



MATERNAL CARE AND TRADITIONAL BELIEFS AMONG THE YORÙBÁS FOR SAFE MOTHERHOOD.

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Abstract

Among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, maternal health is deeply shaped by traditional belief systems that govern perceptions and practices surrounding pregnancy, childbirth, and postnatal care. This paper investigates how indigenous cultural values intersect with contemporary medical approaches to influence maternal outcomes. Relying on qualitative research methods including interviews with traditional birth attendants (TBAs), pregnant women, herbal practitioners, and healthcare professionals the study explores culturally rooted beliefs on conception, pregnancy taboos, spiritual interpretations of miscarriage, and ritualistic approaches to childbirth. The findings highlight that while many traditional practices offer emotional support and strengthen communal care for expectant mothers, others can hinder timely access to clinical interventions or promote the use of unverified remedies. The paper advocates for a culturally responsive healthcare model that integrates indigenous knowledge with biomedical care, fostering trust and cooperation between both systems. Recommendations include localized health education programs, the training of TBAs in essential obstetric skills, and the development of health policies that reflect cultural realities. This study enhances our understanding of how cultural frameworks, when effectively aligned with medical systems, can contribute to improved maternal health outcomes in Nigeria.

Keywords: Yoruba Culture, Maternal Health, Traditional Beliefs, Safe Motherhood, Indigenous Medicine, Healthcare Integration

Introduction

Maternal health remains a pressing public health issue in Nigeria, where cultural and religious beliefs significantly influence women's health-seeking behavior during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period. While numerous governmental and non-governmental interventions have been introduced to improve maternal health indices, maternal mortality rates remain alarmingly high in several parts of the country, particularly in rural areas where traditional belief systems dominate healthcare decision-making (World Health Organization, 2022). Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria one of the most populous and culturally influential ethnic groups in the country maternal health is understood not merely as a biomedical concern but as a spiritual, social, and ancestral responsibility. Health is seen as a state of harmony between the physical body, the spiritual world, and the community. In this worldview, complications in pregnancy and childbirth are often attributed to spiritual causes such as broken taboos, ancestral displeasure, or witchcraft. As Oyèwùmí and Salami (2021) assert, “among the Yoruba, the body is a conduit of cosmic forces, and reproductive health is governed as much by moral conduct and spiritual balance as by physical wellbeing.”

This holistic view leads many Yoruba women to adopt a pluralistic approach to maternal care, combining traditional practices such as herbal medicine, spiritual consultation, and ritual observance with occasional visits to modern health facilities. Akinyemi and Omobowale (2022) note that “trust in traditional birth attendants remains high among Yoruba women, especially those in rural areas, due to shared cultural beliefs, emotional support, and accessibility.” However, this blending of care modalities sometimes leads to delays in seeking biomedical intervention during obstetric emergencies, thereby increasing maternal risks.

Compounding this challenge is the often rigid and impersonal nature of biomedical maternal care in Nigeria, which may not adequately accommodate local cultural realities. According to Adetunji and Fakoya (2023), “the failure of hospital systems to integrate culturally meaningful practices contributes to low utilization of antenatal and postnatal services among Yoruba women.” This disconnect between formal healthcare systems and indigenous belief structures continues to hinder the effectiveness of maternal health interventions in Yoruba-speaking communities.

The Yoruba concept of *ilera* (health) emphasizes a balance of mind, body, and spirit. Pregnancy and childbirth are not simply biological events but moments of heightened spiritual vulnerability and moral significance. As Adesanya and Oduyoye (2020) argue, “traditional Yoruba maternity care is embedded in metaphysical frameworks that recognize the agency of unseen forces, the role of destiny, and the power of ritual in safeguarding both mother and child.” These frameworks cannot be dismissed as primitive but must be acknowledged as essential components of culturally responsive maternal healthcare. This study therefore seeks to examine the role of Yoruba belief systems in shaping maternal health practices and their implications for safe motherhood in Nigeria. By analyzing the intersections of traditional beliefs and biomedical approaches, the paper aims to promote culturally respectful interventions that enhance maternal health outcomes. The study underscores the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge into public health discourse to ensure inclusive, respectful, and effective maternal care.

