The Couvade in Brazil: A Survey[1]

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The momentous event of birth often has far-reaching implications for a number of Amerindian fathers in Brazil. Their lives are radically altered. The implements of hunting and fishing are frequently laid aside. Fast, abstinence, and seclusion become ther watchwords as they pay homage to the mysterious magico-religious custom of the couvade.

The couvade, of course, is not limited to Brazil, though some of the most outstanding examples of these prenatal and postnatal customs have been found there and in the neighboring Guianas. In addition to northeastern and north central South America, the practice has been recorded in a number of other places especially among primitive and peasant societies in East India and adjacent Asia, parts of Africa, and southwestern Europe.

A precise definition of couvade is difficult if not impossible, since often no two tribes observe exactly the same taboos and procedures. The stereotyped definition focuses on the husband simulating labor pains in his hammock. However, this aspect of the couvade is comparatively rare. A better definition would emphasize the observance of dietary and occupational taboos by the father along with his seclusion, which—contrary to popular belief—need not take place in a hammock nor be accompanied by a dramatic imitation of a woman giving birth. As Gillin has so aptly pointed out in his monograph on the Barama River Caribs of British Guiana, "the father is not, however, required to stay in his hammock, although a man forced to stay in the house will usually be found in the hammock because that is the most comfortable place for him to rest" (1936: 180).

What he says of the Caribs of Guiana (who also extend into north central Brazil) can also be applied to other tribes in Brazil. According to Gillin (1936: 180):

> Neither does the Carib father simulate the pangs of childbirth. I suggest that reports given by travellers of certain tropical South American tribes, that the couvade requires that a father behave in the manner of a woman in childbirth, may have been based on just such evidence as that offered here: the father may have been observed in his hammock following the birth of the child, and it may have been assumed in some cases that he was undergoing a vicarious lying-in, whereas the actual facts were orientated to an entirely different ideology.

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The intensity with which the male follows these prenatal and postnatal taboos has enabled ethnographers to distinguish between the full or classical couvade and the half or semicouvade, the latter occurring when the man and the woman are both sharing dietary and occupational taboos to a more or less similar degree.

The oldest accounts of the couvade in Brazil deal with the custom as practiced by the Tupinambá, a group of tribes belonging to the Tupí-Guaraní linguistic family, who dominated much of the Brazilian coastline during the sixteenth century. The Elizabethan Anthony Knivet reported that no Indian would catch fish or kill game while his wife was pregnant because of the belief that the fetus would die as a result (1947: 124). Gabriel Soares de Sousa, writing in the 1580's, reported that when a child is born "the husband immediately lies down in his hammock . . . until the child's navel cord dries. In the meantime, his relatives and friends visit him, bring gifts of food and drink, and his wife makes him many delicacies" (1938: 370). Fernão Cardim, the Jesuit provincial in Brazil, in his tract on the Indians of Brazil which was also written in the 1580's gave a similar description, though he stated that the husband fasted while in seclusion (1939: 149). In addition to the above practices, other rituals were performed by the new father, especially if the child were a boy (Fernandes, 1963: 174-190; Metraux, 1928: 100-101). From the above examples as well as those cited by such sixteenth and seventeenth century chroniclers as Gandavo, Thevet, and Evreux, it is quite evident that the couvade played an important role in Tupinambá daily life. As Frei Vicente do Salvador, a Franciscan writing a history of Brazil in 1627, lamented (1931: 59): "The Portuguese were not able to wean the Indians away from these superstitions, for the Indians were convinced that by following these prescriptions they save themselves and the child from illness."

Throughout the centuries the practice of the couvade continued its important role in the life of the Indians inhabiting the eastern and northeastern parts of Brazil, not only among the Tupí-Guaraní but also among the other major linguistic tribal group in that area, the Ge. Interestingly enough the custom of the couvade in northern and northeastern Brazil is quite uniform, the practices of such Ge tribes as the Apinayé, the Eastern Timbira, the Šerente and others being similar to those of such Tupí-Guaraní tribes as the Tenetehara and the Urubú.

