

PREGNANCY AND BIRTH PRACTICES IN PALAU

MEKED BESEBES AND JOSEPHA KINTOKI

*A chedalkikii, A chedalkikii,
A chedil a di koiei ma ngalek a di koiei!
(Praise! Praise! The mother lives and the child lives!)*

—A Palauan saying

This paper focuses on traditions related to a woman's pregnancy and healing after childbirth in Palau. This healing process is an essential part of a woman's reproduction and life cycle. Great emphasis on and development of rituals were created to ensure women's childbearing and rearing capability. Processes and details in carrying out this ceremony establish connections among family and clan members for the new mother and her husband. It is a celebration of the success and joy of the first child to a new family.

HEALING PROCESS AFTER CHILDBIRTH IN PALAU

The Legend of Mengidabrutkoel and the Origin of the First Natural Childbirth

The legend of Mengidabrutkoel is associated with the first natural birthing process in Palau. In olden times, pregnancy was considered a tragedy for the pregnant mother as the practice of delivering a child was through cutting of the stomach; in most cases, the mother's life was lost in the process. When the spider demigod Mengidabrutkoel fell in love with and impregnated a young woman from Ngiwal, he asked his mother to show him a way to save both his wife and child. His demigod mother showed him the process of natural

childbirth. When Mengidabrutkeol's wife was ready to give birth, he instructed her as his mother had. When the woman's family heard the child cry, they thought the worst for their daughter. However, Mengidabrutkeol opened the house and presented the baby and his mother, both alive. The family rejoiced and wailed with joyous noise, saying, "*A chedalkikii, A chedalkikii, A chedil a di koiei ma ngalek a di koiei!*" This means, "Praise! Praise! The mother lives and the child lives." It is believed to be at the advent of this revelation of natural birthing that the ceremonies of *omesurech* and *omengat*¹ began to be practiced in Palau.²

MARRIAGE AND PREGNANCY

Marriage is the beginning of the traditional economical exchange system in Palau. The traditional institution of marriage binds two families and several clans together into this exchange system, better known as the *omeluchel* system.³ A pregnant woman will adhere to cultural beliefs pertaining to the system, which her mother and other kinswomen closely monitor. Listed below are the traditional rules concerning pregnancy.

1. *Omesurech* is a hot bath. *Omengat* refers to the steaming done with medicinal plants and the first child ceremony that follows the hot bath.
2. Palau Society of Historians, *Traditions of Pregnancy and Birth* (Koror: Division of Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs, 1998), 18-19.
3. The *omeluchel* system is based on goods exchanged for other goods or services between a woman and her brother's wife. Traditional and contemporary marriages in Palau continue to carry similar traits of this system.

- Walking or working under the rain will bring unfavorable weather and heavy rain during the woman's hot bath.
- Standing in the evening sun's rays just before sunset during a woman's pregnancy will cause the baby to be bothered by the sun and have a tendency to cry most of the time.
- The pregnant woman should not break a spider web when going for a walk; otherwise, her labor and delivery will be difficult.
- She should avoid walking beside sacred areas (*tungel*), or the baby will have deformities.
- She should not be startled by an astonishing or frightening sight because she will deliver a baby with something on his body resembling the startling sight.
- The woman must avoid eating food with a strong smell.
- She should not covet another's food or crops, nor take them, because she will deliver a baby who will grow to have an abnormally strong desire to take or steal others' food and crops.
- Eating fruit bat during pregnancy will cause the placenta to move back into the uterus after delivery.