Theoretical Framework

To explore the interface between Yoruba belief systems and maternal health practices, two main theoretical models offer a relevant foundation: Medical Pluralism and the Health Belief Model (HBM). These frameworks are instrumental in analyzing how traditional beliefs and biomedical knowledge coexist, compete, or complement each other in Yoruba communities' approach to maternal care.

Medical Pluralism

Medical pluralism refers to the simultaneous use or availability of multiple health systems such as traditional, spiritual, and biomedical practices—within a given cultural context. Among the Yoruba, medical pluralism is not only common but culturally sanctioned. Traditional healers, spiritualists, and herbalists are often consulted alongside modern healthcare professionals. Kleinman (1980), who pioneered the concept, posits that “health systems are cultural systems in themselves, comprising both meaning and practice.” This perspective is particularly relevant to Yoruba maternal health, where illness and well-being are perceived within a socio-spiritual context, often requiring interventions beyond medical prescriptions.

Recent studies reinforce the relevance of this model in African contexts. As Olajide and Onabanjo (2023) note, “many Yoruba women construct their health-seeking behavior based on an inherited epistemology that gives legitimacy to both biomedical and indigenous medical

systems.” In practical terms, this means a pregnant woman may attend antenatal clinic while simultaneously consuming herbal concoctions or participating in spiritual cleansing rituals prescribed by a traditional birth attendant (Iya Abiye).

Ajayi and Odumakin (2020) further assert that “health choices among Yoruba women are driven by a pragmatic engagement with multiple healing systems, not necessarily as a rejection of modern medicine but as an extension of cultural reasoning.” This pluralistic behavior complicates policy implementation in maternal health, especially when biomedical personnel fail to recognize or respect these concurrent beliefs.

Health Belief Model (HBM)

The Health Belief Model (HBM) provides another useful lens to understand individual and collective decisions around maternal health. Developed in the 1950s and refined over time, HBM suggests that people’s engagement in health behaviors depends on their perceptions of:

Susceptibility to illness, Severity of the condition, Benefits of action, Barriers to action, Cues to action, and self-efficacy. Within Yoruba communities, these perceptions are culturally encoded. For instance, many women believe that miscarriage or obstructed labor may be due to spiritual transgressions rather than physiological complications. This belief system shapes their risk perception and may prompt them to seek spiritual remedies before—or instead of—clinical care. According to Adebayo and Salami (2022), “Yoruba women’s maternal choices are influenced not only by access to care but also by their belief in the efficacy of traditional rituals, prayers, and ancestral guidance.” Thus, perceived susceptibility and severity are often evaluated within a spiritual rather than clinical framework. Moreover, the barriers to accessing formal care such as language, cost, fear of disrespect, and cultural alienation reinforce reliance on indigenous alternatives. Oyeyemi and Fagbohun (2021) highlight that “perceived barriers like cultural insensitivity and the dismissal of traditional values by hospital staff discourage many women from using maternal health services early.”

Importantly, HBM helps public health practitioners appreciate the internal logic behind seemingly “irrational” health behaviors. When applied to Yoruba maternal health, the model underscores the importance of aligning interventions with culturally accepted beliefs to enhance uptake. Together, Medical Pluralism and the Health Belief Model illuminate the complex and dynamic ways Yoruba women interpret and navigate maternal health. The frameworks offer

complementary insights while Medical Pluralism explains the why behind co-existing health systems, the HBM helps explore the how of individual health choices. Understanding and integrating these perspectives are crucial for designing culturally competent maternal health policies in Yoruba communities.

