

Nurturing the Mother and Her Newborn during the Postpartum Period In the Andes Mountains of Ecuador

by Joyce Gallardo

Wherever a baby is born — in a brightly-lit, shining hospital, in the dimness of thatched hut, under an open starry sky, in the mother's bed — it is the mosaic of faces, voices, and hands that receive him that are the first messages about the world he has been born into. Some cultures have encoded the behaviors and attitudes that, from the moment of birth provide for a healthy, nurturing and protective environment for newborns through the wisdom of long-practiced traditions.

Babies born in the Highland region of Ecuador are nurtured and protected from the day of birth by a custom known as *la dieta*. This tradition surrounding the postpartum period guides the care of new mothers and their infants. *La dieta* provides a complete “script” for the actions of the immediate family. It is the responsibility of the mother's female kin and her husband's female kin to nurture the new mother and assume her household tasks, permitting her to turn her full attention to her child. Mother, mother-in-law, sisters, sisters-in-law attend to her, cook for her and bring her gifts of food from their own kitchens.

Both mother and child are secluded and nurtured — protected from the noise and busy-ness of everyday life — by remaining indoors for forty-two days after the birth. *La dieta* provides a respite that is mutually nourishing for mother and child. The mother rests in bed with her child close by and is freed from daily tasks. During nursing and care activities, with no need to hurry and no other distractions, her movements can be slow, deliberate and gentle. She can be focused and fully present to the baby's needs. Relationship develops between mother and child during nursing and care activities.¹ These forty-two days of social and environmental seclusion allow a time in which an intimate, bonding relationship occurs.

La dieta, literally translated, means “the diet,” but its customs prescribe far more than a regimen of preferred and tabooed foods. Sexual continence is the rule. Abstinence from sexual relations is thought to ensure a good supply of breast milk. The light of the sun must be avoided by remaining indoors for forty-two days — one and a half lunar cycles. A description by Ecuadorians of one of the seclusion's desirable outcomes is: the faces of the new mothers at the end of the *dieta*, pale from staying indoors, are said to resemble the moon in beauty and whiteness.

It would be difficult to imagine a new mother in our culture remaining indoors with her infant for forty-two days. In our “modern” world, just a few days after giving birth, many new mothers, with their baby in tow, are shopping in malls, “running” errands, walking in the park. Our newborns experience a very different world from the world of the newborn in Ecuador.

In Ecuador, windows are covered and, if possible, a canopy is hung over the bed. As the sun is seen as an active pathogenic force during this period, the bodies of mother and child are carefully shielded from its light. The new infant's exposure to pathogens is reduced by limiting their social and environmental contacts. People who have been out-of-doors are discouraged from visiting. The sun's burning power might be transferred from their bodies to those of the secluded pair. Exposure to the sun produces a gripe-like illness in new mothers, whose bodies are viewed as excessively “hot,” but its effects are worse for infants. Women say the sun “burns” the milk in their breasts. When the baby suckles the “burned” milk, the infant becomes feverish and (possibly) fatally ill. These effects can be neutralized by expressing some of the breast milk before nursing.

Furthermore, women symbolically assume the status of children. For the first three days postpartum, their bodies are tightly wrapped from buttocks to breasts, so that they resemble the swaddled infants who lie beside them. This is done in order to “realign their bones” and to strengthen their bodies, which have been weakened by the “opening of the bones” during childbirth. Proper wrapping of the mother is also thought to delay another pregnancy. When the wrapping is removed, women are dressed in heavy clothing and their heads are covered with shawls that can be pulled across their faces if they wish.

Diet is also important. Consumption of the appropriate foods returns a new mother to health and helps her to produce nourishing breast milk. Everyone who cooks for her knows what the prescribed foods are and strict adherence to the diet is expected. All women in Ecuador, in general, are artful cooks and know how to cook for health. One always feels well-nourished eating food prepared by Ecuadorian women. Chicken soup is considered the most nourishing dieta food. Other thicker, delicious soups made with quinoa, barley, oats or rice are also eaten, as well as creamy coladas, soups made from grains that have been ground into flour.

At the end of la dieta, women are bathed in water boiled with herbs, perfume, and a cup of milk, or with the petals of three white roses. For mothers of first-borns, this signals their entry into true adult status. But for all mothers, it marks their re-integration into the social world with new tasks and responsibilities to manage.

