

# **PLACENTA DISPOSAL RITUALS AMONG SOMALI REFUGEES IN DADAAB CAMP**

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**Abstract**

Rituals surrounding birth and placenta are common in various African societies. These rituals often include behavior and belief systems that serves to ensure reproductive health and welfare of mother, child, and the community at large. The rituals and practices are transmitted from one generation to next in form of fertility myths, folk tales, taboos and religion. The rituals are perceived as spiritual, important and sacred. The burial of placenta is a common post-partum ritual in many cultures. However, the ritual processes, practices and its symbolic meaning vary from one culture to the other. For instance, the Holy Quran, 20:55, indicates that placenta should be buried because it is from the earth people were created, and into it shall they return. This could be a guiding principle for persons who subscribe to the Islamic faith. Yet, in other communities, they believe placenta should be buried lest witchdoctors steal and use it for witchcrafts, bewitch and/ or to curse the family. Therefore, this study embarked on exploring the rituals surrounding disposal of placenta among Somali refugees living in Dadaab camp. The study wished to establish the religio-cultural drivers behind placenta disposal; how and where they dispose the placenta and significance the manner in which placenta is disposed for the mother, baby and community at large. It was a qualitative study carried out in Ifo refugee camp in Dadaab. The study interviewed 2 married men, 3 TBAs, 2 pregnant mothers and 2 safe mothers/ community midwives. Two separate focus group discussions (FGDs) were done for men and women, where one FGD was conducted for only women and another for men only. Content analysis was done after coding and categorizing data into thematic areas. The study established that placenta is buried. The Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) demonstrated how and where the placenta is buried in the compound. The findings indicated that for the Somali refugees, burying of placenta is a significant spiritual-cultural practice that has been carried out by ancestors from ancient times. And that TBAs are the ones that bury the placenta two feet deep to avoid foil stench and animals preying on it. the overburden is compacted to deter an evil person from exhuming it. The study established that the placenta has a religious significance as it is supported by the teaching of the holy Qur'an. Burying of placenta is one of the major reasons why the community prefer the TBAs services to hospitals. Such findings could be a game changer for hospital staff to come up with strategies to make sure they elicit mothers input regarding placenta disposal, by ensuring that they make provision to meet their wishes

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Placenta plays an important role in the development of fetus in the mother's womb. It connects the fetus and the mother during gestation period, providing fetus with oxygen and nutrients for its growth. Because of its life nurturing role, placenta is viewed as scared in different cultures. For people who prefer home births, placenta is considered as a special element of the childbirth experience. However, this view contrast with that of a hospital set up where, placenta is treated as a medical waste or biohazard material and is incinerated. Once gestation period is over, child birth is a significant event for the mother, family and the community. The infant as well as the placenta are born. While the birth of the newborn baby is cerebrated, people have various way of disposing the placenta. Due to different communities, the world is rich with cultural diversity and practices surrounding placenta disposal. These diverse placenta disposal practices are worth noting and evening writing about. However, because of the huge number of these cultural diversity, this paper reviewed literature related to placenta disposal practices of a few cultures taking into consideration geographical spread across continents. Thereafter, this paper will present findings of data collected on placenta disposal among Somali community, living in Dadaab refugee camp.

## 2.0 Forms of Placenta disposal

People living in African continent practice diverse after birth rituals and placenta disposal. For instance in some cultures like Igbos of Nigeria the placenta is buried, in others it is burned, while in others the placenta is thrown into the river. However, it is important to note that no matter where placenta is disposed, each community practice different and unique way and method of disposal. Researches indicated a persistence traditional practices surrounded by rituals, cultural beliefs and meaning. For instance, in some communities placentas is buried at home because it is perceived to be essential for travel by the soul of the deceased into the spirit world to rejoin ancestors. In other communities, the placenta is buried near the homestead or an uncultivated field near the homestead to ensure fertility. In some communities, the placenta and umbilical cord are thrown into a running river or stream to meet the ancestors. Yet in others, like in Chinas, it is dried for use in rituals later such as making medicine and charms. Others hanged in the house to symbolize continuity in the family. This paper discusses different community rituals practices surrounding placenta disposal as well as findings of how Somali community living in Dadaab camp disposal placentas disposal

