ABSTRACT: Culturally determined patterns of behavior associated with placenta disposal are characteristic of many modern and ancient societies. This paper defines this type of placenta disposal as a ritual event that delimits a "portion of reality"; explanations are provided leading to the conclusion that placenta rituals operate as anxiety releasing mechanisms that provide a means of control over the future health and welfare of mother, child, and community. The question of why the placenta figures so prominently in folk beliefs and practices has previously been attributed to its morphological and physiological properties; this paper argues that attributes associated with it from a psychosocial model are equally important. The data for this study were drawn from a compilation of ethnographic reports of post-partum practices in African, Asian, European, and Latin American societies. Additional information on placenta disposal was derived from interviews with 1,859 Peruvian informants. Analysis of the data obtained from the Peruvian studies show a significant difference between rural and semi-urban patterns of placenta disposal.

The sharply defined prescriptions attached to placenta disposal have been mentioned in ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts as far removed in time and space as ancient Egypt and contemporary South America. In them the placenta is variously described as a source of illness as well as a means of prevention and cure; it is, at times, considered as a seat of sympathetic magic capable of posing a threat to child, mother, and community. The operant factor of these beliefs is that the placenta is thought to be forever joined to the fate of the infant with whom it shared the maternal womb. Leach (1950: 24–25) concludes that what becomes of the afterbirth either influences or determines the whole life-story of the child. It is variously believed to embody his own soul-substance or his guardian spirit, to be either his brother, twin, or actual double, or to be so mystically and inseparably connected with him that its treatment or fate will shape his skills, luck and fate.

It is quite remarkable that in spite of the wealth of lore associated with the placenta little attention has been given to exploring the psychosocial implications of placenta rituals as they operate within the dimensions of the birthing event. This paper explains that beliefs and practices associated with the afterbirth are effective for two reasons. In a general sense, they operate as ritual behavior because they define a portion of reality; more specifically, they are effective because they function as anxiety releasing mechanisms restoring the social and biological equilibrium disrupted by the birth process.

The sensation of mystery and wonder at birth and pregnancy do not correlate with greater or lesser degrees of technological advancement. Pregnancy and birth are conceived as anxiety provoking events in technologically complex Western cultures as well as technologically less advanced non-Western societies.
One of the differences between the perception of the birthing event between Western and non-Western peoples is the point at which the anxiety built up during the nine months of pregnancy is released. Among most Western families, anxiety over the welfare of mother and child is relieved immediately after the birth of the baby. In contrast, among many traditional non-Western social groups the release of anxiety is postponed until the placenta is delivered; and only after the placenta has been properly disposed of can a mother feel assured of her own and her infant's future well-being.

My interest in exploring the rationale behind placenta beliefs and practices arose during a study of medical conservatism conducted in Peru during 1981. The study randomly surveyed a sample population of fifty women living in small rural communities near the city of Otuzco located in the northern highlands and fifty-two women living in a semi-urban setting, a pueblo joven (squatter settlement) on the outskirts of the north coastal city of Trujillo. The objective was to find the extent to which urbanization effects the maintenance of traditional medical beliefs and practices. It was found that even though exposure to an urban environment lessens participation in traditional beliefs and practices, individuals raised in rural settings maintain their traditional patterns of health care even after many years of permanent residence in a pueblo joven (Davidson 1983a). Questions concerning the placenta were included in the survey instrument because other studies (Kelly 1955: 112–113; Gutiérrez de Pineda 1955: 43; and Wellin 1956) found that anxiety over placenta disposal is one of the factors determining the utilization of rural health facilities. During the survey informants were asked to describe the methods used for placenta disposal in their family; they were also questioned about their knowledge of placenta beliefs. The survey found that 88% of the rural sample dispose of the placenta by either burying it or placing it in the water of a fast flowing stream. In contrast 49% of the semi-urban sample responded that they used traditional methods to dispose of the placenta. In reply to questions aimed at finding the extent of their knowledge of placenta beliefs 90% of the women surveyed in the rural area were familiar with them compared to 49% of the semi-urban sample. Informants were also asked to explain why the placenta was treated with such regard. The routine answer was that it was customary, or that these practices were done in order to protect the infant and mother from harm. When pressed for additional information, the usual reply was that nothing more was known. Fortunately, the survey sample included a forty-five year old woman who explained that:

When a woman is pregnant she carries within her body two lives—the life of the baby and the life of the placenta. When the baby is born the placenta must be immediately buried. If not it will be jealous of the attention paid to the baby. It will take revenge on the mother and cause an epidemic in the village. For this reason, after a birth the father must