- The pregnant woman should not walk alone on the road. There must be a companion to watch and guide her so that she does not do restricted or prohibited things during her pregnancy.⁴

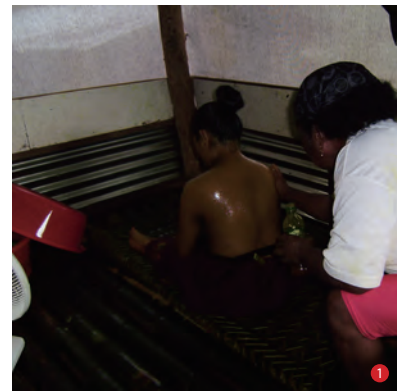
OMESURECH–HOT BATH

Preparation for the first-child ceremony begins with the hot bath. Days before the process begins, word is passed to appropriate relatives of the woman regarding the bath. Female kin of the *mlechell* (new mother going under the hot bath) also notify the man's parents of the bath's beginning and of the potential day of the omengat. All preparation for the hot bath and omengat are taken care of by the *mlechell's* parents, family, and clan relatives.

The hot bath may begin one or two months after the birth of the child. Dirrengechel Sariang Timulch, a 76-year-old traditional medicine practitioner from Aimeliik State, has been giving the hot bath to first-time mothers since she was 30 years old. She explains two divisions of omesurech in Palau,⁵ one that follows the days allotted for the *mlechell's* clan and another used by followers of Modekngai.⁶ This healing process of omesurech consists of a hot bath, drinking herbal medicine, and a final steam. Before the hot bath begins, the mother is told the basic protocols she has to follow.

During the bath, the mother removes all her clothes and enters the hot bath area, which consists of a bamboo floor. She sits on the *ulitech* (woven coconut sitting mat), and turmeric oil is applied all over her body. Turmeric oil aids in removing dark areas of the skin as well as protecting the skin from the hot bath water.

Sitting with her legs stretched out, she waits for the *mesurech* (skilled woman giving/performing the hot bath) to begin the process. An *osurech* (large boiling pot containing medicinal plants) is situated near the *mesurech*, who ladles the hot water into a small holding container and selects a few leaves to be used during the omesurech. The leaves are dipped in the water and are quickly slapped onto the woman's body. Depending on the particular training, different omesurech practices may vary; however, the hot bath usually begins from the head to the abdomen and down to the feet. A typical



4. Palau Society of Historians, *Traditions of Pregnancy and Birth*, Koror: Division of Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Community and Cultural Affairs, 1998: 1-2.

5. Dirrengechel Saraing Timulch, personal interview with author, 9 September, 2014.

6. Modekngai is an indigenous religion in which believers use indigenous medicinal plants for general ailments, sicknesses, and other major illnesses.

1 Traditional medicine healer giving a hot bath to a new mother.
© Kelly Marsh

2 Bamboo floor where the omesurech takes place.
© Omtilou Iyar

omesurech happens twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, for the allotted number of days set forth by the family. The following table shows two major divisions of hot bath practices and the types of plants involved.

	House/Clan Days	Modekngai Days
Number of days for omesurech	1 st Clan – 10 Days ⁷ 2 nd Clan – 9 Days 3 rd Clan – 8 Days 4 th Clan – 7 Days	4 Days
Type of plant used in the omesurech	Leaves of the rebotel plant (<i>Syzygium samarangense</i>)	Leaves of kemokem (<i>Deris trifoliata</i> Lour.), kesiiil (<i>Eugenia reinwardtiana</i>), kisakes (<i>Millettia pinnata</i>), ongael chelangel (<i>Pouteria obovata</i>)
Number of days of omatek ⁸	None, as the last day of omesurech precedes the presentation day.	5 Days
Type of plants used for herbal shower during omatek	None	Kemokem, kesiiil, kisakes
Boiled medicine to be drunk during omesurech	Leaves of the rebotel plant	Ongael (<i>Phaleria nisidai</i>)
Type of plant collected for dechedechomel ⁹	Ulekelakel, chebludes, kerdeu, beraber, tiel a uek, malchianged (<i>Citrus aurantiifolia</i>), chiuetekill (<i>Lophopyxis maingaya</i>)	Ulekelakel, chebludes, kerdeu, beraber, tiel a uek, malchianged, chiuetekill
Type of plants collected for omengat, final steaming in bliukel ¹⁰	Redechel ongor (<i>Pandanus tectorius Parkinson ex Du Roi</i>), bachiei, kiskus er a bleuu (<i>Cymbopogon citratus</i>), kiskus er a ked, sau, kukiut (<i>Cassytha filiformis</i> L.), kobesos, eamel, kertaku (<i>Decaspermum parviflorum</i>), cheskiik (<i>Eurya japonica Thunb</i>), ochod	Redechel ongor, bachiei, kiskus er a bleuu, kiskus er a ked, sau, kukiut, kobesos, eamel, kertaku, cheskiik, ochod