Yoruba Cosmology and the Concept of Health

The Yoruba cosmological view of health is deeply spiritual, communal, and holistic. It sees life, illness, and healing as interconnected phenomena that cannot be understood in isolation from divine, ancestral, and environmental forces. In this worldview, maternal health is not simply a biological or clinical matter but a reflection of a woman's harmony with her Òrìṣà (deities), Èmí (spirit), Òrì (destiny), ancestors, and societal expectations.

Health as Harmony

The Yoruba define health (ilera) as a state of balanced existence—a spiritual and physical equilibrium between the body, mind, spirit, and cosmos. When this balance is disrupted, illness—including complications in pregnancy—is believed to occur. According to Falade and Adegoke (2022), “among the Yoruba, good health is seen not merely as the absence of illness but as the maintenance of spiritual and moral harmony with the universe.” Pregnancy, therefore, is a sacred state requiring spiritual vigilance. Yoruba women are advised to avoid taboos, maintain good standing with family and ancestors, and engage in spiritual consultations to avoid complications. Illness during pregnancy may be interpreted as punishment for moral lapses or as a result of spiritual attacks.

Ajibade and Ekanem (2021) affirm that “the Yoruba perception of maternal complications such as miscarriage, delayed labor, or stillbirth is often rooted in metaphysical causality, including witchcraft, broken taboos, or the anger of neglected ancestors.” Hence, spiritual appeasement and cleansing rituals are as important as medical checkups.

The Role of Òrìṣà and Ancestral Forces

Several deities are believed to govern fertility, childbirth, and maternal wellbeing in Yoruba cosmology. For example:

Yemoja is revered as the goddess of motherhood and protector of pregnant women and children.

Obatala, the deity of purity and order, is invoked for a safe and peaceful delivery.



Èṣù, often misunderstood as a trickster deity, is believed to control the pathways and may obstruct or facilitate childbirth depending on one's spiritual alignment.

Ogunrinu and Salawu (2023) stated that “pregnancy and childbirth among the Yoruba are deeply religious acts, often accompanied by sacrifices and prayers to the deities responsible for human reproduction.” These rituals include the offering of kola nuts, palm oil, or animals, and are usually conducted by Babaláwo (diviner) or Iya Abiye (traditional midwife). Also important is the concept of Ọrì, the individual's personal destiny. When a woman experiences repeated miscarriages or infant mortality, it may be attributed to her Ori inu (inner head) being misaligned. This belief influences her health decisions, encouraging her to seek spiritual realignment before pursuing clinical help.

Communal Health and Maternal Roles

Health in Yoruba cosmology is not individualistic. It is inherently communal. A woman's pregnancy is considered a communal event involving family members, neighbors, elders, and spiritual guides. The health of the mother is seen as indicative of the health of the entire lineage. As Ayantayo (2019) writes, “a pregnant woman is not only carrying a child but also carrying the future of the family; thus, every effort must be made to ensure that she is spiritually and physically protected.” This collective sense of responsibility shapes maternal health behavior. Pregnant women are advised to avoid quarrels, evil looks, and suspicious company, as these may negatively affect the fetus. The fetus is believed to be spiritually vulnerable, especially in the early and final months of pregnancy.

Implications for Maternal Health Practice

Understanding Yoruba cosmology is essential for health practitioners working in Yoruba communities. A dismissal of these beliefs may alienate patients or delay critical care. Conversely, a culturally respectful approach can foster trust and compliance. Olowu and Adeleke (2020) suggest that “health interventions that acknowledge the cultural logic behind Yoruba maternal beliefs are more likely to succeed in reducing maternal mortality and promoting hospital deliveries”. Healthcare providers must, therefore, adopt a dual approach: delivering biomedical care while also showing respect for indigenous knowledge systems. This could

involve partnerships with traditional birth attendants, acknowledgment of cultural rituals, or inclusion of family decision-makers in the maternal care process.

