

Cultural Practices: Pregnancy & Birth - Part 2

Dear Friends,

In last month's article (April) I began telling you about the importance in Ghanaian culture of a young married couple to become pregnant within their first few years of marriage. Once the wife was pregnant and soon to deliver, she would go to stay with her parents, or her in-laws to receive help in getting ready to deliver her child. She will remain there until she delivers, and depending on the new young couple's circumstances, she might stay there up to three months after the baby comes, before returning to her marital home.

When the new wife gets to her mother or in-law's home, she will be expected to commit herself to drinking locally made concoctions and other herbal treatments, all intended to make her strong & healthy (and the baby in her womb as well). This is the traditional set up that represents a modern prenatal environment in a clinic or hospital. She will depend solely on the experiences and skills of the elderly women in the home and community, particularly the "native midwife". The alternative, modern option of visiting a clinic or hospital, and being cared for by nurses and doctors, is now being recommended by health authorities (even though the woman would have to be moved to a town that had these facilities). In more remote areas, we have Family Health Workers who are mobilized to go out to such places and care for the expectant mother.

When the child is born in the typical traditional home, no other person apart from those closest to the young mother, are permitted to see the baby until eight days after the child's birth. It is the local belief that 'evil eyes' and other malevolent spirits could do something bad to the new baby. The new baby would thus be closely guarded and kept from public access. After the eighth day, plans are put into place to bring the child out and give the child a name. This ceremony is known as 'Outdooring'. It is a huge and significant occasion for the parents of the new baby. It's an opportunity whereby friends & family are invited to participate, involving some amount of festivity & making merry to celebrate with the new parents. It is the first naming and Outdooring by the new parents and the significance on them is taken seriously.

Preparations preceding this ceremony involve the careful choice of a befitting name for the child. Typically Ghanaian children, apart from being identified by relevant names of the Day of Birth, are given special names as well. The child may be named after a grandparent or other family member of repute. You could say the name of any person must be a worthy name, so it has to be vetted. The belief is that the child would receive the attributes of the person whose name is chosen and accepted, and may become like him or her.

On this special day, the ceremony is done early in the morning, before 7:00am, or if a little later, still early morning is preferred. When the audience is ready, the eldest man, often the family head, or the father of the new baby, would have the baby in his arms and do the naming. On the table in front of the eldest man will be two cups containing liquids. One will have water and the other alcohol. As he calls out the baby's name, he will dip a finger in the liquid, and touching the lip of the child, he would say, "If you say water, it's water". This will be repeated three times. The same will be done with the alcohol. The importance of this is to have the child grow up demonstrating truthfulness and integrity. This ceremony is a traditional setting, so there will not be any baptism, even if the baby's parents are church-goers. The baptism will come later, where they will specifically request this and have it done on another occasion.

The ceremony will continue with the new parents being given advice on parenting and also they will be given gifts, most of which are for the baby. The ceremony will come to a close with some eating, drinking and merry making.