7. Clans 6 to 10 will follow days according to clan division in the village; for example, Clan 6 may use the number of days allotted to Clan 1 according to its association in the village organization.

8. *Omatek* is a period after the omesurech when the mlechell continues to rub oil on her body and shower with medicinal plants.

9. *Dechedechomel* are various plants chewed and swallowed with water. Traditionally, dechedechomel are eaten while bathing early in the morning in a cold-water bathing pool.

10. *Bliukel* is a steam hut that the man prepares for the steaming of the mlechell.

11. Dirrengichel Saraing Timulch, personal interview, 2014.

Table 1: Two major divisions of hot bath practices depicted by Dirrengichel Saring Timulch.¹¹

For the duration of omesurech, the mlechell showers with the hot bath water and remains adorned with the turmeric oil, constantly applying it as needed. Her mother, sister, and female kin attend to her and her baby. Omesurech is a healing process, and once a woman begins, her body enters a healing stage and must therefore be cared for until the end. In practicality, this hot bath is to help get rid of stretch marks and other skin discoloration around the neck and underarm that may have been a result of the pregnancy.



OMENGAT–FINAL STEAMING

Omengat is the steaming of the new mother and is the last stage of this healing process. In preparation for the omengat, the *mesurech* goes out to different areas to collect leaves, herbs, and flowers to be boiled for steaming purposes (see Table 1). During the omengat, a hollow stool is prepared for the mother to sit on. The *bliukel* (steam hut) is covered completely to keep the heat from escaping the hut. While sitting on a toilet-like bench (*osekoakl*), a basin with the hot medicinal water is placed under her, allowing a refreshing aromatic steam to enter the woman’s private area and thus continue the healing that began during the *omesurech*. A basket of boiled giant taro (*brak*) will also be placed around the *mlechell* inside the *bliukel*.

Omatek is the time between the last day of a woman’s *omesurech* and the day of the omengat ceremony. This is mostly practiced among those following the *Modekngai* hot bath rituals. During the *omatek* period, which consists of five days, the woman continues to be lathered with the turmeric oil and bathe herself with *osurech* of

3 Fresh leaves of important medicinal plant collected for the *osurech*. © Lynda D. Tellames

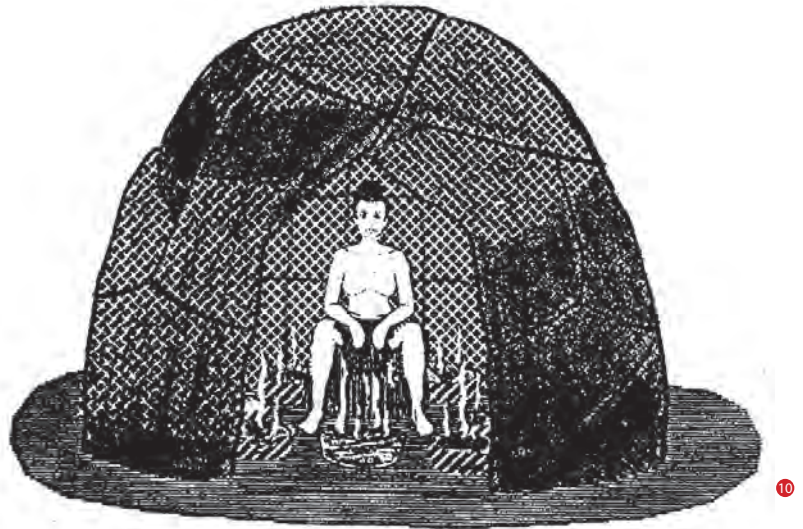
4 Boiling pot of medicinal plant ready for the *omesurech*. © Lynda D. Tellames