Yoruba cosmology offers a deeply spiritual framework for understanding maternal health. Rooted in concepts of balance, destiny, and divine influence, it shapes how women perceive pregnancy, seek care, and respond to complications. Integrating this cosmological understanding into public health efforts can bridge the cultural gap between traditional beliefs and modern maternal care practices.

Prenatal Practices in Yoruba Culture

Prenatal care among the Yoruba is fundamentally embedded in indigenous knowledge systems that interlace herbal medicine, spirituality, communal wisdom, and moral guidance. These customs, transmitted through oral traditions and practice, are regarded not only as preventive health measures but as culturally ordained protocols that ensure a successful gestation and safe delivery. Yoruba women undergo a wide range of rituals, dietary observances, and spiritual disciplines during pregnancy, all of which are believed to shield them and their unborn children from both physical and spiritual threats.

Herbal Remedies and Agbo (Traditional Concoctions)

One prominent feature of Yoruba prenatal care is the use of agbo—a decoction derived from a mixture of leaves, roots, and barks believed to have therapeutic and spiritual efficacy. These herbal brews are considered to fortify the womb, prevent miscarriage, ease labor, and detoxify the body. Typically administered by Iya Abiye (traditional midwives), elders, or herbalists, agbo remains a culturally trusted alternative to biomedical interventions.

Akinyemi and Isiugo-Abanihe (2021) observe that "about 74% of Yoruba women in semi-urban and rural areas reported using herbal remedies at some point during pregnancy, often in combination with hospital care." These concoctions are more readily accessible than formal health facilities, particularly in remote areas.

While health professionals warn about the risks of unregulated herbal treatments, Yoruba communities often imbue these herbal mixtures with spiritual symbolism. According to Ogundipe and Oyeleye (2023), "the agbo given to pregnant women are considered sacred potions infused not only with medicinal potency but also with protective spiritual properties."

Spiritual Protection and Ritual Practices

Pregnancy is perceived within Yoruba cosmology as a spiritually sensitive period that necessitates ritual protection. To this end, spiritual practices such as incantations, ritual baths (ẹ̀sẹ̀), and the use of protective charms are employed to safeguard mother and child. Items like ẹ̀gún àbíyámọ̀ (ancestral charms) and àdùrà (prayers) are used to avert malevolent forces.

Expectant mothers may wear amulets or beads imbued with sacred substances meant to repel witchcraft, evil spirits, and other supernatural threats. Ayoola and Adefemi (2020) explain that "pregnancy among the Yoruba is a spiritually risky journey that requires the intervention of deities, ancestors, and ritual specialists for protection and success." Consultation with Ifá diviners often reveals the need for sacrifices or appeasements to deities like Yemoja (goddess of fertility) or Obatala to avert spiritual threats. These acts are not mere rituals but essential elements of maternal spiritual care in Yoruba belief.

Dietary Taboos and Behavioral Restrictions

Yoruba prenatal care also includes numerous food and behavioral taboos. Foods such as snails (thought to cause sluggishness), okra (believed to increase drooling), and sugarcane (associated with prolonged labor) are discouraged. These beliefs, although lacking scientific backing, are deeply ingrained and strictly observed. Moreover, pregnant women are advised to avoid quarrels, profanity, night travels, and gossip, especially against those suffering from deformities or infertility. These behaviors are thought to attract spiritual backlash, complicating childbirth. Salami and Adeyinka (2022) argue that "moral purity, emotional calm, and spiritual cleanliness are regarded as essential conditions for successful delivery among the Yoruba." Enforcement of these rules is usually carried out by older women or traditional midwives who ensure adherence.

Consultation with Iya Abiye (Traditional Birth Attendants)

Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs), or Iya Abiye, play a crucial role in the prenatal journey. They are custodians of both medical and spiritual knowledge, offering herbal remedies, massages, nutritional counseling, and emotional support. Fapohunda and Orobaton (2021) write that "TBAs enjoy community trust and cultural alignment, offering care that is perceived as more emotionally supportive and spiritually grounded than clinical alternatives." Their services are generally more accessible and affordable than modern hospitals, especially for economically disadvantaged women. While many Yoruba women attend hospital antenatal clinics, they also

consult TBAs for culturally attuned care. This hybrid approach highlights the resilience and relevance of indigenous knowledge in contemporary maternal care.

