



# The Knowledge, Beliefs, and Practices of Allandale Village Regarding Women's Reproductive Health: A Community-Based Study



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## ABSTRACT

This study explored African indigenous knowledge, beliefs, and practices regarding reproductive health among women in the Mpumalanga province of South Africa. Women's sexual and reproductive health in many African indigenous communities, such as Allandale village, is an ongoing sensitive issue that is difficult to discuss in many contexts. As such, information, knowledge, and practices relating to women's reproductive health are shrouded in obscurity through religion, tradition, and culture. The study argues that little or no logical information exists on women's reproductive health written from an African Indigenous perspective. The study used the Afrocentricity theory to explore traditional medicine and its impact on rural women's reproductive health. The study adopted the qualitative research design since it sought to understand the knowledge that was within Indigenous communities. The study findings provided a panoramic view of an exhaustive contextual analysis of reproductive health issues from an indigenous perspective. Most respondents perceived Indigenous knowledge practices as efficacious in the preventive, promotive, and curative aspects of reproductive health, with some key testimonials undergirding these views. The centrality of taboos, herbs, ceremonies, rituals, and observance of social norms demonstrated the vantage point that indigenous knowledge occupied as it straddled the physical, biological, social, and spiritual aspects of diagnoses, prognosis, treatment, promotion, and prevention of reproductive maladies that affected women. Based on the findings and conclusions, this study proposes the adoption of an African Indigenous Knowledge Framework on women's reproductive health. The study advances culturally sensitive health interventions by revealing how spiritual and cultural beliefs influence decisions about reproductive health.

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## INTRODUCTION

Women's reproductive health is a critical component of Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS), particularly in rural and underprivileged areas where there may be restricted access to official healthcare services. Inadequate health education, restricted access to contraceptive treatments, high maternal mortality rates, and deeply ingrained cultural and traditional beliefs that affect health-seeking behaviors are just a few of the reproductive health issues that rural women in South Africa continue to encounter.

Social, economic, and structural disparities that disproportionately impact women in rural communities exacerbate these difficulties. Like many South African rural communities, Allandale Village is distinguished by its heavy reliance on traditional health practices and IKS. Reproductive health in these contexts is frequently influenced by cultural norms, taboos, and customs that are passed down through the generations, in addition to biological information and in underprivileged areas where there may be restricted access to official healthcare services. Inadequate health education, restricted access to contraceptive treatments, high maternal mortality rates, and deeply ingrained cultural and traditional beliefs that affect health-seeking behaviors are just a few of the reproductive health issues that rural women in South Africa continue to encounter. Social, economic, and structural disparities that disproportionately impact women in rural communities exacerbate these difficulties.

Like many South African rural communities, Allandale Village is distinguished by its heavy reliance on traditional health practices and indigenous knowledge systems. In these contexts, cultural beliefs, taboos, and customs that are passed down through the generations frequently regulate reproductive health in addition to biological information.

Reproductive health is widely recognized as a global health priority, with particular importance for women's well-being due to its connection to childbirth and maternal health. Patel and Inhorn define reproductive health as an inclusive framework covering maternal and child healthcare, family planning, infertility, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), postnatal care, and related health concerns.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Rashid underscores that reproductive health entails the right of women and men to the attainment and realisation of safe, efficacious, reasonably priced, and appropriate-standard fertility regulation methods, as well as suitable healthcare services to ensure successful pregnancies and deliveries.<sup>2</sup> Thus, comprehensive reproductive healthcare encompasses family planning, fertility management, disease prevention, and a range of reproductive health choices. This study investigates and evaluates the Allandale Village community's reproductive health practices, cultural beliefs, and local knowledge, with an emphasis on how these affect women's reproductive health choices and results.

In many African countries, adolescent marriages and pregnancies remain prevalent, making reproductive health a critical issue, particularly for women. Reports indicate that several key health indicators for women in Africa fall short of global standards. According to, high maternal disease burdens, heavy reproductive demands, low utilisation of family planning services, poor nutritional status, and lower life expectancy evidence this.<sup>3</sup> Various socio-cultural, political, religious, geographical, and demographic factors significantly influence women's reproductive health in different contexts.