In many tribes the taboos begin as soon as the woman is pregnant. Wagley and Galvão, speaking of the Tenetehara (or the Guajajara or Tembé as they are sometimes referred to), give the following description of that tribe's prenatal practices (1949: 63):

> The onset of pregnancy marks the beginning of a rigid set of restrictions for both a Tenetehara woman and her husband which last until the infant which is born is able to walk. The development of the child during the prenatal period and early infancy is considered to be dependent upon the careful observance of these rules by both parents . . . The most complex rules are those against killing and eating certain animals.

What Wagley and Galvão say of the Tenetehara is almost equally true of the Ge tribes Nimuendajú has studied. Among the Eastern Timbira, the following taboos are practiced (Nimuendajú, 1946: 106):

> Both parents are prohibited from eating the flesh of parrots, wild doves, sariemas [rheas], and armadilloes; and they must not kill a snake if they encounter one. The father must not singe a paca at the fire lest there be a miscarriage, and he must not have sexual relations with either his wife or other women.

It is interesting to note that another Ge tribe, the Šerente, besides being bound to abstain from the flesh of certain animals, are also prohibited from eating most varieties of fish (Nimuendajú, 1942: 38):

> They must abstain from peixe sabao and piau fish, whose remarkable retrograde movements might communicate themselves to the child, obstructing the

delivery. For the same reason they avoid eating tatu de rabo mole (Lysiurus unicinctus) which is very difficult to dislodge from its burrow. Surubim (Platystoma tigrinus) is taboo lest the child have a spotted skin. The only fish of the order of Acanthuridae permitted to the parents is the barbado. Piranhos (Serrasalmo paraya) are forbidden because their shadow would bite the child after birth, causing it to cry incessantly. Steppe foxes, wildcats, and jaguars are also taboo. When hunting, the father should avoid looking at a coandu (Cercolabes sp.), a guariba (Mycetes semiculus L.), or a sucuriju (Eunectes murinus) lest the child acquire their nasty traits.

According to Nimuendajú, the Apinayé also have a long list of prohibited animals including the small armadillo, the small anteater, the sloth, and the porcupine (1939: 99). Failure to observe these restrictions are said to have disastrous effects on the offspring. Nimuendajú was told that "Grab-re's youngest offspring in Gato Preto has such small eyes and a deformed thick nose for no other reason than because the father ate porcupine flesh during his wife's pregnancy" (1939: 99).

Wagley and Galvão sum up with several observations (1949: 63).

The behavior of the father is important as that of the mother in safeguarding the child—guarding the foetus against evil influences, insuring a smooth delivery, and making certain the normal early growth and development of the infant. This physical bond between father and child begins at conception . . . Even though he moves to a distant village he must still respect the restrictions imposed during the prenatal period, during the birth, and during the infancy of the child.

As an example of the above, Wagley and Galvão in their study cite the case of a man who "left the woman before he knew she was pregnant. Her family sent word to him that she was expecting his child and warning him to observe the necessary taboos" (1949: 63).

From their conversations with the Tenetehara, Wagley and Galvão suggest that the principle behind the prohibitions against the eating of the flesh of certain mammals, birds, or fish is that they are carriers of spirits (1949: 64):

If the father kills one of these animals or birds, or if either the mother or father eat of its meat, the spirit 'will enter' the foetus, causing some undescribable feature or even physical abnormality in the child . . . Such abnormal or ugly features are generally characteristic of the animal in question.

A few examples will suffice (Wagley and Galvão, 1949: 64-65):

Animal	Effect on the Child
Red macaw	Born halfwitted or with a beak instead of a nose
Anteater	Born with a white mark on shoulders similar to the marking on the pelt
Jacu	Born with white hair, perhaps an albino
Boa constrictor	Born with a flat head
Black jaguar	Born halfwitted and 'with the flat face and ugly features of a jaguar'
Wildcat	Born with weak hands—'will not be able to hold anything in its hands'
Sloth	Born halfwitted and slow of movement

Prohibited mammals, birds, reptiles and fish could be multiplied by analyzing the taboos of other tribes. Sometimes, it is only certain parts of the animals that are taboo. Nimuendajú (1946: 105), for example, mentions that among the Eastern Timbira if either parent gnaw leg bones, the child will suffer a major umbilical rupture.