5 *Kisakes*. © Moked Besebes

6 *Kemokem*. © Moked Besebes

7 *Meliik*. © Moked Besebes

8 *Bachiei*. © Moked Besebes



kemokem, kesiil, and kisakes. She refrains from doing any hard work or leaving the house. After omesurech and omatek are complete, the final stage is omengat, which entails the steaming and presentation of the new mother.¹²

***Omengat el Ralm*—Unwed Mother’s First Childbirth**

All women who give birth to their first children undergo the whole process from omesurech to omengat, but the final presentation will be determined by whether each woman is married. An unwed mother who gives birth to her first child is cared for by her father or her maternal uncle. She is entitled to the same treatment as a married woman, but she is not to be adorned for a presentation ceremony. She does not go out to be viewed by the public, and all expenses of her omesurech are absorbed by the woman’s father and her maternal uncle.

12. Traditionally, a woman following the clan-day style of hot bath does not practice omatek; however, she continues to lather her skin with turmeric oil and drink herbal medicine for up to six to ten months. If an omengat occurs in another house, she will enter the bluikei for a second time and be presented again (*mekesebech*). Thereafter, she will eat her final medicine, called *osaur*, which symbolizes the end of all restriction for an omechell.

Umbilical Cord and Naming

There are two cultural practices to ensure prosperous futures for newborn children. First is the careful treatment of the umbilical cord when it falls off. When the umbilical cord falls off the baby’s navel, the parents keep it in a safe place. If the child is a boy, the umbilical cord is firmly placed in the deep spot at the base of two coconut fronds, usually at their clan’s house. This signifies that he will be good, skillful, and courageous in all of the arts of men. If the child is a girl,

9 *Bluikei*, steam hut, for *omengat*, final steaming. © Lynda D. Tellames

10 Illustration showing a woman inside a *bluikei*. © Bureau of Arts and Culture

the cord is placed between the leaves of a taro plant, which signifies she will be lucky and diligent in her womanly arts. Other families will bury the umbilical cord in varying places under a stone in the middle of the *lkul a dui mesei*.¹³ Secondly, the naming of a baby after someone in the family or clan who was skillful and knowledgeable is highly practiced to ensure a prosperous future for the child. This naming of a newborn is the responsibility of the father, who chooses a name from his family or clan.

Mesurech—Art of Healing

The *mesurech*, as a knowledgeable woman skilled in giving the hot bath, goes out for *mengerker* (gathering different plants and herbs used in the hot bath). The art of giving the hot bath is a specialized skill that not all women can obtain. Wise women who know the art of the hot bath usually observe among their families or clans to identify young women who have the interest and show natural strength and mobility to execute the proper way of healing the body. Another factor used to distinguish a potential *mesurech* is the woman's ability to withstand the heat and aromatic fragrance of the herbal medicine used. It may take years for an apprentice to accompany the *mesurech*, watching, preparing, and practicing, before she obtains all the proper skills to carry out the art of *omesurech* by herself. In addition, proper training in collecting the right medicinal herbs and plants, observing nature and weather, and using skills beyond the five senses is needed in becoming a successful *mesurech*.

Food Preparation

On the days leading up to the presentation of the new mother, a home transforms into an educational institution of Palauan traditional knowledge and basic norms. Other skills such as coconut basket weaving are also taught, and the baskets woven serve as food containers.