Traditional medicine constitutes a substantial part of reproductive healthcare among African women. It is widely used for contraception, conception, abortion, breast cancer treatment, and menstrual regulation, among other reproductive health concerns.<sup>4</sup> This reliance on traditional medicine is not unique to Africa but is particularly evident in South Africa. Historically, before the introduction of Western medicine, indigenous healing practices were the primary form of healthcare in African communities.<sup>5</sup> Despite the increasing use of modern medical treatments, traditional medicine continues to be a trusted healthcare option for many indigenous communities in South Africa. The World Health Organisation describes traditional medicine as:

“Health practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plant, animal and mineral based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises, applied

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<sup>1</sup> Vikram Patel et al., “Gender Disadvantage and Reproductive Health Risk Factors for Common Mental Disorders in Women,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 63, no. 4 (April 1, 2006): 404, <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpsyc.63.4.404>; Matthew R Dudgeon and Marcia C Inhorn, “Men’s Influences on Women’s Reproductive Health: Medical Anthropological Perspectives,” *Social Science & Medicine* 59, no. 7 (2004): 1379–95.

<sup>2</sup> T. Rashid, *Contested Representation: Punjabi Women in Feminist Debate in Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Mohd Nizam Ab Rahman et al., “Engineering Students towards Entrepreneurship Awareness,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Accounting, Finance and Management Sciences* 2, no. 4 (2012): 272–82.

<sup>4</sup> Marlise Richter, “Traditional Medicines and Traditional Healers in South Africa,” *Treatment Action Campaign and AIDS Law Project* 17 (2003): 4–29.

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organisation, *Investigating Mental Health. Department of Mental Health and Substance Department* (Geneva: World Health Organisation, 2008).

singularly or in combination to treat, diagnose and prevent illnesses or maintain well-being.”<sup>6</sup>

Mararike emphasizes the deep-rooted connection between traditional medicine and African heritage, customs, and values, which explains its continued preference among rural communities.<sup>7</sup> Uddin Further argues that traditional medicine is closely linked to cultural beliefs and taboos, reinforcing its significance.<sup>8</sup> Recognising its importance, the South African government enacted the “Traditional Health Practitioners Act 22 of 2007” and the “Protection, Management, and Development of Indigenous Knowledge Systems Act of 2019,” granting traditional medicine the legal recognition and protection it deserves. As custodians of conventional medicine, traditional health practitioners (also known as traditional healers) profoundly appreciate the socio-cultural circumstances and realities of the communities they serve, earning them respect and trust within these societies. This study is examining how culture and health interact, recording the ways in which cultural norms and beliefs affect reproductive decisions, including the use of contraceptives, menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth. Therefore, the viewpoints of rural women whose experiences with reproductive health are frequently left out of traditional medicine and scholarly writing. Although there are health policies in place, little is known about how they are interpreted and implemented at the village level. The practice of health knowledge in certain social, cultural, and economic contexts is examined in this study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section covers a literature review on reproductive health knowledge, attitudes, and practices, especially in rural and culturally embedded contexts is the goal of this study. In order to place the experiences of women in Allandale Village in context, pinpoint current gaps in the knowledge, and emphasize the significance of culturally responsive approaches to reproductive health, it draws on both local and international studies.

### *Indigenous Knowledge Systems*

Indigenous knowledge systems, which are fundamental to the beliefs, values, and practices of Indigenous communities, are increasingly under threat. Moreover, communities and individuals who have sustained and preserved this knowledge are marginalised. Over time, this erosion will make it increasingly difficult for indigenous groups and knowledge holders to maintain their perspectives, ways of life, and deeply rooted sacred values. Alarming, while this knowledge is often dismissed or discredited, it is covertly exploited by those who oppose it for personal gain, leaving its rightful custodians in economic hardship.

