

Understanding African Indigenous Approaches to Reproductive Health: Beliefs around Traditional Medicine¹

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KEYWORDS Pregnant. Hegemonic. African. Women. Narratives

ABSTRACT Illness and health is more often than not, embedded in a matrix of cultural beliefs and is often more than about simply *'being ill'* or *'being healthy'*. The cause of the 'ill health' may also be located in social and spiritual realms, so that ethnomedical aetiology may include witchcraft and sorcery, and 'attack' by familiars or malevolent spirits. In many communities, constructed understandings of the body and health, for oneself, as well as that of the unborn child, extend back inter-generationally, and point to wider understandings of the (cosmological) world and how the individual is 'located' within this world. Likewise, with many categories of peri-urban and rural African communities, there is an entrenched belief that a pregnant woman and her unborn foetus can be protected from harm, and reproductive health can be promoted by turning to traditional health practices. This paper examines one particular traditional practice; that of offering a decoction known generically as *isihlambezo* in *isiZulu*, meant to aid in the delivery of a healthy baby. The paper works through qualitative data gathered from a sample group of pregnant women and traditional healers (*sangomas*), and probes the popularly constructed meaning of the decoction or *isihlambezo*. The narratives of the *isiZulu* participants around *isihlambezo*, in turn reveal that a complex web of beliefs cohere around understandings of reproductive health and the well-being of the unborn child. These narratives additionally problematise what appears as the hegemonic positioning of the western biomedical discourse which appears to 'push' the faith and reliance on indigenous herbal remedies underground, thus rendering its use somewhat invisible against the more visibly championed western reproductive health care and prenatal medicines.