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The 'Forgotten' Placenta: Symbolic Acts in Modern Home Birth Practice

The practice of giving birth at home was known in the USSR from the 1960s, and in the middle of the 1980s it began to take on the character of a social movement. At that time parents' clubs were opened in Moscow and St Petersburg, and translations of foreign books about 'natural childbirth' began to circulate in *samizdat*. This practice has become institutionalised and commercialised since the 1990s; there are preparatory courses for natural childbirth, and home midwifery is beginning to acquire the status of a profession. Although Russian law still does not in any way acknowledge home births (formally, there is no such profession as that of a midwife assisting at home births, nor is there any system of accreditation for such specialists), they are quite common in major Russian cities. This article is based on information obtained during fieldwork carried out in 2010–2013: forty semi-structured interviews with parents and midwives,¹ and participant observation at ante-natal classes,² and also at a conference devoted to traditional midwifery.³ Materials from internet forums and parents' communities

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¹ The people interviewed were residents of Moscow, St Petersburg, Novgorod, and Rostov-on-Don.

² A lecture given by a midwife during a preparatory course for home births (Moscow, 2012), a seminar for parents on the role of the father during a home birth (Moscow, 2012), and a lecture by a midwife during a preparatory course for home births (St Petersburg, 2012).

³ The Second International Conference 'Traditional Midwifery: Profession, Art and Life' took place in Moscow on 13–17 June 2011, organised jointly by the journals *Domashnii rebenok* and *Midwifery Today*.

served as supplementary sources, as did publications in the journal *Domashnii rebenok* [The Home Child], a popular Russian-language periodical with natural childbirth as one of its main subjects.

Parents who are in favour of home births will be referred to in the text as 'the community'. A certain commentary is needed on the accuracy of this term in respect of Russian materials. Parents of children born at home, as the interviews show, feel that they belong to a community of similar parents, against a background of an unspecified 'majority', of the imagined 'person in the street', whose image persistently emerges during the narrative. The basis for this is that they feel 'unlike' the 'average man', and see their way of parenthood as special (and denoted by the emic terms *conscious parenthood* or *perceived parenthood*, which are synonymous). However, when amongst 'people like themselves', and not confronted with the image of 'the other', the members of the movement adhere to other, smaller groups. One can, for example, speak of a community made up of Orthodox parents, who will, within their own milieu, know of their own 'Orthodox' midwives and paediatricians and of parishes sympathetic to home births. In this way the infrastructure that supplies the needs of such local communities is formed. Contact over the Internet also assists in the evolution of solidarity and the formation of internal social networks. Taking all this into account, it is possible to say that the supporters of home births in Russia constitute a community, with the necessary qualification that it is not homogeneous and consists of small local groups, each united by a particular parents' club, parish, or internet space.

The Internet plays a substantial role in the process of the formation of the community, being the conduit for its shared knowledge, which is not unified, since it is organised according to different systems of understanding the world. On the whole the home or natural childbirth movement is close to a New Age ideology and presupposes a certain eclecticism and a wide range of borrowings of philosophical or mythological concepts. Ekaterina Belousova writes that while the practice of home births was taking shape, traditions connected with childbirth were borrowed from various cultures: the starting point for this was the notion that primitive peoples' way of life was the most natural and, therefore, 'correct' [Belousova 2002b: 51–3]. Modern midwives who assist at home births see themselves of the successors of primitive midwives, continuing the traditions of folk medicine, and the appeal to tradition, from the community's point of view, is a weighty argument in the ideological grounding of a practice which is new to urban culture. The midwives see the revival of the lost traditions of childbirth as part of their professional mission: in Belousova's words, they are aiming 'to re-create the monolithic body of tradition', and to this end they are deliberately studying traditional techniques for assisting at a birth [ibid.: 71]. Within this they pay substantial attention to revitalising ritual practices.

The peculiarity of the transmission of the tradition in this instance lies in the fact that the mechanism for 'natural' cultural succession has been disrupted; knowledge of ritual practices is derived from books, popular ethnographic literature or journalistic paraphrases of it. The way that the knowledge is transmitted affects the way the 'restorers of the tradition' themselves perceive their experience. Ethnographic sources influence the community not only in terms of the transmission of the knowledge of ritual practices: the interpretative models used to describe traditional culture are also borrowed. An example of this sort of borrowing could be the interpretation of birth as a rite of passage. In one of the interviews that I recorded my informant — a psychologist by education, who led courses preparing people for natural childbirth — said that she wanted to *make* her next birth into a ritual, structure it as a ritual:

I had no experience of such a magical structuring, but next time there certainly will be one, because, I think, a lot depends on the surroundings <...> Really, a lot depends on the surroundings. A lot depends on the state a person is in and how they are brought to that state. <...> There is a certain chain of rites of passage that are relevant to all cultures, much has been written about this. It seems to me that now, when we don't much believe in evil spirits and don't need to drive them away, and if there are any, they are our own evil spirits, it is better for a woman somehow to draw the outline of the ritual out of her own unconscious. <...> It doesn't matter what sort of rituals they are, the important thing is that they should mean something to us (f., 27 years, Moscow).