Crops such as taro, giant taro, and tapioca play a central role during *omesurech* and *omengat*. Food preparation involves the family, clan, and sometimes the village. Women work cooperatively to make *billum* (boiled, grated tapioca). In addition, taro is prepared to be boiled. Fish and pig are traditionally prepared by the men. Men go



13. *Lkul a dui* is an allocated taro field for a clan; thus, the wife of a chief tends and harvests this taro field for her husband's taro consumption and other clan-related customs. See "Taro Field Landscape" in this publication for a description of *lkul a dui*.

¹³ Young girl learning to weave coconut leaves for decoration. © Meked Besebes

out fishing days prior to the ceremony, and a pig is killed and cooked to be served with other food. All this preparation culminates on the morning of the omengat. Female kin and several *buch el sechal*¹⁴ work in cooperation to pack lunch plates to be distributed to villagers and other relatives attending the omengat.



A significant aspect of Palauan cultural principles displayed during the omesurech and omengat is reciprocity of goods, services, and wealth between families and clans. The act of coming together as a clan and village to prepare food creates a platform where women and men share ideas, stories, and best practices for accomplishing tasks such as billum making or boiling hard taro. It is on these kinds of occasions that young women and men begin to learn their roles in their families and clans. More importantly, they learn new skills with the guidance of a trusted adult or elder such as taro preparation or skillfully dissecting a whole pig into different parts.

14. *Buch el sechal* is a female spouse who provide food and services to their husbands' families in customs and other related obligations.

12 Reef fish caught days before are cleaned and prepared for the *omengat*. © Moked Besebes

13 Pig preparation. © Omtilou Iyar

14 Pig head and other parts inserted into coconut basket. © Moked Besebes

15 *Billum* is grated tapioca wrapped in coconut leaves and boiled. It is common to see billum hanged as such during Palauan customs like *omengat*. © Moked Besebes

16 Taro preparation. © Bureau of Arts and Culture

17 Lobster caught on the near shore reef adds to the buffet set for the husband's relatives. © Moked Besebes

18 Fruit centerpiece. © Lynda D. Tellames

OMENGAT E MO TUOBED¹⁵ –MARRIED WOMAN’S FIRST-CHILD CEREMONY

A certain level of preparation and dialogue goes on between the mlechell’s family and her husband’s family. Traditionally, the first child ceremony happens after a marriage exchange; however, the culture allows that the marriage exchange take place during this time as well. The mlechell’s maternal uncle plays a greater role in terms of food preparation and all major logistics of the ceremony. The maternal uncle is responsible for preparing the *ngader*, food consisting of crops, meat, and other prepared meals that will be presented to the husband’s family. These foods may be presented before or during the ceremony.



19



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On the day of the ceremony, the mlechell begins her day by entering the bliukel to complete the final stage of omesurech, which is the omengat. Afterward, she takes a shower, during which she is allowed to use soap to clean her body. She then comes back to the house to get ready for her final presentation. In the meantime, her family, clan, and in some cases the village are busy packing food, decorating, and welcoming members of their family and clan to the house. The mlechell’s mother continues to care for the baby while her father lightly supervises, being mindful not to step in on the responsibilities of the mlechell’s maternal uncles (*okdemelel*). Young children run

15. The first-child ceremony takes place only when the first child is born. The woman may go through the hot bath and steaming for her subsequent children for healing purposes but is not presented as in the first.

¹⁹ Coconut basket filled with taro and other goods. © Sylvia Kloulubak

²⁰ Plastic tub filled with consumer goods. © Bureau of Arts and Culture

²¹ Highly valued food piled up on a *boks*, food pedestal, presented to the husband’s family. © Sylvia Kloulubak

around playing and carrying out minor tasks while young girls serve drinks, showing excitement for what everything has culminated into.

Excitement runs high in the air as the husband's family begins to arrive, occupying the neatly arranged chairs, at which time they are greeted with a feast filled with the best food that the land can produce. As the day progresses, a meeting between the *mlechell* and her husband's family takes place to exchange money, which typically covers the *bus* (money for marriage) and *buildiil* (money for the maternal uncle for taking care of her from pregnancy until the *omesurech*).



