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African traditional practices and their public health implications

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Abstract

Background: Health and culture of the people are interwoven; the latter is a determinant of the former. Culture dictates the behavior and belief of people, hence in Africa; there are several traditional practices with various health implications. These doctrines thrived in Africa continent due to dearth of in-depth studies on the health impacts of the abhorrent practices.

Objective: To analyze the health effects of Africa traditional practices and beliefs on the with a view to identifying the responsible factors for their choices in making it part their lifestyle during the need of medical care and treatment.

Methods: This study was a review of previous studies on traditional practices and beliefs in Africa. Ten traditional health practices affecting mostly women and children were reviewed with emphasis on public health implications of each to ascertain if they are to be encouraged or annulled.

Results: A summary of the review shows that most of the practices and beliefs may have negative effects as their effects are not scientifically supported.

Conclusion: To address the public health issues regarding unsafe traditional health practices for women and children in Africa, it is imperative to consider why some women subscribe to the unsafe health traditions. This allows for determination of measures and practices to encourage for behavioral change wheel.

Keywords: Practices, Traditional, Beliefs, Implications, Health

Introduction

Africa is a continent with diverse and unique cultural heritage, this is displayed in their socio-economic and family structures with numerous effects on the wellbeing of her populace ^[1]. As reported by Jimoh (2018) their cultural practices such as mutilation of women's genital organs, forced marriages, early motherhood as well as male children preferences are held tenaciously by African, though some of them contravene the human rights of its indigenes ^[2]. Nigeria is a major player in the African culture and traditional inclinations having the Igbos, Yorubas and Hausas among its over 250 ethnic groups ^[3].

Vaughn (2009) posited that these beliefs and culture plays vital role on healthcare seeking behaviors of the people, their beliefs about illnesses, and management, as well as wellbeing practices ^[4, 5]. Africans have a belief that ancestral spirits are a significant part of one's existence, that offending these ancestors could predisposes one to illness or death; this belief is innate among African traditional believers, even amongst Christians and Muslims as well ^[5].

When reflecting on causation of illnesses, manifestations of disease and pain, the provision of healthcare and treatment, modes of treatment, healthcare education and awareness, cultural beliefs is a major factor ^[6]. Iyalomhe (2012) is of the opinion that in Africa when people decide on their wellbeing, they may risk inference from the influence of past and present experiential beliefs and how they affect life generally ^[7].

Method: This review therefore narrates 10 discretionally selected health practices and posits their public health perspectives to advance health concerns of harmful practices.

Positive and harmful cultural practices with public health impacts

Compulsory rest and provision of native delicacies for nursing mothers

Studies had it that in Nigeria and other African countries, there is a bonding period between the mothers and their babies that also serves as recovering moments from the toils from child delivery; it is a 12 week maternity for all workers (8). Traditionally, this is a period, the

woman who newly put to birth are fed with local foods high in protein, mineral and vitamins to facilitate quick recovery, hormonal balance, energy boosting and enhance exclusive breastfeeding of the baby for at least 6 months^[9, 10]. Wray (2018) supported above practice by stating that this helps them to achieve adequate sleep and rest as a result of the exhaustion occasioned by childbirth labour and inadequate sleep when caring for the new-born^[11]. This is also a rich cultural practice among the Ishans and Urhobos, in the Southern part of Nigeria, where women after delivery are compulsorily made to rest (traditional maternity leave per se), where their daily chores are shared amongst the women of their age group.

Public Health Implication: Rest after delivery is good for the mother and helps the production of breast milk, nutritionally excellent for the child, rest helps the mother to also quickly regain lost strength during pregnancy and delivery^[12]. Breastfeeding practice helps in prolonging the time the women will get pregnant because during breastfeeding the woman is unlikely to ovulate, so this naturally helps for child-spacing and family planning method^[13, 14]. The WHO (2024) advised mothers who have delivered to eat special diets and this is a good practice that needs to be encouraged and sustained since this helps to promote healthy lifestyle and aids in disease prevention^[15].

Early marriage of the girls

Early marriage is a peculiar undertaking amongst the rural dwellers in Nigeria, dominantly in the Northern part of the country, where 48% of females between 15-24 years are involved in wedlock before they are 18 years in Africa^[16]. Kizilhan (2017) opined that forced marriage is a marriage constrained through coercion and constraint, and stressed that it by and large planned and arrangement by the guardians compulsorily made their own girl-child to wed against their will^[17]. Agege (2018) reported that 43% of girls got lured into marital union before 18 years and 17% are wedded before 15 years of age in the sub-Saharan Africa, stressing that child marriage is a violation of human rights of the girl-child and also robs them of their childhood entitlements, education, and future aspirations^[18].

Public Health Implications: According to Malhotra (2010), child marriage have numerous unwanted end result health effects on women, these are high probability for sexually transmitted diseases, cancers, dying during child-birth among others^[19]. In addition, being intentionally pregnant when unmarried may result in rejection of the girl by parents and peers^[20]. Studies further highlighted that child marriages result in various unsafe conditions and exposures such as domestic violence and of dehumanization to the females folks compared to their males counterparts, others include pregnancy and childbirth complications such as Vesico-Vagina Fistula (VVF) and death during delivery^[21, 20].