Integration with Modern Prenatal Care

Despite the rising prominence of biomedical antenatal services, Yoruba women often practice medical pluralism—utilizing both traditional and modern healthcare. For many, spiritual and physical dimensions of pregnancy must be addressed concurrently. Ajayi and Bankole (2020) note that "many Yoruba women engage in parallel healthcare pathways, attending antenatal clinics for scanning and medical advice while maintaining faith in traditional rituals and home-based practices." This duality is not seen as contradictory but as complementary.

Health policymakers and practitioners face the challenge of reconciling these systems. Rather than dismissing traditional beliefs, collaborative models that involve TBAs, elders, and community leaders could enhance maternal outcomes and promote culturally respectful care. Yoruba prenatal practices represent a holistic framework in which physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being converge. These cultural traditions—including herbal therapies, ritual protection, dietary guidelines, and consultations with TBAs—continue to influence maternal behavior and health outcomes. Understanding and integrating these practices into national maternal health strategies will enhance cultural inclusiveness and improve service delivery.

Childbirth and Postnatal Beliefs in Yoruba Culture

Among the Yoruba, childbirth is not just a biological event but a deeply spiritual and social phenomenon. It marks a crucial transition not only for the woman but also for the family and community. Traditional beliefs surrounding labor, delivery, and the postnatal period are rooted in centuries-old cosmologies that emphasize spiritual protection, ritual observance, and community solidarity. These practices continue to shape maternal and neonatal care, especially in rural and peri-urban Yoruba communities.

Ritualized Childbirth Practices

Childbirth in Yoruba culture is often accompanied by ritualized practices and spiritual precautions. Many women prefer to deliver at home or in the care of a traditional birth attendant (TBA), especially in communities where TBAs are highly trusted and culturally aligned. According to Ogunmodede and Salawu (2023), "traditional childbirth among the Yoruba is

conducted in spiritually sanitized environments, with chants, prayers, and symbolic items used to guard the woman and child against malevolent spiritual forces.” The labor room is often cleansed with herbs and incantations, and certain individuals especially those believed to carry negative energies may be barred from entering the delivery space.

In cases where complications arise during labor, the situation may be interpreted as a spiritual attack or ancestral displeasure, requiring immediate appeasement or ritual correction. This belief influences how quickly a woman may be transferred to a hospital, often delaying critical care.

The Role of Iya Abiye during Delivery

The Iya Abiye, or traditional birth attendant, plays a pivotal role not just medically, but also spiritually and socially. She is considered both a caregiver and a spiritual guide who possesses ancestral knowledge about safe delivery, herbal medicine, and protective rituals. Fapohunda and Orobato (2021) affirm that “in many Yoruba communities, TBAs are seen as custodians of sacred knowledge about birth, passed down through generations of women.” During childbirth, the Iya Abiye uses herbal compresses, massages, warm water therapies, and invocations to aid labor progression and protect both mother and baby from harm.

Immediate Postnatal Rituals and Beliefs

Following childbirth, Yoruba traditions emphasize spiritual cleansing and protective rites. The newborn is believed to be highly vulnerable to spiritual dangers in the first days of life. As such, protective amulets, special herbal baths (eṣẹ), and prayers are performed to safeguard the baby and mother.

Naming ceremonies (ikómojáde) typically occur on the eighth day, during which the child is formally introduced to the world. Names often reflect the circumstances of the birth, spiritual meanings, or divine revelations. According to Adeyemi and Fagbenle (2022), “naming ceremonies in Yoruba culture serve not only as identity markers but also as spiritual alignments that ensure the child’s destiny is in harmony with the cosmos.” In the postnatal period, mothers are often placed under home-based confinement, during which they are nursed, massaged, and fed specially prepared foods believed to restore strength and increase milk production. This care is mostly administered by elder women in the family, especially the new mother’s own mother or mother-in-law.