From the outset, it is important to note that there is no single, universally accepted definition of indigenous knowledge. Scholars across various disciplines have proposed different definitions, yet they all converge on a shared understanding of its significance. The standard and recent definitions are noted for this narrative. Thus, IKS are defined as “the complex arrays of knowledge, know-how, practices and illustrations that direct human societies in their immeasurable interactions with the natural environment.”<sup>9</sup>

Indigenous knowledge (IK) as a discipline encompasses a wide array of definitions, diverse theoretical perspectives, and a historically marginalised status compared to dominant mainstream knowledge systems. It has been described using various terms, including indigenous knowledge systems, indigenous technical knowledge, ethnoscience, local knowledge, traditional knowledge, people’s science, and village science.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> World Health Organisation. (2003). Investigating Mental Health. Department of Mental Health and Substance Department. Geneva: World Health Organisation.

<sup>7</sup> C G Mararike, “Killing in Pre-Colonial Shona Societies,” *Unpublished Interview Held at the University of Zimbabwe on The 22* (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Emaj Uddin, “Cross-Cultural Age Ascription between Muslim and Santal Communities in Rural Bangladesh,” *World Cultures EJournal* 17, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>9</sup> Parrota, J. Yeo-Chang, Y. & Camacho, L.D. (2013). Traditional Knowledge for Sustainable Forest Management and Provision of Ecosystem Services: *International Journal of Biodiversity Science, Ecosystem services and management.*

<sup>10</sup> Oluwayomi David Atte, “Indigenous Local Knowledge: The Key to Local-Level Development.,” 1992.

Although these terms differ in wording, they essentially refer to the same concept, with distinctions largely stemming from semantics. However, closer scrutiny of terms such as “indigenous, traditional, folk, village, or local” reveals an implicit association with stagnation, conservatism, or primitiveness. Mawere highlights that indigenous knowledge systems are frequently viewed as “diabolical, barbaric, and primitive.”<sup>11</sup> These misconceptions need to be addressed, as they diminish the essential role that indigenous knowledge plays in the everyday lives of indigenous communities, as emphasized by Tesfaye and Bahilu Bezabih.<sup>12</sup>

The marginalisation of indigenous knowledge, as reflected in these perceptions, has contributed to its neglect, lack of documentation, and increasing vulnerability to extinction. This further attributes this decline partly to the oral transmission of indigenous beliefs, practices, and experiences across generations, making it susceptible to loss. Furthermore, indigenous education is deeply embedded in taboos, folktales, totems, cultural traditions, and reverence for deities, which often renders it sacred and inaccessible to certain community members and outsiders.<sup>13</sup> As a result, knowledge holders - such as elders and traditional health practitioners have historically served as custodians, responsible for safeguarding, managing, and regulating its dissemination.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, these custodians functioned as the community’s recognized ‘legislative mechanism’ overseeing the governance of indigenous knowledge.

“IKS is dynamic and has enabled the local communities to live in harmony with nature, permitting them to use forest resources sustainably and therefore, it plays a pivotal role in sustainable resource management and utilization.”<sup>15</sup>

Since time immemorial, before the advent and polarisation of modern scientific knowledge, various indigenous communities used, controlled, and managed the “forests and landscapes that sustained their livelihood and cultures without compromising the potential of these ecosystems to provide commodities and services for future generations.”<sup>16</sup> It can thus be observed that the beliefs, norms, customs and values of indigenous communities underpinned in IKS are of their own kind and are significant.<sup>17</sup> Judging from history, one has to admit that these indigenous peoples and/or communities were indeed ‘wise stewards’ in their daily dealings.

### ***African Communities' Cosmological Views and their Understanding of Illness***

The influence of 'religious practices and beliefs' among African people is argued to play a crucial role in their approach to seeking treatment. This is largely because ancestral worship is deeply embedded in the African belief system. Additionally, asserts that the principle of Ubuntu emphasizes interconnectedness among African indigenous communities, viewing an individual as inherently linked to others.<sup>18</sup> Within these communities, ancestors hold a revered status in daily life and are often regarded as ‘the living dead.’ The ancestors hold an essential role in the lives of the living, providing protection and safeguarding their overall well-being.

To sustain a healthy life, it is believed that African communities maintain ‘a symbiotic relationship between the living and the dead.’<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the living honour their ancestors through

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<sup>11</sup> Munyaradzi Mawere, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems’ (IKSs) Potential for Establishing a Moral, Virtuous Society: Lessons from Selected IKSs in Zimbabwe and Mozambique,” *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* 12, no. 7 (2010): 209–21.