Female Circumcision/Male Circumcision:

Brains (2019), reported that it is a universal occurrences that male child is circumcised according to their tradition, religion, culture and race with social class, personality, attractiveness, capacity to sexual satisfaction and hygienic factors undertone^[22]. Traditionalists in Nigeria endorsed this practice in women and view it as a pre-requisite rite into that guaranteed cleanliness or better marriage^[23]. Studies revealed that female circumcision, refers to all procedures that involve partial or total taking away of the external

female genitalia, without any tangible health benefits to the females though it is highly practiced in Nigeria and other African countries; Nigeria is ranked as the world's 3rd highest country this is practised, whereas within the country, the rate of FGM practice is 41%^[24, 25].

Public Health Implications: The WHO posited that customs/practices that allow excision and/or injury to healthy female reproductive organs is a violation of female bodies but recommends that it allowed among males as a preventive measures in places where there are high incidences of HIV^[26, 27]. It worrisome to note that FGM results in adverse health outcomes, including long-term complications that impact on physical, mental, sexual well-being of females, thus such practices are unacceptable, regardless of who performs them^[21, 15], the other adverse health impacts of female circumcision are infections, difficulty urinating and menstrual flow, pain, infertility, and complications during parturition^[22].

Denying children some local foods: Traditional settings in some rural areas in Nigeria, forbids kids eating meat and eggs, they only feed on carbohydrates due to food restriction during illness, false beliefs with vicious cycle of undernourishment and inability to withstand diseases as the attendant effects^[29]. The reason for this belief and traditional practices which plays essential role in food acceptance, makes them have the opinion that children will become thieves, witches/wizards, etc., if they consume such foods at infancy or during childhood^[29].

Public Health Implications: According to Mahmood (2012), family is pivotal in indoctrinating infants and children's adherence to healthy food choices and healthy eating habits; aiming at dietary health promotion and education^[30, 31]. It is prudent to know that denying the infant access to highly nutritional foods can lead to serious health issues such as kwashiorkor^[32]. Studies have shown that children in families that are food unsecured in forms of unavailability or denial, are prone to illnesses, recover slowly when sick, suffer poor health outcomes, and are hospitalized frequently; because food insecurity in children often leads to iron deficiency problem and other nutritional problems such as skeletal compactness^[32].

Neonatal Cord Care: Abua (2023) reported that one of the leading causes of new-born infant death under 1-month-old is neonatal sepsis, that could ensued during the severing of the umbilical cord of the new-born with dirty or contaminated equipment^[33]. In Nigeria and other African countries, during home delivery, the umbilical cord of the newly born is sometimes cleaved with unsterilized razor blade or any other sharp instrument and treated with different herbal substances^[34]. At times the severed stump of the cord is covered with native concoctions several times until the stump falls, without cognisant to the neonatal morbidity and mortality due to neonatal infections including tetanus^[35].

Public Health Implications: According to Mullany (2007), significant infection occur during home delivery in a dirty environment attended by unqualified birth attendants under sub-standard delivery procedures and practices (36). The WHO endorses clean and dry cord for new baby in health facilities and at home to lower neonatal mortality using chlorhexidine solutions^[37]. The use of such agent could help curb the application of harmful traditional substance

such as cow dung in the treatment of cord stump because this obsolete practice exposes the new-born to infection that can lead to death^[38].

Febrile Convulsion Management in Children: Studies have shown that in Africa, seizure due to elevated temperature in child under 5 years is mostly caused by severe malaria, but the traditional management and understanding about malaria is often related to culture, and can affect the timely and efficacious management of it^[39, 40]. Ofovwe (2002) reported that in some rural areas in Nigeria, when a child fits or convulses due to hyperthermia, they are often placed near the fire or wrapped in thick clothes, or the whole body is rubbed with oil with the aim of treating the cause of the fever^[41]. Subsequently, to manage the seizures traditionally, some herbs are roasted and squeezed into the eyes of the child and even kerosene as well with erroneous belief that the seizure be averted^[41].

Public Health Implications: It is expedient to note that febrile seizure usually occurs when child's temperature is above 38°C^[42]. Febrile seizures, have good prognosis but are associated with a high frequencies of complications and deaths in Africa and other countries due to crude methods in managing it^[43]. Application of force to a child who fits can further increase the temperature, breaks the teeth, blindness and suffocates the child, instead it is paramount to ensure hydration by persuading the infant to take water and recommended medicines^[42].

Breast flattening/ironing: This is one of African customs practiced by the Gildas in Cameroon, it involves rubbing or pounding the girl's breasts with heated spatulas and pestles among others, in order to flatten the developing breasts^[28, 29]. This is a harmful practice is majorly executed on girls and women in some localities in south of the Sahara Africa^[46]. According to African Health Organization (AHO) (2019), breast ironing affects 3.8 million women globally^[45]. This is also carried out with the aim of delaying the first sexual encounter by making their bodies not appealing, prevent juvenile pregnancy and sexual molestations^[47].