Today, many women in Ecuador are permitted only a “minimum dieta” of eight to fifteen days by their husband and kinswomen, as our modern world is becoming less generous with time. Yet, even if shorter in length than the traditional forty-two days, la dieta requires that mothers receive special attention and treatment that otherwise might not be granted. Research shows that by eight days, mothers and infants established ways of interacting that tend to endure and to color their future relationship.²

The wisdom of this tradition enhances the quality of life of mothers, infants, and, ultimately, Ecuadorian family and social life. Given this sheltered time of seclusion, mothers are able to nurture and care for their babies out of a place of deep instinctual “knowing.” The mother’s usually busy hands can now tend solely to the care of the newborn. “Hands constitute the infant’s first connection to the world (outside of nursing). . .that a different picture of the world an infant receives when quiet, patient, careful, yet secure and resolute hands take care of her than when these hands are impatient, rough or hasty, unquiet and nervous.”³ The mother knows how “sensitive” newborn babies are and, therefore, carefully protects the development of the infant’s bodily senses in these early days of life.

One of the many fruits of providing a peaceful, secluded environment for the mother as well as for the newborn during postpartum can be a firm foundation for the healthy development of the basal or bodily senses, those of life, touch, movement and balance. “. . .(T)he infant must have continued reinforcement of its own heart from the mother’s heart. The stabilizing influence of her electromagnetic field, as well as her heart’s sound waves and other heart signals are critical to the infant’s development.”⁴ Research indicates that when infant and mother are close to each other, their heart-brain frequencies are synchronized. Stress occurs when they are separated for a time and the heart-brain frequencies of both infant and mother become incoherent, out of synch.⁵

Thus, the well-being of the mother, as well as the sense of life of the newborn is enhanced by the closeness and constant presence of the mother during la dieta. Her quiet, gentle hands and movements enhance the infant’s sense of touch, movement and balance. These basal senses in turn provide the fertile soil upon which the higher social senses of language, thought, and ego will mature.

At a bodily level, through the senses, the child learns capacities for the virtues of the soul. Out of the healthy development of the bodily senses in the earliest days of life, the child can develop social capacities necessary for relationships with others in later years. A healthy sense of life lays the foundation for the social virtue of tolerance, a community-building capacity. From a healthy sense of touch will come interest, caring concern for others, and ultimately, the social attitude of the feeling of brotherhood. The capacities acquired through the sense of movement will give the child a sense of orientation, of life direction, and ultimately, the ability to form relationships. A respect for human dignity in the form of the sense of justice unfolds from our nurturing of the child’s sense of balance. “A capacity for compassion and the sense of justice are the two moral-social capacities related to the motion-and balance-sense complex. . .just as tolerance and caring are related to the life-and touch-sense complex...these are the four aspects of what the Christian ideal resolves into one and calls love of one’s neighbor.”⁶

With a deeper awareness of the profound significance that the protection of the bodily senses during the first days of life has for the whole of life comes the realization that we are touching the very core of what it means to be human. This is the great secret of the senses.⁷ What a gift we could give to mothers and their newborns in our midst by drawing from the wisdom of the human custom of *la dieta* to create our own unique, individual version of postpartum care here in the U.S. The positive health-giving effects of this humane tradition, coupled with a heightened awareness of the importance of protecting and nourishing the basal senses, would surely serve to enhance and enrich the quality of life of mothers and infants, and ultimately, our family and social life in North America.

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¹ Emmi Pikler, *Peaceful Babies—Contented Mothers*, Hungary: 1969.

² M. Richards and J. Bernal, “An Observational Study of Mother-Infant Interaction,” in N. Blurton-Jones, ed. *Ethological Studies of Child Behavior*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 176.

³ Emmi Pikler, *ibid.*

⁴ “Unfolding Childhood’s Magic,” An interview with Joseph Chilton Pearce in *Lilipoh*, Winter 2004.

⁵ Joseph Chilton Pearce, *ibid.*

⁶ Henning Kohler, *Working with Anxious, Nervous, and Depressed Children*. AWSNA Publication 2001, p. 116.

⁷ Cheryl Sanders, *Introduction to Our Twelve Senses, Wellsprings of the Soul*, Dr. Albert Soesman. Glos., England. Hawthorne Press, 1990.