As for postnatal practices, among the Eastern Timbira the husband confines himself to a partitioned place in his hut until the navel string drops off. While in seclusion

> the parents must not paint or decorate themselves, neither cut their hair or scratch themselves with their fingers, substituting for the last purpose special little sticks. During the entire period they are limited to vegetable fare, maize—today rice also—being considered most fitting . . . In eating sweet potatoes the couple must not throw away the skins, but collect them in a basket and carry them behind the house. The father must not execute any hard work or otherwise exert himself in any fashion (Nimuendaju. 1946: 107).

The Urubú and the Tenetehara husbands are also subject to rigid lying-in rules. The latter must rest and only eat "manioc flour, small fish (usually the piabanha), and roasted maize; and . . . drink only warm water" (Wagley and Galvão, 1949: 69). Among the Urubú the parents

> take to the usual diet of shibes and yashi flesh. A week after the birth, the couple can get out of their hammocks and walk about in the village, but the man cannot go hunting . . . The diet becomes less restricted as time passes: the flesh of smaller game is allowed, but not of pig, deer, tapir, or birds; and all sexual intercourse is still forbidden (Huxley, 1957: 184).

The couvade prescriptions for the šerente are even stricter.

> Immediately after delivery the parents partake of nothing but white manioc flat-cakes and the milky juice of the babassu palm kernels. The father must not touch an axe before the third day. After that he may add fermented manioc paste (puba) to his bill of fare . . . This remains [his] substance until the navel cords drops off, prior to which event, the father is rarely seen outside the partitioned space (Nimuendaju, 1942:89).

What happens if these rules are transgressed? The Indians questioned always seem to have many ready examples of the consequences. One of the Teneteharas told Wagley and Galvão (1949: 69):

> One man went hunting, killing a deer the day after the birth of his son; two days later the infant's stomach became bloated and the child soon died. It was explained that a man in Januaria is blind because he did not follow the rules when one of his daughters was born.

Huxley observed the following among the Urubú (1957: 185):

> It is true that some fathers, sickened by a diet of tortoise flesh are occasionally tempted to eat a juicy piece of tapir, but they rue their lapse bitterly afterwards—as did Yawaruhu, whose young son died shortly after he had accepted such a forbidden tidbit. His sorrow expressed itself in a kind of angry melancholy which his wife made worse by refusing to sleep with him for having been such a fool.

To this an interesting note is added.

> But it is not just in order to protect their children that the Indians observe the couvade: they do it also to protect their souls. Tero, for example, once fell unaccountably ill and turned quite yellow. His yellowness was a sure sign that his illness was not merely physical, and that he had broken some taboo. And so it turned out. A married woman, with whom he had been having an affair, had recently given birth to a child. She and her husband had gone into seclusion and this protected them and the child; but it did not protect Tero who, by Indian logic, had contributed something to the making of the child and was therefore under its influence. He was immediately made to observe all the rules of the couvade (Huxley, 1957: 185).

This is typical of another curious aspect of the couvade as practiced by the Ge and Tupí-Guaraní of northeastern Brazil. For if

> a woman, whether single or ceremonially wedded, has had extra-marital sex relations with one or more men during pregnancy, she ruthlessly names them all after her delivery . . . This confession is in the child's interest, for these men must all go into retreat; no Indian, whether bachelor or married man, would ever dare deny his co-paternity, as it were, and shirk seclusion, which customarily takes place in his mother's home (Nimuendaju, 1946: 107).

Nimuendajú, still speaking of the Eastern Timbira, adds that this applies also to a pregnant wanton who "names all the men with whom she has had sexual relations during pregnancy, thus enabling them all to go into seclusion in the infant's interests" (1946: 131).