16. Dirrengichel Sariang Timulch explains that the purpose of covering the *mlechell*'s neck with Palauan money is to show that she is married and is accepted to her husband's family.

Kinswomen gather inside the house to get the *mlechell* ready. A traditional skirt that bears the family color is used for her final presentation. A *btek* (woven pandanus belt) is lashed around her stomach. While her aunts prepare the finest adornment for her hair and other body ornaments, her younger sister and female cousins, who have not gone through the process, watch ardently, questioning and showing excitement, for they know that their own times will come. When she is finally ready, word is passed to the *mlechell*'s husband's relatives that she is ready. A senior family or clan member of her husband comes to cover her neck with valuable Palauan money.¹⁶ This money will be returned to the family afterwards.

²² *Toluk*, turtle shell money, and US currency exchanged for food during the first-child ceremony. © Sylvia Kloulubak



When all formalities of the day have finished, the mlechell is led out of the house. Two women escort her to her final presentation. Typically, a significant paternal aunt will hold her elbow while another aunt will place the *telutau* (woven coconut frond) in front of her to walk on. She is presented on a stage that has been decorated. This presentation is to show her body, which has been healed, and to celebrate her health. More importantly, it's a depiction of her family and clan's deep affection for the new mother and the newborn child. The careful attention to detail, time, and effort spent in this healing process are what the mlechell's family want to display to the husband's family. In carrying out their respective roles, members of the family and clan strengthen the unity among themselves as well as with the husband's family and clan.

23 The healing mother with her son. © Meked Besebes

24 Female relatives adorning the new mother with traditional attire and body ornaments from her clan. © Meked Besebes

25 Mother escorted by female relatives; she wears her husband's Palauan bead money around her neck. © Meked Besebes



While standing, the *mlechell* has one hand underneath her breast, crossing to hold her opposite elbow, which is protruding upward. Containers filled with medicinal plants are placed in front of her. A significant woman from her husband's family will perform the last process of *omesurech* by splashing the *mlechell*'s feet with medicinal plants. Her husband's female kin begin dancing toward her, singing, “*A chedalkikii, A chedalkikii, A chedil a di koiei ma ngalk a di koiei.*” They then continue to sing this joyous song and other songs to welcome the *mlechell* into their family and to celebrate her health and the life of the newborn child.

This ceremony is a true celebration of life, for it unites people and enhances cultural roles among men, women, families, and clans. Other variations of childbirth exist in Palau; for example, the presentation of the first child ceremony in Angaur consists of the woman climbing scaffolding to take a seat higher than everyone else. The Palau first-child ceremony continues to be practiced in Palau as well as in communities of Palauans residing in Guam, Saipan, and the United States.

²⁶ *Telutau*, woven coconut frond. © Bureau of Arts and Culture

²⁷ The *mlechell*'s sister lays down a *telutau* for the *mlechell* to walk on. © Sylvia Kloulubak

²⁸ Walking on a *telutau*. © Sylvia Kloulubak



FIRST CHILD (*MOWA DIIYE*) TRADITION ON SONSOROL ISLAND¹⁷

Acknowledgement and Preparation

After missing menstruation for a month and knowing that she is pregnant, the daughter will inform her mother. Her mother will then inform her other daughters, her sisters, her own mother, and her aunts, as well as the pregnant daughter's father. Thus informed, they begin the process of collecting the daughter's leftovers and all her food scraps. The daughter's husband and his father will husk the daughter's coconut drink but will not throw the husks just anywhere, for this is taboo. They will collect and store them all in a separate place all on their own, separate from other people's trash.

