

The Dusuns of North Borneo.

Their Social Life.

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(Continuation.)

Chapter III: Birth, Names, Childhood.

The woman who is about to become a mother will do her ordinary everyday work till the very day of her confinement. She will fetch firewood and water, pound paddy, cook, plant, weed and harvest, as if nothing were the matter. It is not uncommon to see a woman whose time is near go fishing with her triangular nets, which means that for hours she stands and walks in muddy water reaching above her knees, and not seldom to her waist, with a continual bending of the body, which certainly has not a good effect on her unborn babe.

Things "tabu" to her is the flesh of animals that have been killed with a sharp instrument. She may eat the flesh of those that have died a natural death, except when giving birth, or that have been killed with a club. And, secondly, she is forbidden the use of a sharp instrument. She may not cut anything loose or open. Going for firewood she is not allowed to cut a branch off a tree, but she may break wood, lying on the ground, in pieces. She may not cut open a "durian" or jackfruit or cocoanut.

The husband has to abstain from more than his wife has, for he is forbidden the use of any instrument. He may not kill anything. If he saw a snake he will not kill it, for his child would be in danger of death. He is put on diet; fish, meat, vegetables are "tabu" to him. He is only allowed rice and salt. This secures a strong baby. The pregnant woman will often whilst eating take a nice little bit "for her child".

She is not specially treated, for births are natural and of little interest. Only barren women frequently talk to her. It may be out of jealousy, or it may be that they superstitiously think that frequent meetings with an expectant mother can procure the blessing of motherhood to themselves. Barren women are unfortunate.

Marriages are not very prolific. The reason seems to be that they fare so poorly. Their evil habit of drunkenness may, perhaps, have an effect; it doubtlessly has on miscarriages. There may be other causes. The two named are to my mind the reason; for women who have married Chinese generally bear several children; and in these cases the two reasons mostly disappear, — they eat better food and abstain more from strong drinks. Preventatives are known but not much used. I have heard of only one case. The whole neighbourhood knows it. They use the juice of a jungle fruit that is supposed to be contra-conceptive. A red flower (poppy?) is also said to be preventative when eaten with hot chillies. I think that preventions of conception is non-Dusun; that they learned it from Malays and Badjous, amongst whom the relations of men and women are more lax than amongst Dusuns.