A similar occurrence is also reported among the Apinayé with the exception that after the wanton has publicly announced her sexual partners, the latter must go to *her* mother's house the day after the child is

born. There each of them "must drink of the very bitter decoction of the bark of the pe-re tree. But therewith the affair is settled so far as they are concerned" (Nimuendajú, 1939: 102). A pregnant wanton among the Šerente, however, only points out one man—the one she regards as the procreator. He, in turn, must share her dietary restrictions (Nimuendajú, 1942: 38).

So important is this postnatal ritual performed by the putative husband and so close is his connection to the child thought to be among the Tenetehara, "even a step father, the husband of a woman, is subject to these lying-in rules" (Wagley and Galvão, 1949: 69n). To substantiate this Wagley and Galvão mention the case of one of their informants, Manuel Viana, who "married a young widow who was pregnant. When the child was born, he was subject to all the regulations for the child's protection" (1949: 69n).

Though, on the whole, the practice of the couvade in northeastern Brazil is quite similar to that observed in the Guianas, the above regulations concerning pregnant wantons and their sexual partners provide an interesting variation. The reason for this practice being centralized in northeastern Brazil is somewhat of a mystery. Perhaps the fidelity and intensity with which the custom of the couvade is practiced in that area has something to do with it. As has been shown earlier, the taboos against eating the flesh of certain mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish also seem to be more accentuated in northeastern Brazil.

Though observers of the tribes of southern Brazil seldom mention the couvade, care must be taken not to draw false conclusions. Many of the tribes in this area have not been carefully studied, and, in addition, unless one has lived in an Indian village for a length of time, it is easy to fail to recognize the couvade in some of its less obvious manifestations. However, from the evidence at hand it seems that the Kaingáng Indians do not practice the couvade (Henry, 1941: 32). If this is so, the question then arises whether the absence of the couvade is related to the widespread promiscuity characteristic of the Kaingáng.

Turning to central and western Brazil, there is again evidence of the couvade. Karl von den Steinen in his famous study states that among the Bakairi the mother after giving birth goes immediately back to her work "while the father submits to the celebrated couvade, a period in which he does not touch arms, staying the greater part of the time in his hammock" (1940: 431). But both husband and wife remain in seclusion. They

> leave the house only to satisfy their necessities. They live exclusively on a gruel-like pogu, formed from mandioca cakes dissolved in water. Anything more would be harmful to the child—it would be like giving meat, fish, or fruit to the child himself to eat (von den Steinen, 1940: 431).

However, Kalervo Oberg makes no mention of the couvade existing among either the Bakairi of northern Mato Grosso (1948) or the Terena from the southern part of that state (1949). In view of von den Steinen's observations to the contrary and in light of the fact that the Bakairi are a branch of the Caribs who do practice the couvade, it is quite possible that Oberg or his informants failed to notice it.

Another tribe in Mato Grosso that practices the couvade is the Bororos. Von den Steinen reported that "during two days neither the father nor mother eat anything. On the third day they can take some warm water. If the husband ate anything, the wife and child would become sick" (1940: 638). The two Salesian missionaries, Colbacchini and Albisetti, in their monumental study of the Boróros Orientais confirm von den Steinen's reports of the couvade (1942: 44).

The birth of a child is accompanied by numerous superstitious practices.

> The parents for a period of three to five days (sometimes ten) . . . abstain from food, from fresh water and from smoking. By doing this they believe that their child will be healthy and strong . . . They drink only hot water and chew leaves from certain plants whose juices they swallow.

The Salesian missionaries also describe a unique ceremony which the father performs (1942: 44).

> The father, two days after the birth of his son, procures the 'ixira,' a pointed stick, ordinarily a long splinter-like strip from the spine of a palm leaf. It measures about a half-meter in length. Making a flexible point on one end of the stick, he puts it in his mouth and into his bronchial tubes till it reaches his lung. Then he presses the stick until he opens a wound and causes a hemorrhage in his lung. Tnis is done, they say, for the purpose of protecting themselves, spitting out the blood that the son would have left in him.