This interpretative model is in demand in the stories about home births which already constitute a particular narrative genre within internet communications by parents: women use concepts established in the research tradition when describing their personal experiences. Rituals derived from ethnographic sources are combined with new practices, and no distinction is made between them: both are understood as traditional. In this article I shall attempt, using the example of the handling of the placenta after birth, to show how such symbolic practices function in modern urban culture.

The topic of the symbolic practices connected with the placenta has already been treated in works on home birth based on Russian material: the practices current in modern urban culture are described, and parallels drawn between them and the ritual acts which are part of the traditional childbirth ritual of peasant culture [Belousova 2002a; Rabey 2012]. Here we shall focus on how symbolic practices arising out of a new cultural phenomenon function in modern urban culture.

In the Russian peasant tradition it was the midwife who had the role of ritual specialist during childbirth. Care for the afterbirth was, like many other of the ritual acts that made up the ceremony surrounding

childbirth, part of her duties. (For more detail on the functions of the midwife see [Popov 1903: 350–351]). With the changes in the system of perinatal care that came about in the twentieth century and the generalisation of professional medical assistance at childbirth,¹ the handling of the placenta came to be determined by the routine practice of medical institutions: after the birth, the placenta was subjected to a histological examination and dealt with in accordance with the requirements for the disposal of biological waste. The new mother may, if she wishes, take the placenta with her from the maternity home, but there is practically no demand for this; patients in maternity homes have no need to consider what to do with the placenta, and it is handled entirely by the staff of the home.

When a woman has a home birth, the situation is different. While in a maternity home it is the regulations of the medical institution that determine how the placenta is dealt with, here it is up to the parents or the midwife to decide. The placenta is an object which has a complex status. On the one hand it is a human organ, and a quite unique one, ‘belonging’ simultaneously to the mother and the child and associated with their bodies. On the other hand, this organ has already fulfilled its function and needs to be disposed of in one way or another. Modern home midwives (or in the emic terminology *spiritual midwives*) rarely take upon themselves the role of the ritual specialist in this question: the fate of the placenta after the birth is left to the parents, and the midwife can only suggest one or more possibilities. The field material shows that modern town dwellers share certain ideas about the afterbirth that were traditional for Slavonic cultures: their cultural competence tells them that this special object demands special (‘respectful’, symbolic) treatment [Belousova 2002b: 68].

This is particularly reflected in the traditional cultural prohibitions: the placenta must not simply be thrown away, as in that case it might be eaten by dogs or found by homeless people. This idea is based on the premiss that even after the umbilical cord has been cut, the placenta retains its connexion with the mother and child and that if it comes into contact with ‘unclean’ beings that may, in accordance with the principles of contagious magic, be dangerous. Galina Kabakova lists the prohibitions connected with the afterbirth: ‘The p[lacenta] must not be thrown out into the yard, or onto a path, because it might fall into other people’s hands, which would be bad luck for the child. They also think that the p. might be picked up by a witch or a fairy (Serbia). If the p. is eaten by a pig, the mother’s milk will dry up (Dobrudzha). The p[lacenta] must not be buried where dogs might dig it up, because if a child’s p[lacenta] is eaten by a dog,

¹ On the adaptations of traditional ideas to the modern maternity home, see [Belousova 1999].

the child will die (Polesye). On the contrary, in Kosovo they sometimes deliberately give the p[lacenta] to a dog to eat, so that the child will grow up cunning' [Kabakova 2009: 201]. The prohibition is lifted if the stress is transferred from the animal's 'uncleanness' to its 'cunning', and the attitude to the dog changes. Similarly, contact with a dog ceases to be dangerous if the animal is not perceived as 'bad' or 'unclean':

— *Sometimes, twice I think, I just took it away — it was a piece of meat — so I simply put it by the dustbins and the dogs ate it. I think that's fine. <...> I know that some women keep it to make face masks for themselves. I think that's a proper way to use it. It's right.*

— *But you haven't tried it yourself?*

— *No, we've never used it, we've buried it. But I'd rather the dogs ate it than bury it. Though then, of course, the worms will eat it. But for some reason I prefer it to be used somehow (f., 51 years, Rostov-on-Don).*

This is the only case in the recorded material when contact between animals and the placenta is not regarded as undesirable. It is indicative that in the interview the woman found it necessary in some way to explain and to 'justify' her actions: *But for some reason I prefer it to be used somehow.* The 'dogs' and 'worms' are not understood as potentially dangerous, 'unclean' creatures here, and therefore there is nothing wrong with their contact with the afterbirth.