### 2.1 Disposal of placenta through burying.

Burying of placenta is a common practice among many cultures across the world. According to Reddy (2012), burying of Placentas served various functions such as guiding the baby's spirit to help the child navigate through birth to returning and connecting after death. He also notes that burial was considered to be a sacred connector of the child to his birth place or heritage as well as bestow blessing or protection for the child's future. For communities who bury the placenta, it is done in a special designed location to protect the baby. These locations differ from one community to the other. However, the bottom line is to keep evil spirits and other harmful practices such as witchcrafts from interfering with the baby. For instance, amongst the Kikuyu community of Kenya, placenta and the umbilical cord are believed to symbolise attachment of the child to its mother as well as its roots within the community that bind the child to its ancestors. The placenta is also seen as a symbol of fertility, and therefore, it is deposited in an uncultivated field and covered with grass and grains (Kenyatta, 1937). Kikuyus are not the only ones who bury placentas, Bogaert (2008) observe that the Ibo of Nigeria and Ghana treat the placenta as the dead twin of the live child and give it full burial rites. However, he never mentioned the exact location where Ibo burry the placenta. Bogaert(2008 ) further states that Filipina mothers bury placenta with books, in hopes that the child will turn to be smart. In her article, *'Traveling Companions: The Burial of the Placenta in Niger'* Cooper (2019) notes that placenta is considered as a child's traveling companion which should be respected and carefully buried to protect woman's future fertility. The article further stated that placenta is buried to protect the mother from envy her co-wives who might "tie up" her womb from bearing other children. This notion was affirmed by a TBAs in Machakos, Kenya who stated that envy, evil eye and bewitching of the mother and child are the main reason for burying the placenta. The TBAs stated that once they help the mother deliver her baby, they pack her placenta nicely in her bag to carry home. They mentioned that the young generation is no longer burying the placenta but throwing it into a pit latrine. Observably, these communities that bury placenta must ensure that it is sent out of the house without being noticed. It is therefore, a common practice for the placenta to be taken out at a time when people are not likely to come into the homestead such as at dawn, dusk, in the evening or in the middle of the night. Such practices are intended to prevent people from seeing the placenta in case one has evil eyes to cast a spell and bring bad luck to the mother and baby.

Notably, burying of placenta is a common practice among Kenyan communities. This was notion was aired by several persons from different ethnic groups who had attended an interdisciplinary dissemination conference held on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2021 at Kenyatta University. Among those in attendance were medical professionals (midwives, nurses and doctors working in hospitals and universities), university professors from various disciplines among others from across Kenya and Zambia. They affirmed and opined that culturally ones' home is where their placenta was buried. The medics observed that, in as much as placenta is treated as a medical waste in hospitals, its importance of binding the child to their roots should by no means be underestimated.

Gender of the child determine specific spot and direction where the placenta is buried or disposed. For instance, among the Luo community of Siaya, Kenya who believe that home is where the placenta was buried (William & Odhiambo, 1987), placenta of a female child must be buried on the left-hand side of her mother's house, while that of a male child is buried on the right-hand side. The gendered location emanate from community perception and expectation of what entails masculinity and femininity. According to them, the left side denotes impermanency and vulnerability, whilst the right signifies permanency and authority Bogaert(2008). Unlike the Luo community, the Marakwet community of western Kenya, don't burry the placenta but throw it in the bush whilst performing designed rituals. In this community, a TBA carries the placenta as she spread millet along the way going to the designated bush to dispose it (Rono et.,al., 2018). This observes Rono et.,al. (2018), will ensure that the woman does not become infertile. Once, the TBA arrives to the designated bush, she lay the placenta in a specified manner, then pours milk on it and leave without burring it. However, like the Luos gender of the child among the Marakwet also determines the rituals and the spot where the placenta will be disposed. In their study of *Culture and Birthing: Experiences from a Rural Community in Western Kenya*, Rono et.al. (2018) stated that the TBA in Marakwet community takes placenta of a male child to the right hand direction from the house of delivery and left hand direction for that of a female child, where it is then laid in the bush and millet is spread on the ground. These gender differentials in placenta disposal indicates the position of boys and girls in the community at birth. In that girls are regarded as impermanent 'lefted' members because they are expected to get married and leave the family but 'righted' boys seen to carry on the family name and patriarchal authorities (William & Odhiambo, 1987). One wondered how Somali immigrant community living in Dadaab refugee camps perform their rituals of placenta disposal.