<sup>12</sup> Biniam Tesfaye and Bahilu Bezabih, “Indigenous Knowledge and Factors Related to Practices of Forest Conservation among Forest Dependent Communities in the Tocha District Southern Ethiopia,” *Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries* 6, no. 1 (2017): 6–19.

<sup>13</sup> Lee, S. Kugara, “Witchcraft Belief and Criminal Responsibility: A Case Study of Selected Areas in South Africa and Zimbabwe” (University of Venda, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> S.K. Noah, L. Musonda, and W. Wang, “Education for Sustainable Development: Integrating Indigenous Knowledge in Water Sanitation Programmes in Shikumi Community of Chibombo District in Zambia,” *International Journal of Contemporary Applied Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2016): 114–27.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Gyamerah, “The Role of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Pedagogies in Decolonizing and Transforming Mathematics and Science Learning in Ghana” (Queen’s University (Canada), 2024).

<sup>16</sup> John Parrotta, Youn Yeo-Chang, and Leni D Camacho, “Traditional Knowledge for Sustainable Forest Management and Provision of Ecosystem Services,” *International Journal of Biodiversity Science, Ecosystem Services & Management* (Taylor & Francis, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Nelson Chanza and Anton de Wit, “Rediscovering Indigenous Climate Knowledge for Better Responses to Climate Change: Insights from Muzarabani,” *The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses* 6, no. 3–4 (2015): 19.

<sup>18</sup> Astrid Berg, “Ancestor Reverence and Mental Health in South Africa,” *Transcultural Psychiatry* 40, no. 2 (2003): 194–207.

<sup>19</sup> Jabulani Mkhize, “Literary Prospects in ‘post-Apartheid’ South Africa,” *Alternation* 8, no. 1 (2001): 170–87.

rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies, while the 'living dead' provide guidance, prosperity, and good health in return.

It should be understood from the onset that the presence and role of ancestors is sacrosanct and respected amongst African indigenous beliefs and values. In that manner, the ancestors are said to convey and direct the living by means of 'visions, trauancies and dreams'. According to Mbiti, the guidance of ancestors is considered sacred, with the living expected to adhere strictly to their instructions.<sup>20</sup> Triebel supports this by noting that ancestors significantly influence both daily lives and everything of the living.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, any form of neglect or disregard for ancestral guidance is believed to invite misfortune and endanger the lives of the living, particularly their health.<sup>22</sup>

### ***African Traditional Healing***

Before the introduction of Western medicine in Africa, traditional healing was the primary form of healthcare relied upon by African communities asserts that traditional medicine is often perceived by its users as a "panacea for all anathema," reflecting the deep-rooted trust in its efficacy, which is based on generations of experiential knowledge and careful observations.<sup>23</sup> The World Health Organization (WHO) defines traditional healing as:

"The total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on theories, beliefs, and experiences Indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness."<sup>24</sup>

This definition highlights the comprehensive nature of traditional healing, which extends beyond biomedical practices to include spiritual dimensions of health. Unlike Western medicine, traditional healing draws upon spiritual realms to diagnose and treat illnesses. Mokgobi explains that traditional healing incorporates substances derived from plants, minerals, and animals to promote healing.<sup>25</sup> Traditional health practitioners may blend spiritual treatments with herbal remedies to diagnose, treat, and prevent illnesses, while also ensuring the overall well-being of their patients.

The term "traditional healing" is often used to distinguish it from mainstream biomedical practices. However, emphasizes that these healing methods are culturally specific and vary across different communities.<sup>26</sup> A defining feature of African traditional healing is its foundation in African spirituality and religious beliefs. Mbiti further explains that many African communities believe in a supreme deity who grants wisdom and healing abilities to chosen individuals, often referred to as "living dead" or ancestors.<sup>27</sup> These ancestors then call upon specific individuals, who are trained to become traditional health practitioners, to serve their communities, suggesting that both practitioners and their patients often perceive traditional healing as an effective medical system that has contributed to the development of modern medical care, warranting greater recognition.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike Western medicine, becoming a traditional health practitioner is not a voluntary career choice but rather a spiritual calling passed down through ancestral lineage.<sup>29</sup> Traditional healers practice

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<sup>20</sup> John Mbiti, *African Concept of God* (London: SMC Press, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> Johannes Triebel, "Living Together with the Ancestors: Ancestor Veneration in Africa as a Challenge for Missiology," *Missiology* 30, no. 2 (2002): 187–97.