Concern that the placenta might fall into unfriendly hands is to some extent shared by the maternity home patients. Material from Russian-language parents' forums shows that women who have given birth in a maternity home are also often worried about the fate of the placenta after the birth, specifically, about what the medics might do with it. They are afraid that the placenta might be used for pharmacological purposes, and this sort of treatment of it is regarded as undesirable:

— *It was very valuable material, it was sold abroad. I think that home births were so severely punished, because they couldn't get hold of the placenta, because the placenta was sold for gold, it really is very serious material.*

— *Could a placenta be sold privately?*

— *No! It was the clinics that sold it, the state. It was the state! Perhaps that's why home births were punished, because they didn't get the placenta afterwards. They made quite wonderful medicines out of it — this has been known for a long time — they made special preparations to prolong the life of our old men, then; they used bone marrow too. There were dreadful stories about our old government. How they remained capable of action, quite dreadful... Brezhnev and company <...> But that placenta is very valuable material, I can understand, because nowadays they even use animal placentas in creams, and nobody knows*

what becomes of human placentas. So many women giving birth, but they don't give them the placenta with the child, so what becomes of it?

— *I know that you can take it with you nowadays. If a woman fills in a form, she can take it with her.*

— *Then they must have stopped selling it (f., about 50 years, Moscow).*

As in the material about traditional peasant culture in Galina Kabakova's work [Kabakova 2009], the mythologised image of the 'evil forces' is reproduced, with the doctors, medical institutions and pharmaceutical companies in the role of the evil forces, and the special value of the placenta constructed out of their particular interest in it. An institutional mistrust of the medical system¹ helps to entrench this opinion amongst contemporary parents.

Though they share the traditional notions regarding the placenta, parents who have chosen a home birth often find it difficult to decide what to do in practice. How current the problem of finding the 'right' way to deal with the placenta is can be seen from how this topic is discussed within the community. In 2009 the journal *Domashnii rebenok* published as special issue, *Derevo* [The Tree],² with a bloc of seven articles devoted to the placenta [Charkovsky 2009; Efremov 2009; Ivanova 2009; Kotlar 2009; Privalskaya 2009; Shelepina 2009; Trotskaya 2009]. The topic of how to deal with the placenta took up an entire twenty pages of the magazine.

The first article in the block is by Kirill Efremov [Efremov 2009], on the world tree in mythology, explaining the theory that the image of the world tree owes its origin and distribution to its external similarity to the human placenta (according to the theory of the psychoanalyst Lloyd de Mause, the placenta is the first object of affection, the 'first love' of the child in the womb [Mause 1982]). A short note after the article expands the idea of the resemblance between the placenta and the tree, and discusses the practice of placenta art, a form of contemporary applied art, popular amongst home midwives in the USA and Europe [Trotskaya 2009]. Placenta art is the imprint of the placenta on paper or canvas, and it really does look like a tree. An example of placenta art is used as the cover illustration on this issue. This practice is new to Russian culture, and is not yet popular amongst parents.

Two extensive articles in the issue are about the significance of the placenta and the rituals connected with it in traditional culture [Ivanova 2009; Shelepina 2009]. Information about the anatomical

¹ On Russian women's perception of the state obstetric system and the cultural mechanisms regulating the interaction between doctor and patient in the maternity home, see [Belousova 1996; Shchepanskaya 1999].

² With a print run of 10 000 copies.

structure and physiological functions of the placenta is combined with discussion of the symbolic significance of the afterbirth in popular culture and its role in everyday magic, and a list of rituals, the description of which is taken, according to the author, from historical sources: *the placenta could be*:

- *placed in a vessel (made of clay, coconut or other fruits) and hung on a tree;*
- *burnt, and the ash kept to be used as medicine in case the child should be ill;*
- *burnt, and the ash placed in a vessel and set adrift on the waters on a small raft;*
- *burnt, and the ash buried in a vessel under the house;*
- *buried in a corner of the house, under the threshold, or by the hearth;*
- *buried under a tree, or else a tree was specially planted on the place where the placenta had been buried;*
- *cooked and given to the new mother to eat, or else she ate it raw;*
- *eaten by a group of people close to the mother; or*
- *lots were drawn amongst the women present at the birth to determine which of them should eat the placenta [Ivanova 2009: 109].*

One of the main characteristics of the movement is its interest in ethnographical materials. The everyday life and traditions of pre-industrial societies (first and foremost peasant culture) are associated with a 'golden age' when human beings were not 'spoilt' by civilisation and lived in harmony with nature. In order to have an easy birth the modern woman needs to 'return' to forgotten lore and reject the stereotypes that modern culture imposes upon her.¹ Traditional practices are considered safe and effective thanks to the belief that the ancients had an instinctive understanding of 'the right way to do things', whereas modern man has lost this primal understanding. Recourse to ethnographic data or (more often) a bare reference to the traditions of 'certain peoples' are very frequent as means of legitimising new practices. As Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger argue, this situation is very typical of the