## 2.2 Disposal of placenta by Burning

As mentioned above, placenta disposal and accompanying rituals, practices and beliefs vary from one community to the other. Burning is another form of placenta disposal for certain communities. For instance, among Korean, the placenta is usually wrapped in rice straw or paper and carefully stored for three days in a clean spot within the room where the baby was born. The place where it is stored has to have a clear view of the location where the Goddess of Childbearing (Samsin), is enshrined in the house (Leepilyoung, 2020). The practice are that, three days after birth, the placenta is taken to the burning site and burnt as people sing and chant some words. The placenta is often burned until it turns to ashes in a wood or charcoal fire with straw or chaff on the spot where the baby was born. Leepilyoung (2020) noted that the placenta is burnt slowly for a very long time and it should not be left alone until it completely burns to ash, lest someone steals it to for use as medicine or by an infertile woman who wants to have a baby. The ash can then be thrown into a river or buried in the ground. However, if a couple desire not to have more children/ infertile, the placenta is burned and mixed with ash, then the husband is made to drink this mixture (Leepilyoung, 2020). While placenta in

Korea that is burnt to ash is mix and drank to decrease fertility, a similar practice in South Africa is undertaken but it is meant to enhance fertility. Explaining this notion, Bogaert (2008), says that South Africans select pieces of placenta and umbilical cord and first leave them to dry in the sun before they make it to “*muti*” (ashes or crashed human body parts for medicinal purpose). This *muti* is taken to stimulate the fertility of infertile women.

Burning of placenta to ash was a common practice in early days among African Americans living in Georgia, USA. This information was gathered in an informal interview with an elderly woman in her late 80’s. She explained that the birth attendant took the placenta outside the house and placed it in a hot furnace and watched over it until it burned to ashes for fear someone would steal and to use it for charm or witchcraft. She further explained that burning of placenta was done when there were no other person around, in case an evil eye got sight of it and cast a spell on the new born. Notably, placenta burning is very rare practice among communities in Kenya as was stated in the February 2021 conference.

### **2.3 Disposal of placenta by drying /curating for use as traditional medicine and charm**

Drying or curing is another form of placenta disposal. The dried placenta may be left hanging or used to make traditional medicine or/ and charm. For instance, among the Koreans, placenta is believed to have mysterious vitality, and is widely used as a wonder drug Leepilyoung (2020). They believe that placenta cures diseases such as epilepsy, tuberculosis, convulsions and boils. Leepilyoung (2020) observes that people even kept the dried umbilical cord with the belief that, it is a very effective charm for passing the higher civil service examinations or winning a lawsuit. In other communities, placenta is dried for use in rituals later, such as, for making medicine and charms. For instance, the Araucanian Native Americans of Argentina dried and ground a child's umbilical cord, giving the child a little of the powder when it was sick (William, 1979). Practices of placenta drying are also found among Africans. For example, the Chaga of Tanzania place the placenta in a receptacle for two months to dry. Once dry, it is either left hanging in the house to symbolize continuity in the family; or it is ground into flour from which a porridge is made. The porridge is served to old women of the family as a way of preserving the child's life (Eibel, 2020). Closely related to drying or/ and curating for making medicine is placentophagy discussed below.

### **2.4 Placenta disposal through placentophagy and its use as medicine**

Placentophagy is another form of placenta disposal. Placentophagy refers to the practice of eating, or consuming human placenta. Observably, most non-human mammals eat their placentas after giving birth. For instance, when I was growing up in my father’s farm, I witnessed cows, sheep, dogs and cats eating their placenta after giving birth. The dog also ate the first puppy that come out. Since it was a common belief that a cow will die from feeding on its own placenta, my father made us hang around a cow that was giving birth to monitor for the delivery of placenta. We had strict instructions that, once a cow expelled the placenta, we should quickly drag and bury it in a hole outside the paddock or throw it to the dogs. It is during these times, that I observed how keen and passionate cows were about eating their own placenta after giving birth. Indeed, a cow would put up a spirited struggle to get hold of its placenta, to the point of chasing after us, as we dragged the placenta away. However, no matter how scaring these activities proved to be, we had to brave snatching placenta from the beast to prevent its death for dairy farming was our main source of livelihood.

Placentophagy may be a new concept. Consuming placenta which was originally common among animals seem to gain grounds with humans, as women and even some men eat placenta for some acclaimed benefits. Little is known of such practices in medieval time. In actual fact, the earliest mention of placentophagy occurred during the Siege of Jerusalem (587 BC) and was recorded in the bible book of Deuteronomy 28:56–57. Here, Jehovah their God, pronounced placentophagy as a curse for not obeying his commandments. Some scholars such as Miles Jack (2011) in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *God: A Biography* ellude that Judeans actually ate placentas because they disobeyed Jehovah their God and also due to excessive famine that was experienced in the land of Judah at the time. One is not certain how true these could be.

The second mention of Placentophagy was in 1596 AD where the Great Pharmacopoeia of the time, recommends placental tissue mixed with human milk to help overcome the effects of exhaustion (William, 1979). Placentophagy has subsequently been mentioned as a common practice among Chinese who are believed to have used human placenta as Chinese traditional medicine for centuries to treat kidney and liver ailments or low energy. For instance, William (1979) cited a Chinese medical text, where he explained that dried, powdered placenta mixed in milk would be warmed up in sunlight, then taken as treatment. According to him, the placenta mi, was meant to treat many ailments including anemia, weakness of the extremities, and coldness of the sexual organs with involuntary ejaculation of semen.

