

April 2015 #58

A Day in the Life ...

Cultural Practices: Pregnancy & Birth - Part 1

Dear Friends,

The last two articles introduced you to the cultural (Ghanaian) way of contracting marriage, particularly among the people called the AKANS, the ethnic group that the people of Akrampa belong to. Now I'd like to talk to you about the next stage, pregnancy, and birth of the first child to the newly married couple.

For the average Ghanaian woman, the two most significant events in her life that she desires, barring any misfortunes, are marriage, and a baby within the first two years of marriage. In the traditional setting, parents, family and friends would begin 'pestering' the young woman, asking for the reason that she was not pregnant within the first two years of marriage. Also, the parents, family and friends of the young man would begin to wonder if the woman was barren. Until the recent 'miracle' of modern medical science, if a young woman wasn't seen to be pregnant shortly after being married, she was assumed to be incapable of bearing a child, and that could be sufficient enough reason to divorce her (in extreme cases). Or it might be cause for the man to marry another woman in addition to the first, so that she would give him a child. In more modern times, the number of men opting for a second wife has gone down severely.

In the past, it was never in the mind of anyone to suspect that the problem of being unable to have a baby could come from the man as well. It was always the woman who was faulted when they could not become pregnant within 2 years. In extreme cases the expectation is extended to 5 years, but at that point people would be spreading gossip about her, even that she may have an evil spirit in her life and in her family, that prevents her from becoming pregnant. They would speak poorly of her family also.

When the troubles began, the understanding husband, and both families, would begin to consult with the traditional herbalists to get treatment for the woman so that she would become 'fertile'. When it became really difficult, mediums may be consulted to see if there was a spiritual reason. Sacrifices to the household gods and other divinities would be done on behalf of the woman. The woman would have to submit herself to the treatment, even if the means and mode may appear dehumanizing. In modern times, scientific, medical treatment has been added to this, by those that can afford it. Unfortunately, if the man divorces her for failing to give birth, no man may ever ask for her hand in marriage. Sadly, the better of the two evils, would be to get pregnant and lose your child at birth, than to never bear a child.

When the woman does get pregnant, it is expected of the husband to send her to her parents, or to his parents, to take care of her. The idea is that the parents have the experience and therefore have the requisite knowledge to impart to the young woman. It becomes a training period for her. In some situations the young woman will go to the parents' in the third to fourth month for a short visit, and then return to her husband's house. Then she will go back to the parents' in the seventh month and stay till term. During this period of pregnancy, she is excused from doing anything that might put her in danger of losing the baby. She is well fed and even 'pampered', all for the purpose of keeping her healthy and strong to be ready for the delivery.

In recent, modern times, even though the woman would be attending clinics to monitor her pregnancy, and very likely deliver at the hospital, the parents and elders at home ensure that she commits herself to all other home-based care and treatment. Statistically, about 25% of pregnancies are delivered at home, handled mainly by trusted old maidens or by trained traditional midwives.

Blessings - Pastor Ben