¹ *Medics nowadays don't really believe that childbirth is a natural process. I was very pleased with the way Anna May <sic.> [Ina May Gaskin, an American midwife who took part in the 'Traditional Midwifery' conference in Moscow in 2011] said that there are about five thousand species of mammal on the planet, and so why the devil should one of these five thousand species have such problems in reproducing itself? Either it's not a very viable species, or else... But no, for hundreds of thousands of years none of these dreadful problems existed, and this species multiplied and populated the whole planet. <...> Basically, I think, it's the medics themselves who are responsible for this situation, when they create such a setting for childbirth. Because when a woman goes to have a baby, she is full of alarms about the birth and thinks that something is bound to go wrong (f., 27 years, Moscow).*

invention of tradition as a social phenomenon: the invented tradition illuminates the human relation to the past, and therefore the historian's own subject and craft, since all invented traditions use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion [Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983]. In the context of these ideas ethnographic data are particularly interesting to partisans of home births, and concepts and practices of the most diverse provenance may be adapted: the geography of borrowing is more or less universal [Belousova 2002b: 52]. As a rule, parents are acquainted with various traditions connected with the placenta, and can provide a short list of rituals similar to the one cited above. But not all the rituals that are known in the community are actually reproduced: some practices enjoy a greater or lesser popularity, and there are others that are never used at all, even though they are acknowledged as a permissible possibility.

The most frequent practice nowadays is the burial of the placenta. Although in Russian peasant culture it was usually the midwife who buried the placenta [Popov 1903: 350–351], in modern urban culture this act has become the exclusive responsibility of the father. The afterbirth is buried in the garden or else in the woods or parkland — in nature, in a secluded spot which is felt to be 'clean' and 'safe'. It is indicative that one of the women who took part in a written survey conducted over the Internet by Ekaterina Rabei explains her choice by means of the category of purity: *We had to commit the placenta to the earth, and so we did in the nearest park. :-) I can't explain why we didn't throw it away except for reasons of spiritual purity* (f., about 30 years, E. B. Rabei's personal archive).¹ Spaces such as parks and woods are probably felt to be 'pure' places by virtue of their connexion with 'nature' — in contrast to the town. If a family owns its own plot of ground, that is where the placenta is usually buried: their own ground is felt to be the safest, and therefore the most suitable place for it. Occasionally the parents motivate the action by the desire to 'root' the child in his native earth and thus strengthen his ties with the family.

The practice of burying the placenta has a range of variants, concerning how precisely it should be buried (wrapped in a cloth or not) and what objects should be placed nearby (bread, or a dried fragment of the umbilical cord). A tree may be planted on the place where it was buried. This plant is considered to have a special connection with the child, in emic terminology it is 'his' tree. If a fruit tree is planted, it is expected that in the future, when it begins to bear, the fruit should be offered first to the child. Different kinds of tree are regarded as 'male' or 'female' and are planted on the spot

¹ I am grateful to E. B. Rabei (Russian State Humanities University) for allowing me to consult and use the material that she has collected.

where the placenta of a child of the corresponding sex has been buried. An oak is usually planted for a boy, and an apple or birch tree for a girl. The choice of tree may be motivated by a phonetic association with the child's name: in one interview I was told that the parents of a girl called Yasna planted an ash tree (*yasen*) on the spot where her placenta was buried.

The next recorded variant also continues the analogy between the disposal of the placenta after the birth and the burial of the dead: the placenta is given a water burial. This variant is much less common than inhumation. It may, nevertheless, also be motivated by the desire to connect the child with a particular place:

We also preserved the placenta. We couldn't find anywhere to bury the first one, so we solemnly sank it in the Volga. We haven't got our own piece of land, but the Volga, after all, is the Great River. We've still got the second one. I hope that we can still bury it in our own earth. <...> When we set it adrift, there was the thought of connecting the child with the most important Russian river as a strong 'energy base', stronger than just a plot of earth. That is, so to speak, 'Your home is not a plot of land, but the whole country' [Rabei 2012: 103–104].

Committing the placenta to the waters is supposed to give the child a particular connexion with that element:

— *[The placenta] may be set adrift or else weighted down so that it sinks. We did the same with the umbilical cord. When it detached, it... we'd tied it off in a rather silly way, rather long. <...> So. There was a piece about four or five centimetres long. I dried it, kept it, and when we went to the seaside, exactly six months later my elder daughter and I swam out a long way from the shore with flippers, it must have been a kilometre, it took us three hours, and there we sent it to the bottom with a stone in deep water <...>*

— *Can you tell me why people do this? Why they send it out to sea?*

— *I wanted to put it in the sea! Some people might bury it, some people might crumble it up and let the wind blow it away — however they like. It depends what feels right to people. I wanted to do it like that, put it in the water, and just like that. We're all very marine people, swimmers (f., about 50 years, Moscow).*

This interpretation becomes more relevant within the context of the ideology of the water birth movement, or that variant of it that was particularly popular in the 1980s and 90s. One of the ideologists of water births in the USSR, Igor Charkovsky, put forward the idea that people should overcome their fear of water and develop the capacity for living in water by analogy with marine mammals such as dolphins and whales. According to Charkovsky and his followers, accustoming infants to spend long periods of time in the water helps them to

discover their paranormal abilities.¹ ‘Water babies’, according to this concept, are the potential founders of a new human population, the vocation of which will be to develop the hidden potential of the human organism.² In the light of these ideas parents’ desire to ‘connect’ their child with the element of water is natural.