The topic of placentophagy surfaced again in the 1960s when a Czechoslovakian medic working at Hospital of Czechoslovak-Vietnamese Friendship in Haiphong reported that male and female Vietnamese nurses and midwives of Chinese and Thai background consumed placentas of their young, healthy patients for unspecified reasons (Bawany, 2013). This article further explained how these nurses and midwives stripped the placentas off the membranous parts, which they then fried with onions before eating.

Although there are several anecdotes of different cultures practicing placentophagy, it was only in the 1970s when maternal placentophagy started in the USA (William, 1979, Gryder, 2017). The scholars elaborately explained how placenta was prepared for consumption through encapsulation. In that, first the placenta was dehydrated or dried and later grounded into a powder, and put into capsules to be taken when energy was low. They maintained that other persons used steaming method, where the placenta is gently steamed with various herbs (ginger, lemon, frankincense, myrrh, etc.), then fully dehydrated, ground into a fine powder, and put into capsules. Yet, others are known to boil or grind to mix with smoothies to drink. Gryder, (2017) explains that in Jamaica, bits of placental membranes were put into an infant's tea to prevent convulsions caused by ghosts. In some communities, sex of the new born baby demined the manner in which the placenta would be eaten. For instance, in Bagui China, the placenta of a boy is specially prepared and eaten by the mother's family and relatives (Young, Sharon; Benyshek, Daniel 2010).

Notably, in the contemporary society, making placenta smoothies has become popular among some socialites as scripted by several bloggers in social media (Max, 2020). Supporters believe the nutrients, proteins and hormones in the placenta help avoid postpartum depression, increase milk production and facilitate overall recovery. Modern technology has made it easier for women who practice placentophagy. Max, (2020) explain that they encapsulate their placentas by drying, grounding and putting it into pill form. Women who are carrying the practice believe it helps in postpartum.

Not much publication done on placentophagy in the contemporary society especially in Kenya. However, existence of placentophagy was affirmed by medical professionals (attended the February 2021 conference) working in a private hospital in Nairobi, Kenya. They noted that due to modern technology and numerous foreigners (immigrants) the dynamics placentas disposal in Kenyan context has changed. They explained that their patients come with well articulate birth plans which include their wishes on placentas disposal. One explained that the Asian community who come to give birth in the hospital along the coast request to carry their placenta home. They even bring along with them a pot or plastic bag where the placenta will be packed for them to carry home. They maintained that the placenta has a, religious and other significances. One of the nurses narrated how a husband presented a pot to her to ensure that she placed the child's placenta to be carried home. She said when she inquired the purpose for which the placenta was carried, the couple explained that it was to give to a woman friend who for many years had not conceived. She observed that true to their words she assisted the woman (whom the placenta was taken to) to deliver her baby after two years in the same hospital. Her narration was supported by another nurse from Eldoret level 5 referral hospital who stated that she too has witnessed similar incidences. The migratory community has indeed brought with them new ways of placenta disposal in the Kenya hospital arena. Placentophagy has surfaced as noted by nurses working in private hospitals. For example, one nurse explained that, in the upmarket estates of Nairobi, there is someone who upon request from her patients (Agha-Khan university hospital) collects the placenta which he dries and grinds, encapsulate it and brings back to the women before she is discharged.

From the foregoing, there are many rituals, practices and beliefs of placenta disposal as there are different communities. Kenya has diverse communities who practice different cultures and traditions including those of placenta disposal. Although Kenya several communities one could study, this particular study chose to establish the manner in which TBAs attending to Somali refugee women residing in Dadaab camp dispose placenta.

Hospitals in the refugee camps and other parts of Kenya mainly incinerated placenta as medical waste. However, there is still a large percent of women who prefer to give birth at home attended by TBAs. Observably, this is the scenario in Dadaab refugee camp where majority of pregnant women prefer TBAs over hospital delivery. This study therefore, sort to establish the rituals and practices performed by TBAs during placenta disposal. This was achieved by travelling to Dadaab refugee camp and gathering first-hand information from TBAs, mothers who have given birth at home with the help of TBAs, community gate-keepers and safe mothers. Data was collected in the month of November 2020. The researchers employed a Qualitative case research design.

Later in that mid-morning, a meeting was held with the identified TBAs and expectant mothers. Our purpose and intentions of the research was explained to these women. They raised several questions which were addressed one by one. Once satisfied, the women were then divided into two and assigned to a researcher who read and explained the content of the consent form. Only when they understood and their questions answered, then were the women requested to append their signature if they consent to participate.