<sup>22</sup> Mkhize, "Literary Prospects in 'post-Apartheid' South Africa."

<sup>23</sup> Berg, "Ancestor Reverence and Mental Health in South Africa"; M. G. Mokgobi, "Views on Traditional Healing: Implications for Integration of Traditional Healing and Western Medicine in South Africa" (2012).

<sup>24</sup> World Health Organisation. (2003). *Investigating Mental Health*. Department of Mental Health and Substance Department. Geneva: World Health Organisation.

<sup>25</sup> Mokgobi, "Views on Traditional Healing: Implications for Integration of Traditional Healing and Western Medicine in South Africa."

<sup>26</sup> Mokgobi, "Views on Traditional Healing: Implications for Integration of Traditional Healing and Western Medicine in South Africa."

<sup>27</sup> J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion (Rev. Ed.)*. ( Botswana: Heineman Educational Publishers, 1991); Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion (Rev. Ed.)*.

<sup>29</sup> Dorothy Bea Akoto, "Hearing Scripture in African Contexts: A Hermeneutic of Grafting," *Old Testament Essays* 20, no. 2 (2007): 283–306.

within a culturally embedded framework, employing African cosmological concepts to promote holistic health.<sup>30</sup>

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Afro-centricity

Lumar conceptualizes Afrocentricity as a framework of thought and action that prioritizes African interests, values, and perspectives.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, he further articulates Afrocentricity as an intellectual movement, a political stance, and a historical evolution that underscores the cultural significance and contributions of Africans. At its core, Afrocentrism advocates for a paradigm shift in global perspectives, emphasizing the importance of African experiences and countering Eurocentric narratives that seek to justify colonisation, distort African contributions to global development, and undermine African epistemologies. This study, therefore, adopted an Afrocentric lens to explore indigenous knowledge, beliefs, and practices related to reproductive health.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the qualitative research design since it sought to understand the knowledge that was within Indigenous communities. Shank defines qualitative research design as,

“... a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning.<sup>32</sup> By *systematic*, he means “planned, ordered, and public”, following rules agreed upon by members of the qualitative research community. By *empirical*, he means that this type of inquiry is grounded in experience. Inquiry into meaning says researchers try to understand how others make sense of their experience.”<sup>33</sup>

The study utilised an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate deeply rooted knowledge, beliefs, and practices related to reproductive health among women in Allandale village. This design was selected to uncover the reasons behind their preference for traditional practitioners in seeking reproductive health care services. An exploratory qualitative approach was chosen as it identifies and describes new observations, particularly in areas where little to no prior research exists or where complex issues are involved. Allandale Village was chosen as the study site. Located within the Bushbuckridge Municipality in Mpumalanga province, Allandale was selected due to its rich presence of traditional medicine and healers specialising in reproductive health.<sup>34</sup> In this study, the population consists of all accessible individuals in Allandale who have knowledge of traditional medicine and its usage.

This research adopted a non-probability sampling approach. The study employed the following non-probability sampling techniques. This technique ensured that participants with knowledge of indigenous reproductive health were specifically identified and included. The Participants were selected through purposive sampling and were asked to recommend others with relevant knowledge, continuing the process until data saturation was reached. The above sampling methods were employed to select the following participants: rural women, traditional health practitioners (such as diviners, herbalists, faith healers, traditional birth attendants, and traditional surgeons), and elderly individuals recognized as custodians of knowledge.

The themes for this study were derived from the research questions.<sup>35</sup> Research questions and emerging themes from data collection were used to shape the thematic analysis.