This bloody ritual, which incidentally is practiced by only a few of the Boróros today—one Indian complained that his fellow tribesmen were too weak and blamed it on the decadence of the tribe—is an extremely rare occurrence in reference to the couvade.

Farther to the west in Rondonia, the couvade is practiced by the Nambicuara Indians. Here, too, it is characterized by fast, abstinence, and seclusion—"ending when the child takes his first meal that is not exclusively milk" (Lévi-Strauss, 1948: 107). Postnatal prescriptions, however, vary slightly from the neighboring tribes, for among the Nambicuara the women seem more restricted than the men (Lévi-Strauss, 1948: 106-107).

Finally, in northwestern Brazil the couvade is also widely practiced. Among the Maués the husband withdraws for a month and remains in confinement. In the meantime, he follows a strict diet of mandioc pap and "çapó" (Pereira, 1954: 47). A similar regimen is also followed by the Conibos on the nearby Madeira River. St. Cricq reported that the husband remains amost completely inactive in his hut and observes a most rigorous fast (1953: 288).

On the River Uaupés the practice of the couvade is quite common. Hamilton Rice says that after the child's birth the "sire is found in his hammock, a victim of the fixed idea that upon him is visited the necessity of post-partum precaution, as he regards himself as an ill man and is so considered by others" (Rice, 1910: 698).

As for the Tucanos, Antônio Giacone wrote (1949: 15):

> The birth of a child is always accompanied by diverse practices and superstitions. When a child is born, the father lies down in his hammock for three days and submits to the following diet: He only eats three times a day, mekca — Sauba ants, depotina — Sauba ants with big heads, and iamica — fat, large ants bigger than termites. At nightfall, he takes mandioc and farinha with water or a tapioca gruel. He is absolutely forbidden to eat the flesh of anta, paca, or pig, and any fish like uaracu, tucunare, etc.

Another tribe in northwestern Brazil known to practice the couvade is the Tukuna (not to be confused with the Tucanos mentioned above), found in the vicinity of the Solimões River. Nimuendajú gives the following details (1952: 69):

> Father and mother must be cautious and must diet until the umbilical cord drops off . . . Except for going to the river to bathe, the father may not leave the house grounds, and he is forbidden to touch a firebrand, a paddle, an ax, or a bow. If he touches his bow, the child will develop a crooked spine and become a hunchback. The father may drink paiauaru in small quantities, but only if it is sweet; drinking more would make the child a drunkard and would also cause it to cry excessively.

An interesting observation here is that the father is allowed to bathe —something that is usually prohibited by most other Indian tribes in Brazil.

What conclusions can be drawn from this survey of tribes known to practice the couvade in Brazil? The essence of the couvade seems to be

seclusion, fast, and abstinence. The prohibitions vary greatly with tribes. Particularly good evidence for this latter point is found in the Guianas and northeastern Brazil. However, there is not enough available evidence to determine whether environmental influences or linguistic similarities affect the various taboos.

Three factors cited by ethnographers as helpful for understanding the "why" of the couvade seem to be universal among the Brazilian tribes. They are (1) the fact that an individual's life is in greatest danger during its first days or months, (2) the preliterate Indian's premise that an infant's well being is intimately connected with that of his parents, and (3) the principle of imitative and sympathetic magic. However, more detailed interviews with members of tribes which still practice the couvade in Brazil are needed and might provide further insights into the "why" of the couvade.

Finally, the problem of the typology of couvade which bothered Kroeber remains unsolved. In one of the latest attempts to deal with this problem Lucile Newman stressed the face that there is a need for "more specific information on its [the couvade] incidence in the community, the extent of social endorsement, reinforcing mechanisms as well as correlative institutions" (1966: 154). This survey of the couvade as practiced in Brazil is the beginning of an attempt to help fill such a need.

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