There is another means of disposing of the placenta — cremation. The placenta is burnt on a fire, and in one variety of this practice, once the ashes have cooled they may be preserved at home together with the dried umbilical cord in a special container — the ‘child’s box’.³ Like the water burial, committing the placenta to the fire is sometimes intended to ensure that the child has the support of its ‘native’ element:

I was fortunate enough to have both my babies at home, and of course we keep both their umbilical cords very carefully in a special place, together with the ashes of their placentas, which were cremated on special fires. <...> Both my children are ‘fire children’, that is, born under Aries and Leo. There is a belief that a child also acquires an energetic connexion with the element that has received the placenta, but many people prefer to bury the placenta under the special birth tree, which can be determined by the druid calendar [Chudesnyi dar novorozdennogo — platsenta 2011].

As far as one can tell, the cremation of the placenta is not a widespread practice: it is mentioned only twice in the recorded material.

The next two practices to be discussed (the use of the placenta for healing and the making of ritual objects out of it) are also not widespread in Russia and are known primarily from written sources (publications in the magazine *Domashnii rebenok* and on several sites devoted to parenthood).

The practice of drying the placenta and its subsequent use for medicinal purposes is less widespread than those described above. Keeping the placenta requires it to be specially prepared: it is cut up, dried, and then kept in a special place. Afterwards the dried placenta may be used for making homoeopathic medicines or cosmetics at home. These preparations are recommended primarily for the mother, and also for members of her family. It is believed that the placenta contains special substances which are beneficial to blood relations.⁴

¹ Charkovsky’s ideas have their followers and opponents, and his system for training new-born babies in the water has been criticised by paediatricians and home birthing experts, but is nevertheless still authoritative and in demand among some of those who support water births.

² For more detail on the ideology of water births, see [Belousova 2002b: 13–15].

³ The box may also contain the first lock of hair cut from the child’s head, the first tooth lost, and also the positive pregnancy test [Rabei 2012: 74–75].

⁴ ‘One of the great advantages of a home birth is that you can cook and eat the placenta. The placenta is full of hormones and substances which are very important for a woman who has just given birth, and

Although this practice is evidently unpopular, information about it is in demand within the community being described. In 2011 the magazine *Domashnii rebenok* included a detailed article about how the placenta should be prepared and how it may be used for medical purposes¹ [Enning 2011]. Quotations from and paraphrases of Cornelia Enning's articles and lectures may be found on parents' sites and forums, giving recommendations on how to make such things:

1. Remove the amniotic membranes. The Germans and many other peoples have the tradition of making them into a drum for the child. The membranes are stretched over a round box, and when they are dry it will be a personal ritual instrument for driving evil spirits away.

2. Wash the placenta in a sufficient quantity of wine or cider vinegar in which juniper berries have been steeped.

3. Dry the placenta in the oven with the door partly open for two to three days. A sufficient quantity of oxygen is essential. The temperature should be 70° for the first hour and 50° thereafter. It is important not to bake or burn the placenta, but to dry it. If the door of the oven is slightly open, the thermostat should be set to 100°, and then the temperature in the oven will be 70°. Eventually the placenta will be reduced to a small smooth black stone about the size of the palm of your hand.

4. Grind the stone in a hand grinder. This is a laborious process best entrusted to the father. It is better not to use an electric grinder, as the structure of the substances is destroyed by heating. After the grinder the powder should be ground again in a mortar. The finer the powder obtained, the better it will be in use.

5. Keep in a tightly closed glass jar, for preference of dark glass and in a cool dark place [Meditsina platsenty 2011].

Material describing the techniques of drying and keeping the placenta are much more frequently encountered than texts describing how the resulting preparation is to be used for medical purposes. The recommendations for preparing medicaments may say that the powder derived from the placenta may be made into pills or kept and used in capsules, but they do not specify what maladies are to be treated or what doses taken. The impression is thus created that medicine made from the placenta has the properties of a panacea.

necessary both for her and the child to restore their strength after the birth. Amongst most peoples the placenta was either eaten, or buried, and the birth tree planted on the spot (naturally, on the child's native soil). The paradox is that the vast majority of families leave the placenta at the maternity home (and medicines are made from it and sold) instead of using it as it is meant to be for the good of the family' [Kak prigotovit platsentu].

¹ The author of the article was the German midwife Cornelia Enning, also the author of the book *Placenta: the Gift of Life* [Enning 2007]. Cornelia Enning delivered two lectures on the preparation of medicaments from the placenta at the 'Traditional Midwifery' conference in Moscow in 2011.