17. Sonsorol Island is one of the sixteen states of Palau.

²⁹ Containers filled with medicinal plants in front of the *mlechell*. © Lynda D. Tellames

^{30, 31} The *mlechell* encircled by her husband's relatives, singing and dancing to welcome her and the baby into their family. © Lynda D. Tellames

Josepha Kintoki states that the new pregnant woman will be made to sit and learn things she needs to follow for the duration of her pregnancy:¹⁸

- The pregnant daughter will not be expected to do much work; she will not lift anything heavy, for it may cause miscarriage.
- She will not walk far from home or outside the village, for people watching her may gossip about her out of spite.
- She will not touch ugly birds, lest her child be born with unhealthy skin.
- She will not hold the head of a turtle, lest her child be born blind.
- She will not hold a fruit bat, lest her child be born with ears like the fruit bat's, having a smaller dimple within the ear.
- She will not take a bath after sunset, lest her child grow up with night blindness.
- She will not hide tobacco or anything else, lest her child be born with dark spots on his/her body.

Meals and Meal Preparation and Taboos

The pregnant daughter will not drink the last drops of the coconut juice or the fresh tuba juice, and she will not eat leftovers. The first servings go to her, though. She will eat pounded *moruye* (taro corm) and drink coconut juice or fresh tuba juice. She will eat only fresh foods and drink plenty of coconut juice so that her child will be born with a clean body.

She is not allowed to eat with her girlfriends or be tempted to eat stolen food or improperly acquired foodstuffs, lest her child be born ugly and with a bad personality. She will not drink coconuts that are not matured, lest she have a miscarriage. This may cause her to have other miscarriages. She will not drink from a deformed coconut (*riyapin*), lest her child be born ugly. She will not drink from coconuts that are *sibwerihotu* (two coconuts from the same spikelet in a bunch) nor eat banana fruits that are conjoined, lest she have twins. She will not eat shoreline birds or some types of tern (*bwirih* and *keingaw*), lest her child be born with foolish and senseless characteristics (*ranimoru*) that will develop into mental illness when the child grows older. Furthermore, she will not eat fish that looks thin and sharp, lest her child grow up with a bad temper.

18. Josepha Kintoki, personal interview by Lina Kintoki (translated by Laura Ierago Miles), 11 August 2014.

In the sixth month of pregnancy, the pregnant daughter will not lie on her back, lest her unborn child sink into her backbone, causing a difficult delivery. In the seventh and eighth month of pregnancy, the daughter's sisters and aunts will weave a small mat for the child out of small and soft pandanus leaves as well as a *yep*, a skirt of pandanus leaves, for the pregnant daughter. If she has another extra skirt, she will keep it for the child to use at birth. In the ninth month, when the pregnant daughter begins having labor pains, her mother will inform her sisters and her daughters-in-law. The daughter's mother will take her pregnant daughter to the *ipporu* (menstruation and delivery hut) together with a midwife (*suyawaur*, literally meaning "easy exit"). The midwife will be responsible for the delivery.

Labor and Birth

At birth, if the newborn does not breathe, its nose will be sucked on or it will be lifted up and spanked under its feet for it to cry before it is put in the new mother's arms. The umbilical cord will then be tied with a fiber of coconut husk, and a shell will be used to cut it. The female in-laws will have cooked porridge made of the young white coconut meat brought to the new mother at the *ipporu*.

The midwife will massage the new mother to deliver the afterbirth (*hiye niweisi*) if it fails to come out with the child at birth. After all is done with the new mother, the midwife will gather all scraps from delivery, including the afterbirth, and bury them at a *hapiri imweri ipporu* (a space nearby the *ipporu* where all scraps from *ipporu* are buried).

The new mother's mother (new grandmother) will take the newborn, lay it on her legs, and bathe it. After that she will rub coconut oil on the newborn's body to keep it warm, after which she will lay the baby first on the mother's *yep* and next on the new mother so that the new mother can nurse the baby.