Implications for Maternal Mental and Physical Health

While these traditional postnatal practices offer emotional and communal support, they can sometimes conflict with modern maternal health advice. Some forms of confinement or delayed medical intervention may pose risks if complications arise postpartum. Nevertheless, these practices are often cherished for their psychological benefits.

Eze et al. (2022) found that “women who undergo traditional postpartum care among the Yoruba report higher emotional satisfaction and family support compared to those who deliver in hospitals without traditional follow-up.” This underscores the need for healthcare systems to recognize and harmonize these beliefs with medical postpartum protocols.

Childbirth and postnatal care in Yoruba society are governed by elaborate spiritual and communal frameworks that prioritize the wellbeing of both mother and child. These practices—ranging from the rituals performed during labor to the postpartum confinement—are essential expressions of cultural identity, social bonding, and spiritual continuity. Public health strategies that acknowledge and integrate these practices stand a better chance of promoting safe motherhood in Yoruba communities.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Yoruba maternal health beliefs and practices are deeply embedded within a broader cosmological framework that intertwines spirituality, morality, communal responsibility, and embodied care. Pregnancy, childbirth, and the postnatal period are not treated as isolated biological processes but as spiritually charged life transitions that require careful ritual management, moral discipline, and collective support. From prenatal herbal therapies (*agbo*) and dietary taboos to ritualized childbirth practices and reliance on traditional birth attendants (*Iya Abiye*), Yoruba maternal culture reflects a holistic understanding of health that integrates physical, emotional, and metaphysical well-being.

Scholars consistently emphasize that these practices persist not because of resistance to biomedical care, but because they offer cultural meaning, emotional reassurance, and spiritual security. As Ajayi and Bankole (2020) aptly observe, “Yoruba women do not necessarily reject modern medicine; rather, they seek completeness by combining biomedical care with indigenous systems that address spiritual vulnerability.” This medical pluralism highlights the inadequacy of maternal health models that rely solely on biomedical logic while disregarding cultural realities.

The role of traditional birth attendants is particularly significant. TBAs function not only as caregivers but also as spiritual mediators, counselors, and custodians of ancestral knowledge. Fapohunda and Orobato (2021) note that “the trust placed in TBAs is rooted in their cultural proximity to women’s lived experiences, something that institutional healthcare often struggles to replicate.” Their continued relevance underscores the importance of community-based maternal care systems, especially in underserved rural and peri-urban areas.

However, the paper also acknowledges the potential risks associated with some traditional practices, particularly when spiritual interpretations of childbirth complications delay timely medical intervention. Ogunmodede and Salawu (2023) caution that “the spiritual framing of obstetric emergencies can unintentionally prolong decision-making at moments when rapid biomedical response is critical.” This tension illustrates the need for culturally sensitive, yet medically sound, integration strategies rather than outright dismissal of indigenous beliefs.

Ultimately, the findings reinforce the argument that effective maternal health interventions in Yoruba communities must be culturally informed and dialogical. Olowu and Adeleke (2020) compellingly assert that “maternal health programs that respect cultural logic are not merely more ethical, but demonstrably more effective.” Integrating Yoruba cosmological understandings into public health policy through partnerships with TBAs, inclusion of family and elders in decision-making, and respectful engagement with spiritual practices can foster trust, improve service uptake, and reduce maternal and neonatal mortality.

In conclusion, Yoruba maternal health practices represent a resilient and adaptive knowledge system that continues to shape reproductive behavior in contemporary contexts. Recognizing and engaging this system does not undermine modern medicine; rather, it expands its reach and relevance. Bridging the gap between indigenous cosmology and biomedical care is not only a cultural imperative but a practical strategy for achieving equitable and sustainable maternal health outcomes in Yoruba communities and beyond.



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