Public health Implications: According to African Health Organization (AHO) (2019), breast flattening is extremely hurtful; make girls feel ashamed of their bodies and can cause tissue damage with breast cancer, cysts, depression, and interfere with breastfeeding as possible complications^[45]. The AHO (2019) also argues that breast ironing exposes the woman to many health problems that include cancer, abscesses, itching, discharge of milk, dissymmetry of breasts, cysts, breast infections, fever, tissue damage and disappearance of one or both breasts^[45]. While Gil (2019) reported the practice as child abuse with gradual and subtle negative outcomes on psycho-social wellbeing^[48].

Virginity testing: This is an African traditional practice where a virgin women are subjected, or forced to undergo a test to determine if she has had sexual coitus^[49]. In communities such as KwaZulu Natal, South Africa and Swaziland, it is sometimes done on school-aged girls with the intention to discourage sex before marriage and reduce HIV prevalence^[50]. The WHO, notes that virginity testing lacks scientific rationale, damages and infringes on female rights and privacy^[51]. Crosby (2019), also note that this test that involves physical examination of the hymen, to determine if there has been vaginal intercourse is based on erroneous premise that penile penetration results in

observable changes in vaginal introitus, with reference to the shape and appearance of the hymen^[52]. It has been noticed that in some cultures, to be a virgin is a crucial social norm and sexual purity thus an honor to the female, her family and community^[53].

Public Health Implications: Virginity exam has been known to result in remarkable negative emotional consequences such as intense anxiety, culpability, mortification, depression, loss of self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, powerlessness, humiliation, and panic^[54]. Crosby (2019) also posited that a lost maidenhood comes with some psychological effects such as distress, rejection, suicide, weakened self-confidence, apprehension, loss of respect and dislike to the girl by the community^[52]. This practice also violates the individual's physical integrity, autonomy, and privacy especially when performed without consent^[55].

Grieving and Mourning by a Woman: As posited by Ayebare (2021), cultural beliefs, religious and socio-cultural practices affect outcome of bereavements of a loved one such as a child, spouse, or very close family member's demise (56). Such belief has made some to feel less for a grieving person especially the women failing to realise that everybody have different levels of threshold when suffers a loss and that each person's grief style is both personal and unique^[57]. Studies have shown that the magnitude of deprivation is determined by some factors such as anticipated or sudden death, the role/position of the dead in the family, age and status of the dead^[58].

However, there are variances with respect to gender from one country or tribe to another; whereas the male mourners are more comfortable with losses and are treated with respect during bereavement, the females are with levity and ignominy^[59], these include being made to bath the dead, stay with the corpse, shaving her hairs, eating with unwashed and broken utensils, prohibition of bathing period and wearing of dark or black clothes for a specified period of time^[60]. In the eastern part of Nigeria, the widow is made to carry out some process of cleansing such as having sexual intimacy with the custodian of a deity after her husband demise because she is deemed to have been defiled by the death of her spouse so as to weaken or wall off the late husband's spirit^[61]. No wonder Eknunkunbor (2014) averred that apart from the upsetting experience by a mourner in some cultures, the widows are forced to start a new life entirely different from what they were used to due to the demise of their husbands^[62].

Public Health Implications: In some part of Nigeria, while the dead is yet to be buried, the family members often subject the widow to various kinds of ill-treatment, discrimination and stigmatization; even prevention from inheriting her husband's land and other properties^[63]. The loss of a spouse is seen as one of the most distressing experiences in life, in the immediate period following the loss, there is an increased risk of illnesses and deaths among the widows^[64]. Studies revealed that grief leads to adverse effects on wellbeing and compromised immunity stemming into infection, misery, consternation, suicidal tendencies and actions, physical illness, and post-traumatic stress disorders^[65]. It is also vital to note that the agony of losing a spouse or partner impacts not only on emotional and psychological aspects, but it affects the physical health as well^[66].

Drinking of Cow Urine to treat poison and convulsion:

In some African countries, suspected cases of poison are traditionally managed using cow urine as a preparation for the treatment ^[67]. This is a common traditional rehearse among the Yorubas in Nigeria ^[68].

Public Health Implications: Studies have shown that though cow urine may have some medicinal benefits, it loses its usefulness and sterility once it is out of the body of the cow rendering it tainted, yielding microbes and toxic to human body ^[69, 70]. Elegbe (1977) recorded that urine therapy is argued as alternative therapy in some parts of the world, and that there are various antibiotic resistant microorganisms that can be acquired via intake of cow and human urine ^[67].

Conclusion

Managing of diseases among children using customary means is common in Africa, so, any other practices which are dangerous to humans should be abolished. It is essential to know that changing or modifying an age-long tradition is challenging, especially those with culturally believed repercussions. Therefore, it is germane to ask, why do Africans hold on to traditions and customs that are unsafe and harmful? What measures do we have available to tame these obnoxious exercises? Efforts must be directed towards overhauling the mindset about the acclaimed benefits of these deleterious customs and their sources must be expressly examined. The dependence on good traditional practices may be good but knowledge on better medically proven alternatives are acceptable to dispel the fears of repercussions for deviations from traditional norms are necessary to provide the ability, motivation, and opportunity to foster behavioral change wheel.

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