Many people know about the extraction of stem cells from umbilical blood, and the concentration of stem cells in the tissues of the placenta itself is very high. A single placenta contains enough stem cells to save over 10 000 people! <...> NB It is important to understand that the treatment of serious diseases such as cancer or AIDS with placenta-based preparations should be conducted only under the supervision of a naturopathic doctor [Meditina platsenty 2011].

As far as can be seen, dried placenta is rarely used as a medicine (only one mention of such a case is recorded in the field material), and in practice if a placenta is dried, it is not for practical, but for symbolic purposes, as an affirmation of its exceptional value.

One other variant of the use of the placenta, which I know only from written sources, is the making of individual ritual objects intended to be owned by the new-born child or the mother. Instructions for the preparation of such ritual objects can be found on parents' sites:

Many peoples have the tradition of making a drum for the child out of the amniotic sac. The sac is carefully removed from the placenta and stretched over a cylinder that forms the body of the drum, and dried in the same way as a drum skin is dried in a vertical position in a room which is not too hot. Apotropaic symbols may be carved on the body of the drum, or the placenta, the child, or the birth tree drawn. The purpose of this drum is to drive away evil spirits, and it is given to the child to play with [Tema rodov blagodatnaya tema 2013].

Although this method is not followed in practice and is regarded more as a curious 'exotic' practice, it must be mentioned insofar as it is regarded as a permissible way of using the placenta.

The next most frequently mentioned practice after burial of the placenta is placentophagy, the use of the placenta as food by the mother or the members of her family. The placenta is eaten raw or cooked in various possible ways. This scenario is played out noticeably less frequently than the burial of the placenta, but it is nevertheless widely known.

Placentophagy is normal behaviour for placental mammals: the female as a rule eats the placenta after giving birth. The exceptions are marine mammals and human beings [Kristal, DiPirro, Thompson 2012]. The authors of a comparative research project using the materials in the electronic database eHRAF (The Human Relations Area Files <<http://www.yale.edu/hraf/>>) have come to the conclusion that the prohibition against placentophagy is almost universal in human society [Young, Benyshek 2010]. In the whole corpus of material (179 cultures) only one culture in which instances of placentophagy had been recorded was discovered (the Chicanos, Mexicans living in the USA) [Ober 1973]. Citing [Janszen 1980; Filed 1984; Bastien 2004], the authors note that the earliest evidence

for placentophagy dates from the 1970s and probably reflects a practice that was new to this culture. They stress that the available information is insufficient to form a conclusion about whether the practice had been known in the region before [Young, Benyshek 2010: 472]. At the same time they indicate a noticeable rise of interest in placentophagy among women in the first decade of the twenty-first century, which they connect with the spread of the natural birth movement [Selander, Cantor, Young, Benyshek 2013: 94]. The authors conclude from the research results¹ that in the USA placentophagy is practised not only by supporters of home or natural births, but also in maternity homes.²

The origins of the practice of eating the placenta may be connected with an interest in the 'natural' world and an intention to 'learn from nature', to put into practice that which is understood as natural. It probably arose as an imitation of the behaviour of female animals. The analogy with animal behaviour is a frequent means of legitimising this practice in accounts of placentophagy: *Some of my friends, who are very much that sort of people, very natural, very very natural, decided that if animals eat their placenta, why shouldn't we? So they cooked it and ate it* [laughs] (f., 27 years, Moscow). In this example the informant is not in complete solidarity with her friends: she does not disapprove of their action, but evidently regards it as 'not quite usual behaviour'. This is a very common attitude, although overall eating the placenta is not condemned and is included in the repertory of acceptable practices.

One common interpretation of placentophagy is that the afterbirth belongs as much to the mother as to the child and is a repository of feminine strength (which coincides with the notions on which the preparation of medicines from the placenta is based). This interpretation is, as a rule, rationalised in the narrative: it is said that the placenta contains particular substances (vitamins, micro-elements, hormones) which need to be returned to the mother's organism so that she can recover from the birth more quickly.

Another common explanation of the benefit of eating the placenta is connected with the idea that the placenta can strengthen family ties, 'attach' the father to the child, and strengthen the bond between brothers and sisters:

— *What did you do with the placenta afterwards?*

— *We put it in the freezer, and then defrosted it, cooked it and ate it.*

¹ 189 women practising placentophagy were surveyed (91.5 % living in the USA, 7 % in Canada, and the remaining 1.5 % from Great Britain, Australia and Singapore) [Selander, Cantor, Young, Benyshek 2013: 101].

² According to the survey, the women believe that eating the placenta improves lactation and the general health of the mother after giving birth.

— *How did you cook it?*

— *Now I don't know why I should have cooked it, because in general I eat raw food, but then we cooked it like liver: braised it and ate it. My husband said that he couldn't and went to visit his mother, and my daughter and I ate it. And that is how it turned out afterwards, because my husband later 'branched out on his own', and the three of us were left together. And we are still very close, although we all have our own families. But we get together whenever we can! (f., about 55 years, Moscow).*

It is believed that if the older children are given the placenta to eat, they will love the new baby and there will be no conflicts between siblings in the family.

