

Indigenous Mothers: An Ethnographic Study of Using the Environment during Pregnancy

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ABSTRACT ‘Pregnancy’ and ‘giving birth’ are socio-culturally constructed and regarded as critically important events in a (married) women’s life. Within many sub-Saharan African communities, children are valued and considered as ‘agents’ who serve to continue the genealogical lineage of the parents. However, the Mpondo women believe public knowledge of their pregnancy increases their (and their unborn child’s) vulnerability from spirits and witchcraft, and in turn shun the potentially supportive help of birthing attendants. Through participant observations and in-depth interviews with the amaXhosa Mpondo women, the paper applies an ethnographic lens to how pregnancy and birthing is conceptualised, constructed and enacted within the community. The paper shows that such a construction and the ritual enactments around pregnancy and birthing point to the Mpondo’s deeply embedded metaphysical beliefs that govern understandings of good health and ill health.