Postpartum, Baths, and Herbal Medicines

After the delivery, the new mother will wear a woven belt made of banana fiber (*somisomi*) around her belly with the belly button

pushed in and tucked under the belt. This is done to prevent *diiya mouraho*, meaning big or sagging belly. It is now taboo for her to touch her own hair, lest her hair start falling out. She will instead have a *sitabo* (a sailfish bone or a small twig) adorn her hair for her to use to scratch her head. She will not walk in a drizzling rain. She will bathe in the ocean every morning before sunrise and every evening before sunset. After every morning and evening ocean bath, she will return to the *ipporu* to have her herbal sitz bath. Her mother would have prepared an herbal sitz bath consisting of warmed leaves of *motu* (beach naupaka; *Scaevola taccada*), laying them in taro leaves (*moruye*) on top of a woven mat made of coconut fronds. After each sitz bath she will rub coconut oil on her body to keep warm.

After one month of living at the *ipporu*, the new mother and newborn will move to a *bungutohow* (small room outside of the main house built specifically for the mother and newborn).¹⁹ The new mother will continue her ocean bath, but after each bath she will bathe in herbal medicine called *halafilefi*, literally meaning “to bring back to its normal size.” This consists of the leaves and bark of specific trees boiled in water and prepared for the new mother’s bath. A move from *ipporu* to *bungutohow* normally occurs at the new moon; if a woman was admitted to *ipporu* at the new moon, she will exit and move to the *bungutohow* at the next new moon. If a woman is admitted after the new moon, such as at the quarter moon, she will have to stay past the next new moon to meet the number of days required before her move to the *bungutohow*. However, even at this stage, if someone is heard yelling out the words, “*E ringa malama dairi bongi!*” (“The moon appears in the western skies!”) only then can the new mother move on to the *bungutohow*. The day of her move, the midwife will accompany her to her ocean bath. At this time, the midwife will wash the new mother’s hair and rub fresh coconut milk onto her hair and her body. After this, the new mother will be led to the *ipporu* to do her herbal sitz bath before the move to the *bungutohow*.

The door to the *bungutohow* is restricted to only the new mother’s mother (new grandmother) and the midwife. This door is called the *famosou* door, the opening from which the newborn’s soiled clothes and bath water are tossed out.

19. Josepha Kintoki, personal interview, 2014.

After two months at the bungutohow, they then move to the *immarap* (main family house). At the *immarap*, the new mother cannot touch other women's or children's heads because she is considered *lei reduweisi*, a woman with a child she is still caring for. During her year at the *immarap*, the new mother continues to be fed well so that she keeps a healthy weight because she is still nursing her baby. If she doesn't eat well, she may lose her appetite and lose weight; she may then develop a postpartum ailment called *letatorahi*, meaning "postpartum loss of appetite."

Family Relationship (*Hautout*)

When the new mother and baby move to the *immarap*, the in-laws bring fish and coconuts for drinking to the new mother's residence while her family provides the starches such as baked and pounded taro. This process symbolizes a closer relationship between the two families. Members would give respect to each other for the rest of their lives.

BIRTH PRACTICES IN HATOHOBEL ISLAND²⁰

When a young woman misses her menstruation, she tells her mother. A certain level of care is given to the new mother. Her father and mother bring special food such as taro for her to eat. A special mat is designated for the young mother, and she is instructed to sleep in the same position and not to maneuver from one side to another, for it will cause difficulty during childbirth. Specific advice is given to the mother for her and the baby's wellness. Her mat will not be folded when she gets up, and no one is allowed to walk over her. She should eat properly, without walking around or eating while standing, and she should return home before sundown. After childbirth, her mother prepares for her an herbal bath with leaves of rebotel (*Syzgium samarangense*) plants. The new mother would give herself the herbal bath with rebotel leaves. This is to help cleanse her body from impurities and discharge associated with any pregnancy.

20. Kuterdis Lorenzo, Regina Andrew, and Sisma Andrew, interview with author in Hatohebei State in Palau's Southwest Islands, 22 July 2014.

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