Overall, although placentophagy is recognised amongst supporters of home births as a widespread and legitimate practice, it often presents parents with a difficulty resulting from a conflict of cultural norms eating the placenta is associated with cannibalism and is met with incomprehension by the people around them. In the next example her relatives' disapproval made a woman give up the idea of eating the placenta, although it seemed to her a perfectly natural thing to do.

— *It seems to me, from my own point of view, that the best way would have been if I had eaten it myself. So. But the members of my family were very disapproving.*

— *Are you vegetarians?*

— *No. Masha is a vegetarian, Nastya has tried to be a vegetarian, and from time to time I live on uncooked food. <...> It's just that it seemed like cannibalism to them. 'Aha! Eating your own meat!' That is, I somehow think that I could have... (f., 51 years, Rostov-on-Don).*

The conflict between the two systems of knowledge which the supporters of home births subscribe to often means that the decision to eat the placenta is not carried out:

— *It must be in the freezer. At first I wanted to eat it, but afterwards I couldn't make my mind up to it <...> Listen, honestly I don't remember it very clearly. But I do remember mother showing me the bag with the placenta in it... I think it was soft, but it may have been frozen solid, I don't remember, and saying 'Right, now you can bury it, or you can do something else, or some other thing, I think,' and I thought, 'I can't be bothered to bury it...'*

— *You couldn't be bothered?*

— *Of course not. Having to go somewhere... Perhaps we should... give it to the dog? But then we thought: no, we won't. So in the end it's still there in the fridge. It wouldn't be right to throw it out, would it? Better to eat it (m., 24 years, Moscow).*

The cultural norm that is standard for modern town dwellers does not allow the use of human flesh for food, whereas the new norm current amongst supporters of natural birth, by contrast, approves placentophagy as 'correct', 'natural' behaviour.

The large number of recipes for cooking the placenta that are current amongst the special communities of the Internet, and are intended to give the placenta a 'culinary' appearance and avoid any feeling of revulsion, provides evidence for the difficulties associated with eating it. One such recipe recommends grating it with berries, and another recommends roasting it like ordinary meat:¹ 'The placenta is cooked as follows (similarly to ox liver): cut the umbilical cord from the placenta (DO NOT THROW IT AWAY!). Heat a frying pan and put the placenta in it, pouring the blood from the birth over the top. The placenta will sizzle and shrink markedly. Turn it over and fry the other side. It is ready! It may be salted to taste (we didn't) and served with raw vegetables. Bon appétit!' [Kak prigotovit platsentu]. The use of the placenta in a recipe allows this unusual food to be located within the generally accepted culinary code. The phatic ending 'Bon appétit!' and the photograph of the dish served on a plate, which accompanies the text, evoke the genre of the cookery-book recipe, with which the reader will be well acquainted.

Stories of specific instances of eating the placenta show that placentophagy may be 'normative' or 'non-normative'. In the first case the placenta is eaten deliberately, in the course of carrying out a pre-existing ritual scenario, though not one that has mass acceptance. 'Non-normative' eating of the placenta, that is to say without prior intention, becomes the subject of humorous anecdotes. In one spontaneous interview I was told that a placenta that had been left and forgotten in the freezing compartment had been mistaken for liver, cooked and eaten.² This has become an established theme of folklore amongst supporters of home births, and is told with different variations, always about a third person. The function of such stories is to convey information about what sort of behaviour is normative, and what is non-normative and therefore funny. The same action, depending on the intention with which it is performed, is evaluated in opposite ways.

¹ You would not believe how many recipes can be found among the English-language resources. Fundamentally, practically any recipe for offal can be used for cooking the placenta. The most beneficial way of eating it is raw. So as not to make yourself sick, you can make a berry smoothie. This can be made very easily in three or four minutes: mix the placenta, a glass of strawberries, a glass of bilberries, a glass of raspberries, two glasses of ice and a third of a glass of honey in a blender. The placenta can also be dried and taken in capsules like vitamins. (There are experts who will do this for you.) Incidentally, the taste of cooked placenta is similar to liver, and the texture of raw placenta to omelette (according to those who have eaten it) [Bilukha 2011].

² I was told a story about a home birth. They didn't do anything with the placenta, just put it in the freezer. And then the woman's mother came and cooked it, thinking it was lights (meaning the lights of some animal). Whether they ate it or not I don't know. I wouldn't have' [Chto delat s platsentoi 2010].

Some of the practices described here are more or less widespread, whereas others are perceived even by the people who practise them as rare and more 'exotic'.

