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Zeutegueu, above center, a healer who lives in Batié, Cameroon, with his family, including two of his three wives. (Photos by Jiro Ose for the International Herald Tribune)

Where traditional customs can mean AIDS

By Elisabeth Rosenthal

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NKOLNDONGO, Cameroon: When Innocent Zamba Manga was born this summer, doctors advised his mother, Marise, who is HIV positive, not to breast-feed, since nursing can pass the AIDS virus from mother to child. Mother and baby left the hospital with bottles and formula, supplied by a Catholic charity.

But that very next week, the proud parents took their baby to the father's village in the south of Cameroon, to take part in a traditional celebration of the birth. Custom required the new mother to nurse little Innocent, which she continued for two weeks.

"Why would you risk his health in this way?" scolded Dr. Suzie Tetang Moyo, on seeing the parents last week at her clinic on a dirt road here, sighing deeply in frustration.

As researchers spend more time studying Africa's overwhelming pediatric AIDS problem, they are finding that the routes of transmission may be different than in the industrialized countries, and that strategies for preventing the disease's spread must be adapted to local realities.

In developed countries, the only real risk factor for children is that they can get HIV from their mothers at birth.

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But here, researchers have come to agree, a host of traditional ceremonies and practices are creating

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transmission routes unique to Africa - dangers that have, up to now, been largely ignored.

There are birth ceremonies, like Innocent's, that may require nursing. But there is also a host of potentially even more hazardous practices in which body fluids of different people are mixed. For example, in scarification ceremonies for ethnic identification and cutting for ritual healing, blades are used in sequence again and again. There is also the practice of communal breast-feeding a single baby by numerous women, common in many tightly knit African villages.

In a country like Cameroon, where more than 5 percent of the population and 11 percent of pregnant women are infected with HIV - the vast majority unknowingly - such practices could lead to a wildfire spread.

"If we are only biology, biology, biology, then we are only doing half of our mission," said Marcel Monny Lobe, director of the new International Reference and Research Center for HIV- AIDS in Yaoundé, the capital. "We need also to do the sociology and anthropology and then make biological interventions."

Researchers here and elsewhere in Africa are just beginning to study the role of these common traditional practices of rural Africa, to determine if they account for a small or large portion of HIV transmission.

But the risk is serious, and small studies in Calabar, Nigeria, have already implicated unsanitary body cuttings and herbal injections of traditional healers in spreading the AIDS disease.

"We don't know enough about this important topic, but there is no doubt that traditional practices are spreading HIV - it's a growing concern," said Dr. Ed Mills, an epidemiologist at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, who has done extensive work in South Africa.

"Unaid has been ignoring it," he said, referring to the UN agency that deals with the disease. "I think it's because people think it's culturally insensitive to talk about. Even if it turns out to be only a minor amount, it's a preventable amount so we really need to address it."

The practices also may explain a mystery that has long perplexed both local and foreign doctors: They kept seeing children with AIDS, who had no obvious explanation for their infections, whose mothers were HIV negative. The children had never had transfusions, where unscreened blood might be blamed.

In Batie, a village three hours from Yaoundé, most people go to both traditional healers and medical doctors, and traditional treatments often involve blades to cut the skin.

On a recent afternoon, Berlin Simeu, a villager, visited the darkened hut of Sop Kamtchewo, a healer, in a ceremony intended to ward off both illness and witchcraft.

With a razor blade that had been wrapped in a sheet of paper, the healer made three short cuts on his patient's body - one each on his wrist, back and shoulder. A fruit was placed on the wounds to draw out any bad influences.

It was unclear how - or if - the blade would be cleaned before its next use.

Yves Moumbe, a doctor in Batie, said that almost all of his patients with HIV went to traditional healers before they saw him.

"It is not clear if they are using any sterile technique at all," Moumbe said. "They don't have much knowledge of HIV and how it is spread. So it could be a serious problem."

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