta.

Two distinct behavioral patterns emerged regarding post-burial behavior, where people who cited a "showering area" as the burial site stated that they proceeded to "wash the mother or the newborn baby" after burial, while those that cited yards and farms as the burial site replied that they "plant a tree." According to the interviews, the former behavior was intended as a prayer for the safe birth of the next child, while the latter signifies a prayer for the healthy growth of the newborn. In rural Benin, a showering area for washing bodies is typically outside the house. However, in urban homes where some may lack yard space, an area was designated at or near the home's entrance, which may characterize a converted burial site. The placenta was buried in the showering area, and the mother and child connected with the placenta, wash themselves on the burial ground. The water they use to wash themselves seeps into the soil and washes the buried placenta as well. It is almost as if they associate the placenta with the child and treat it accordingly. The custom where the placenta is "buried in a yard or a farm with a tree planted above it" is based on a belief that the tree represents the child. It implies a desire for the child to continue taking nutrients from the placenta buried at the root of the tree, just as it supplied nutrients to the fetus during pregnancy.

While the burial of the placenta was an exclusively male responsibility

in many regions, grandmothers and post-menopausal women undertook the duty in some regions as well. Until the arrival of Christianity, these regions had devoutly practiced a traditional religion that treated menstruation as impure. Hence, only those who did not experience menstruation, like men and post-menopausal women, were allowed to perform the holy ritual of burying the placenta.

The placenta was buried with the attached umbilical cord facing up. If it was buried facing down, the next birth is believed to end in miscarriage. The placenta is buried either by placing it directly in the hole or by placing it in an unglazed pot which is then buried. Placement in a pot signifies preservation, while direct burial into the soil signifies the return to the soil for rebirth; customs based on a belief in reincarnation frequently observed among farmers.

In the northern regions, rice and beans were placed on the placenta as ritual offerings at a placental burial. This was also based on the belief that the placenta is equivalent to the newborn, and is meant to avoid hunger. Some people also sprinkle salt over the placenta. This is to prevent the placenta from decaying, and is a ritual for preservation.

In the local language (Fon), the placenta is called nouzizan, which means “something important to the owner” (i.e., something important to the child). One interviewee said, “We continue the traditional way of treating it because the placenta is holy to us.”

To the Beninese, the placenta is as significant an entity as the newborn child. They view it as the instrument that brought the child into this world and a sign of good fortune in terms of the newborn's growth and for future children. In Benin, a stillborn child is buried at home with the placenta instead of a graveyard. Children who pass away after birth are buried in graveyards. The placenta and stillborn children are treated equally. Rather than prohibiting the citizens from practicing their beliefs regarding placentas, Beninese law sanctions these customs by employing hygienic measures before delivering the placenta to the family. The spiritual well-being of the people can be sustained by empathizing with their sentiments.

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