Works describing the practices connected with the placenta in modern urban culture stress the emphatically symbolic, 'ritual' acts that reproduce the traditional peasant birth ritual [Belousova 2002; Rabey 2012]. Nevertheless, the field material shows that such practices are not always in demand amongst modern urban dwellers. On the contrary, the need to carry out the ritual is often a source of difficulty and embarrassment for the parents:

It [the placenta] lay in the freezer for a long time. So. This was psychologically very strange. My husband kept saying, 'I'm afraid to go and bury it'. And if he didn't bury it it could stay in the fridge for ever. So that was the story of the placenta. If we lived in some sort of ecological settlement, or if we were altogether traditional people, belonging to a particular culture, d'you see, we'd have known what to do with it. But here we are, two — how to put it? — well, roughly speaking, members of the intelligentsia — I was still a student studying journalism, and he had a second degree in philosophy... Anyway, we lived in the city, and we went into the woods to bury the placenta, and of course it felt very peculiar (f., 43 years, Moscow).

Given the need to dispose of the placenta in some way, acquaintance with the ethnographical literature suggests to urban dwellers that the situation requires of them symbolic, ritual behaviour. However, without either specialists in ritual or a living inheritance in the tradition, modern people find themselves in a difficult position. They can indeed reproduce one of the 'folklore' scenarios, but townfolk are not accustomed to this sort of role: the facts of ethnography are associated with peasant culture which is 'exotic' to them.

The very need for ritualisation of the actions concerning the placenta may result from the degree of acquaintance people have with the practices that are common within the community.

The first time, we were asked whether we wanted to do anything with it [the placenta]. They showed it to us and told us that this was the organ which we should thank for bringing the child into the world. Then they took it away. But the second time N [the informant's wife] had got a more emotional attitude towards it. It made me laugh. We froze it in the fridge, then buried it. In the park. <...> [on cutting the cord] I don't think that this is any sort of mega-sacral act, it's more practical. I don't have any... I don't feel any metaphysical element in it (m., 38 years, St Petersburg).

This last quotation refers to the births of the first and second children in the family. There was a home birth in each case, but the first time the woman decided to have the baby at home partly for external

(economic) reasons: being abroad, she had no insurance that would cover the costs of giving birth in a clinic, whereas the services of a home midwife (which were legal in that country) were significantly cheaper. The second time the woman was no longer in straitened circumstances, but by that time she was in favour of home births in principle: there were families which had had them in her circle and she was deliberately reading the literature on the subject and subscribing to *Domashnii rebenok*. As can be seen, the ritualisation of the handling of the placenta in the practice of this family was the result of the parents' becoming familiar with that knowledge which is common in home birthing circles.

However much variety there is in the possible ways of handling the placenta, the commonest practice is to bury it. Still, if the child is born in a cold season, the burial of the placenta may be put off till the spring, and in that case it is put in the freezing compartment in order to preserve it until the ground thaws. It can happen that over time the parents forget about the frozen placenta:

— *What did you do with the placenta after the birth?*

— *Oh how dreadful! You've just reminded me — it's still in the freezer! Really! How awful! It was winter, and it has to be buried somewhere in the woods... We forgot about it. We remembered it several times, and then we went away for the summer and forgot about it again. And it must still be there... (f., about 25 years, Moscow).*

When this interview was taken my informant's daughter was two and a half years old, and all that time the placenta had been in the refrigerator, the parents having forgotten about it. Although the woman herself found the situation as evidently abnormal when she remembered about it, this is not the only such case in the recorded material. Putting the placenta in the fridge is invariably regarded as a measure taken through force of circumstances and above all, temporarily; the 'forgotten' placenta is an oddity. However, the frequency of such cases confirms the hypothesis that for many modern parents the symbolic handling of the placenta is a means, remaining within the sphere of the permissible, of ridding themselves of a symbolically significant, but 'inconvenient' object. The freezing compartment thus becomes a means of procrastination, allowing a still incomplete tradition to 'put away' a symbolically significant object until a convenient time or until the ritual practice is established.

The fact that the placenta may be forgotten by people who have not yet performed the necessary ritual acts with it highlights an important peculiarity of the functioning of symbolic practices in the modern city. Whereas in traditional culture the question 'Why this way, and not some other way?' was simply meaningless, because the whole point of tradition was to do it the way it had been done 'at first', at the

time of ‘the first acts’ [Baiburin 1993: 9–10], in modern practice, even when it is orientated on the archaic past, the questions ‘How exactly?’ and ‘Why this way, and not some other way?’ are ever more relevant. It should be pointed out here that the ‘forgetting’ of the placenta does not mean that the parents do not care about what happens to it; their cultural competence tells them that the situation requires some special action, but they find it difficult to choose a suitable one. In the situation described, when the community partially borrows symbolic practices from traditional culture on the one hand, deriving its knowledge of them primarily from popular ethnographical literature, and on the other hand invents new practices which it understands as rituals, we observe an example of those phenomena which Kirill Chistov has designated secondary forms of popular culture [Chistov 1986: 43–56]. The need for such an action arises partly when someone who belongs to modern culture becomes acquainted with the model of interpretation of traditional ritual practices conveyed by the ethnographic literature. The forms of symbolic practice are numerous and diverse and are an attractive subject for ethnographic description, but at the same time this diversity, as the practices observed demonstrate, does not in itself constitute a tradition, a persistent conventional code of behaviour.

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