Since the questions were written in English, the study hired 2 interpreters who assisted each other to translate the questions from English into Somali language ready for data collection. Role playing was done to ensure that the questions were translated accurately and that they carried the same meaning. With English and translated questions, TBAs, pregnant mothers and safe women were visited in their homes where interview were conducted. Women were asked Questions in Somali language, and their responses translated into English.

The study held two focus group discussions, for men only (10 men) and women (8 women) only. Men FGD comprised of community gate-keepers from Ifo refugee camp (a male representative from each block). Women FGDs comprised of TBAs and pregnant women from Ifo refugee camp. Data was recorded by VR recorder, tape recording and note taking. Transcription was later done and data transcribed arranged thematically. Questions related to placenta, such as religion-cultural factors guiding the manner in which placenta is disposed, significance of rituals and practices were asked. The findings are presented in the section below.

### **2.5 Findings how Somali refugees dispose of the placenta**

Respondents were asked to explain placenta rituals/practices by Somali community in Dadaab refugee camp. They maintained that the community disposes the placenta through burying. They explained that immediately a woman gives birth to the newborn and delivers placenta, the TBA attending to the birthing process wraps it nicely with available polythene papers and rugs. Once this is done, the placenta bundle is then carried outside the house and buried at a corner behind the house. A TBA respondent explained and later demonstrated how they dispose the placenta. She explained that a hole two feet deep is dug site in the compound behind the house. Once the hole is excavated and soil removed, the wrapped placenta is respectfully placed and carefully buried. The placenta is placed at the bottom of the hole without any religious or traditional rituals. Placenta is then covered with the overburden which is compressed down to make sure that the soil is compact to make it difficult for predators to unearth and devour. Respondents were asked why the hole has to be two feet in depth to which they stated that it ensures the placenta is deep enough to avoid any foul stench as well as ensure it is safely away from reach of animals. Asked why they bury at a corner behind the house, a TBA respondent stated that it is to ascertain no one tramples over the burial site. They explained that placenta is a part of human body and must be respected so its burial site has to remain undisturbed. One TBA showed and demonstrated the burial process where by a Virtual reality video has been produced to that effect.

The study probed respondents further as to why it is significant for the placenta to be buried at home. They maintained and repeated that placenta is part of human body and flesh and should be treated with respect. One man asserted that *'we are not dogs or animals, we are human beings, and just like you can't cut off your hand and throw it to dogs, the same applies to the placenta'*.

They stated that whether a woman delivers in hospital or home, the placenta should be buried within the compound to symbolize that the child belongs to the particular homestead and community at large. However, the pregnant women said they ensure the placenta is buried because it is part of their body and that they don't know of any other significance other than they have to emulate their ancestors who have buried placenta from time immemorial.

Men seemed to have more information as to why Somali community bury their placenta. Those shows the extent to which men in this community are custodian of religion and culture. They stated that burying placenta is a directive from prophet Mohamed found in the Holy Quran, 20:55 which states that it is from the (earth) they were created and to it shall they return. The placenta, being seen as part of a woman's body, it is thus buried as instructed by the Holy Quran. They further explained that placenta should be buried to prevent an evil eye or a witchdoctors who may wish to steal it for evil purposes such as to curse the family.

## 2.6 Conclusion

From the above findings, it is clear that like other communities, placenta is seen as a live giving organ that should be respected. As much as they bury the placenta, it is clear that Somali community has their own unique way and reasons of disposing placenta. It is clear that different cultures have a history of burying placentas, burning or consuming them. They also have specific rituals and reasons for the practices. To the Somalis, placenta place of burial is the homestead not anywhere else. To them, burying placenta is a directive from Allah through the teaching of prophet Mohamed a fact that should be respected.

## 2.7 Recommendation

Based on the finding of this study which shows the importance of placenta to Somali community and that it is one of the puss factors away women from seeking assistance in health facilities. Since placenta also gives children a sense of belongingness to the household and community, the hospitals should:-

1. Draw insight from privates hospitals and encourage childbirth plans including decision on placenta
2. Make provisions for mothers who give birth in hospital to leave with the placenta
3. Ministry of health Train nurses on methods of placenta handling and disposal which is glaringly lacking in their curriculum which a unit dealt with in details in public health training. Yet, they are the ones directly dealing with clients.
4. Ministry of health to include psychology, gender and anthropological units in the nursing curriculum and training to enable nurses and doctors appreciate diversity of cultures and their practices as well as give hospitals a human face.

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