To uphold ethical standards and protect participants' rights, honesty was maintained by adequately acknowledging the work of other scholars through appropriate citations. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, with their consent obtained verbally and through signed

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<sup>30</sup> Elias Mpofo, Karl Peltzer, and Olaniyi Bojuwoye, “Indigenous Healing Practices in Sub-Saharan Africa.,” *Counseling People of African Ancestry*, 2011, 3–21.

<sup>31</sup> Ranjit Kumar, “Research Methodology: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners,” 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Kumar, “Research Methodology: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners.”

<sup>33</sup> G. Shank, *Qualitative Research: A Personal Skills Approach* (New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> O. Mdhluhi, “An Exploration of Traditional Medicine into the Effects of Reproductive Health of Rural Women in Allandale Village, Mpumalanga Province” (2019).

<sup>35</sup> C. Lankshear, *A Handbook for Teacher Research* (New York: McGraw-Hill International, 2014).

informed consent forms. They were fully informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. The informed consent document outlined the study's purpose and assured participants that their information would not be misused or cause psychological or physical harm. The study was conducted in a safe environment where participants felt comfortable and free from coercion. To ensure privacy, participants were not required to disclose their names, and their responses were strictly confidential. Code names were assigned to protect their identities.

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are discussed below:

### a. Cultural and Spiritual Beliefs

Many participants believe that women's reproductive health issues are closely tied to spiritual and cultural influences, with both local women and community leaders emphasizing the significance of traditional dogmas and practices in fully apprehending these aspects. Thus, as reiterated in this work, African traditional cultures distinguish between naturalistic and impersonal causes (such as infection and organic deterioration) and personal agentic causes (such as a superhuman being).<sup>36</sup>

Infertility and other reproductive health diseases in some Indigenous groups are believed to stem from spiritual causes, such as ancestral discontentment, taboos, or curses. In such instances, individuals often turn to traditional healers for spiritual remedies to restore fertility. In this study, it also emerged that women may marry late in life and attempt to bear children, which was said to reduce fertility naturally.

Women across different age groups and indigenous health care practitioners share unique perspectives on how cultural and spiritual beliefs impact their views on reproductive health, revealing a worldview where health is deeply intertwined with ancestral and spiritual connections. A participant stated:

*"These days, we see young women facing issues we didn't encounter as much when we were young. In our culture, we believe that health problems, especially with fertility, can be signs of a spiritual imbalance or a lack of connection with our ancestors. When a woman struggles to conceive or carry a child, we sometimes see it as a call to make peace with the ancestors. We offer prayers, burn traditional herbs, and ask for guidance. Often, this helps restore balance, and many women have seen their health improve this way."* **Elderly Woman**

The researcher noted the above sentiments by the participant and noted that they underscore the belief in spiritual forces as potential causes of reproductive health problems. She emphasizes that women in Allandale often seek guidance from *sangomas*, or traditional healers, to address issues believed to stem from spiritual disturbances or 'bad energy' caused by evil-doers (witches and wizards).

By using herbal remedies and conducting cleansing ceremonies, the *sangomas* aim to remove what are seen as spiritual blockages that could prevent conception or complicate pregnancies. Her account reflects a widespread trust in traditional healing practices, which are used together with conventional medical treatments for reproductive health in the community.

Agreeing with what was said above regarding spiritual and cultural understanding of diseases, a Traditional healer noted,

*"Our culture teaches that reproductive health goes beyond the physical. A woman who faces difficulties may need to reconnect with her spiritual roots and the spirits of our ancestors. During such times, we turn to rituals and prayers, seeking health and fertility. These practices remind us of our duties to the land and each other, and they strengthen our bonds as a community. As healers, we guide families through these ceremonies, which we believe protect and support women on their paths to motherhood."*

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<sup>36</sup> M. Steyn and A. Muller, "Traditional Healers and Cancer Prevention," *Curationis* 23, no. 3 (2000): 4–11.

