

Placenta Burial Rituals

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Ceremonial burial of the placenta has traditionally held spiritual meaning for cultures around the world. Included here are some themes and examples of traditional rituals that have been practiced in various cultures to honor the placenta. These customs have inspired many families today to create their own meaningful placenta burial rituals

Placenta honored as baby's spirit guide

Traditional Hmong, Malaysian, Nepalese, Balinese, Siberian, and Icelanders practiced placenta burial rituals in this theme

In **Bali** the placenta is called “Ari-Ari” and is considered the physical body of the child’s guardian angel, and the angel’s spirit stays with the child for life. The placenta is wrapped in cloth and placed within a coconut to be buried.

In the **Hmong** culture, the placenta is buried with great care and ritual at the home, as the placenta is believed to be the spiritual jacket that the baby wore to come into this world. Once the baby lived his life, his spirit will, after death, retrace his life’s journey, back to the very site of the placenta burial to recover the placenta. His spirit can again wear the placenta as the spiritual jacket that will allow him to cross back over to the other side. The Hmong word for placenta literally means “jacket.”



Native Icelanders call the placenta the baby’s “fylgia” which means “guardian angel.”



Placenta burial as a sacred connector of the child to his or her land and heritage

Traditional Native Hawaiians, Native Americans, Maori and African tribes practiced ritual burial in this theme

In the Navajo tradition, burial of the placenta within the boundaries of the child's family tribal land will bind or root the child's spirit to his ancestors and to the land. The Navajo believe that this will ensure that the child will always return home.

Igbo tribe of Africa believe that burying the placenta connects the child to the spirits in the ground, and the placenta was given the name “Our Mother.”

Native American tribes Chinook and Quinault call the placenta “Grandmother.”

The Maori of New Zealand bury the placenta on tribal land to tie the child to the land. The Maori word for placenta and word for land have the same name, “Whenua.”

Placenta burial to bestow blessings or protection for the child's future


Traditional Chinese, Indonesian, Mayan, Thai, Ibani, Cambodian, Ukraine, Turks, Japanese and Yugoslavians practiced rituals in this theme

The Mayans revere the tree the placenta was buried under, believing the sacred relationship created gives the tree protective powers over the child.

Japanese traditions include a formal burial ceremony, as the placenta was considered linked to the child's destiny. The placenta was washed in first in water, then in sake. Next it was wrapped in colored silk cloths and placed in a wooden box. Good luck emblems to ensure a successful life were added, such as writing brushes or needles and thread.

In China, numerous literary and artistic sources reflect the importance in traditional China of properly disposing of the placenta after birth. The texts offer detailed instructions: After washing it, often in special water or even wine, it should be wrapped in silk, enclosed in a tightly sealed vessel, sometimes with the addition of auspicious items like a calligraphy brush or coins, and buried in the ground in

carefully chosen locations. Based on the connection with both the child and the mother, the placenta, when disposed of improperly, was believed to have a potentially grave effect on the future fate of the mother and child, as well as potentially offending various spirits through the pollution of female blood. The attached chart, for examples, instructs the viewer to bury the placenta in the most auspicious direction for each month of the year while at the same avoiding the rotating two "death" positions associated with Jupiter and the Big Dipper.



庚子 十一月 子	辛丑 十二月 丑	壬寅 正月 寅	癸卯 二月 卯
甲辰 三月 辰	乙巳 四月 巳	丙午 五月 午	丁未 六月 未
戊申 七月 申	己酉 八月 酉	庚戌 九月 戌	辛亥 十月 亥
壬子 十一月 子	癸丑 十二月 丑	甲寅 正月 寅	乙卯 二月 卯



Many families today find personal meaning with placenta burial ceremonies. Some create rituals celebrating the completion of the pregnancy and birth, and honoring a woman's journey into motherhood. Families also recognize the life giving properties of the placenta and bury it as an offering of nourishment to the land and a blessing to the earth

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Photographs by Sarah Hollister

Painting taken from the supplement to Buyi Lei Gong's Guide to the Preparation of Drugs (1591 edition), from Wellcome Images

Chinese Burial Chart image reconstructed by Sabine Wilms, PhD