In view of the above verbatim response from the traditional healer, the researcher opines that her perspective illustrates the belief that reproductive health is deeply linked to one's spiritual ties with ancestors and community. Rituals and prayers are vital practices that honour the ancestors and seek their support for fertility and healthy pregnancies. As such, these healers play an essential role in conducting related ceremonies, which are seen as ways to not only address reproductive challenges but also reinforce cultural values and community cohesion. For many, these spiritual practices are considered as important as medical treatments, reflecting a holistic view of health that blends physical and spiritual aspects of the Allandale community. As such, this reveals how the people of Allandale approach reproductive health through a cultural lens that integrates spiritual beliefs and traditional practices. They believe that addressing reproductive health challenges involves restoring harmony with ancestors and seeking spiritual balance, demonstrating a reliance on both cultural traditions and spiritual interventions to promote women's well-being.

### **b. Holistic Approach**

One of the emerging themes that came from participants was that indigenous knowledge has a unique way of embracing a holistic view of health. That is, in African traditional medicine, the healer addresses the whole person. Thus, it provides treatment for spiritual, corporeal, mental, and social indications of disease.<sup>37</sup> In the context of women's reproductive health, this implies holistically exploring all possible causes of ailment through visions, medicine, rituals and even massages.<sup>38</sup> This is informed by the fact that in African cosmology, a human being is immersed in elements of nature such as plants, water, and animals, which all have an influence on healthy living. Therefore, to successfully render holistic health care, patients' dogmatic stances and cultural perspectives should be comprehensively assessed.<sup>39</sup> Andam defines holistic development as:

“... [A] process of self-actualization and learning that combines an individual's mental, physical, social, emotional and spiritual growth. The term can be used to describe forms of alternative education that are based on the more humanistic and democratic outlooks. Its premise is that an individual finds purpose and meaning in life through connections to the natural world, the community and through humanitarian values.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite the above definition coined in the study of child growth, it incorporates the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of an individual within the current study. The Allandale community members maintained that a holistic component of indigenous knowledge caters for a comprehensive reproductive health system that is lacking in modern reproductive health care. It was interesting to learn from the traditional health care practitioners and other community members that primary custodians of this knowledge provide care that often centres on the mother's connection to her community and environment. In this way, indigenous knowledge highlights promotive and preventive health practices that come in the form of natural remedies and adjustments of lifestyles that support reproductive health across the life cycle. Below are distinct responses from participants in Allandale village, showcasing different perspectives on reproductive health and the use of indigenous knowledge in their practices:

*“We are taught by our elders to understand our bodies, especially when it comes to fertility. I feel connected to the plants around here; some, like moringa, are always used to cleanse and strengthen our bodies naturally before we even think about having children.”* **Young Woman**

*“Reproductive health is not only physical here; it's emotional and spiritual. My mother taught me to pray and cleanse myself with certain leaves to prepare for the next stage*

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<sup>37</sup> Oluwafemi Omoniyi Oguntibeju, “Hypoglycaemic and Anti-Diabetic Activity of Selected African Medicinal Plants,” *International Journal of Physiology, Pathophysiology and Pharmacology* 11, no. 6 (2019): 224.

<sup>38</sup> Banabothle G. Baakeleng et al., “Indigenous Practitioners' Views on Causes of Female Infertility,” *Health SA Gesondheid* 28 (February 8, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hsag.v28i0.2152>.

<sup>39</sup> Fhumulani M. Mulaudzi and Raikane J. Seretlo, “General Conclusion,” in *Working with Indigenous Knowledge: Strategies for Health Professionals* (AOSIS Books, 2022), 213–15, <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2022.BK296.0c>.

<sup>40</sup> N. H. Andam, “An Exploration of the Holistic Development and Wellbeing of Children at Clouds of Hope Home KwaSani Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal ” (2018).

of life. It's a ritual that helps us feel grounded and connected to the land." **Middle-aged Woman**

"In our village, we rely on the wisdom passed down from our grandmothers. When a woman is having trouble conceiving, we use certain herbs, like aloe, which we believe prepare the womb. We don't need to go far; nature provides everything here for us." **Older Woman**

"My role is to guide women using plants that align with their cycles. We don't force treatments; we work in harmony with what each body tells us. Every plant has a purpose, like African ginger for pain and rosemary for calming the mind. We respect each plant's energy." **Traditional Health Practitioner**

Relating the above verbatim quotes from the participants, one can note that, indeed, indigenous knowledge is linked to the natural environment and cosmos. Women in Allandale find this approach empowering, as it addresses not only fertility and menstrual health but also mental clarity and emotional stability, all of which are viewed as interconnected aspects of reproductive wellness. With guidance on mental health control, using herbal remedies and indigenous rituals, the young women in Allandale are able to see and perceive women's reproductive health as part of their overall emotional balance that enables them to manage stress, anxiety and enhance fertility naturally. Through the way the participants spoke and related their cases, the researcher was able to appreciate the way indigenous knowledge is harnessed in sync with nature, thereby promoting the symbiotic relationship that has long been established.

The researcher also noted how the above view slightly differed from that of elderly women who subscribed to the view that holistic reproductive health practices carry significant cultural and ancestral meaning. The researcher is of the view that this could be attributed to the generation gap that exists between these two groups. The elderly participants were clear that to them, reproductive health transcends mere biological functions but plays a connecting role in establishing a link between the past and future generations. The philosophical underpinning of their intergenerational understanding stems from the view that their physical well-being and spiritual alignment, particularly during menopause, resemble spiritual connotations. As such, most traditional healthcare practitioners in Allandale held the view that the holistic essence of indigenous knowledge grounds foundational issues of wellness.

Moreover, most of these traditional healthcare practitioners strongly believe that reproductive health, especially of women, is strongly connected to the way one eats, their lifestyle, and emotional health. It is because of these that it is critical in their practice to make use of herbal medicines, prescribe dietary regimes and give counselling to women through various stages, mainly through the women's initiation schools and through the wisdom of *hahani* (paternal aunt). However, the researcher learnt that these female initiation schools have become extinct, and this could be the cause of the many reproductive health challenges women currently face. The researcher further noted that such indigenous systems in the stages of life in Allandale ensure that the reproductive health of women is treated as a unitary system, honouring their spirituality while fostering harmony with nature and balance for the women of Allandale.

The foregoing findings endorse the conception that conventionally, African patients seek reasons for illness within the structures of indigenous beliefs, wherein good health is perceived as consisting of not only a physiologically well-functioning body but a holistically effervescent life.<sup>41</sup> Hence, for example, advocates for reproductive interventions that address health conditions from a socio-cultural perspective.<sup>42</sup> Some patients in indigenous contexts believe that socially related phenomena, such as witchcraft, are the cause of disease. Therefore, the priority should be to reverse the sorcery before presenting such conditions to hospitals for modern medicinal treatment methods. The call is for scientists

<sup>41</sup> Daniel A Vorobiof, Freddy Sitas, and Gabriel Vorobiof, "Breast Cancer Incidence in South Africa," *Journal of Clinical Oncology* 19, no. 18; SUPP (2001): 125s-125s.

<sup>42</sup> Duduzile Zwane, "'Our Beauty Is in Our Breasts': A Culture-Centered Approach to Understanding Cancer Perceptions in Kwa Zulu Natal, South Africa," *Qualitative Health Research* 31, no. 1 (2021): 148-59.

(such as botanists) to effectively decipher cultural and language-based descriptions of spiritual, medicinal plant use made by Indigenous peoples. In the process, cultural bigotries should be discarded that prevent comprehensive and integrated understandings of traditional healing methods.<sup>43</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that there should be increased communication and less stigma, and health professionals should be trained on local cultural and spiritual views about women's reproductive health, particularly with relation to concerns like menstruation and infertility. The findings of this study should be used by policymakers to create inclusive and community-specific reproductive health policies that are based on rural reality.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how important it is for women's experiences with reproductive health in rural areas to be shaped by indigenous knowledge systems, cultural beliefs, and community behaviors. The results show that although the community's concept of reproductive health is still largely based on traditional practices, there is an increasing need to close the gap between these practices and biomedical health care. The study emphasizes the value of culturally aware health interventions that uphold regional customs while encouraging access to high-quality care and accurate health information. In order to guarantee that reproductive health services are pertinent, efficient, and empowering, it also emphasizes the necessity of inclusive health policies that take into account community voices, especially those of women. One that improves the cooperation between traditional and modern health systems, encourages health education, and appreciates indigenous knowledge.

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