

Customs and Rites Connected with Pregnancy and Childbirth in a Northeastern Thai Village

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THE village under study is situated between Udorn and Nongkhai in the northeast. The study had its beginning in connection with a UNESCO program related to curriculum changes in primary education made in 1961–62. The pupils in Grade 1 and their parents were the research sample then. Other basic information needed to make a survey of customs and rites connected with pregnancy and childbirth was also provided then. This special area was studied in detail in 1968, in thirty-three of the fifty-two families who were our research sample initially.

In 1978 the pupils from the 1961–62 Grade 1 survey were 24–25 years old. Twenty-seven of these, now married and having borne children, formed the sample for a follow-up study.

This group of young people had grown up during the Viet Nam war, during a period of economic boom in the area, a period of rapid changes and “modernization.”

Only a small amount of the vast data resulting from this longitudinal study can be mentioned here.

THE KHWAN RITES FOR THE PREGNANT WOMAN

It should be kept in mind that the Thai believe in what has been termed a dual soul, “winjan” and “khwān,” and that these souls are of widely different natures. Both are part of man. Indeed, together they are what makes us into human beings, equipped as we are with spiritual essences. According to the villagers the “winjan” leaves man only when death occurs. One is concerned with its fate after death because it is of importance for one’s cycle of rebirths.

The *khwan* also leaves man at death, and is then irretrievably lost, and thus the villagers are no longer concerned about it. In contrast to the *winjan*, however, the *khwan* can leave man at any time throughout his life. There are reasons for this to happen, and there are unavoidable consequences resulting from its departure.

The *khwan* is closely tied to man's well being, his mental condition, strength, will to live and vital power. In Western terms this is the subject realm of psychology.

The *khwan*, or "state of mind," is very easily affected by pregnancy and childbirth, and this is the object of much attention in the village. There is a special *khwan* rite for pregnant women, the *Suu Khwan Maemarn*, which means calling the *khwan* of the pregnant woman.

The declared purpose of *Suu Khwan Maemarn* is to give the mother strength and enable an easy delivery. This is clearly to be understood as "to give her just that peace of mind which is of importance for ensuring that everything will go well." If the woman is well psychologically, she will also feel better physically.

The *Suu Khwan Maemarn* functions in the village partly to prevent a state of mental unbalance from arising, and partly to treat such conditions should they have arisen. The mode of practice surrounding the *Suu Khwan Maemarn* in this village is such that what we have could be called a well developed system for the treatment of minor psychological ailments. This ceremony contains elements which are clearly comparable to what in the Western part of the world is called psychotherapy. It is better suited to the village environment than anything we could achieve in the West, faced with parallel groups of citizens. In professional discussions in the West it is often illustrated that most of our psychological forms of therapy are best suited to people who are relatively well educated, and socially not members of the lower layers of the community. In this northeastern Thai village this ceremony reaches the humblest groups of the society.

To continue the discussion in psychological terminology, treatment in the village may well be directed towards an individual person, but the form of treatment is not western "individual therapy." Treatment draws in the family, relatives and often friends. The social surroundings of the person are used as support. It is in this way in perfect agreement with what we in the West today consider most essential to an effective result of psychotherapy. One is tempted to say that the villagers have for generations practiced what we are only now approaching in theory, but are still almost incapable of accomplishing in practice.

Tambiah (1970) is the only Thailand researcher who mentions *Suu Khwan Maemarn*. His descriptions originate from the same

village as do my own—we worked on the same team in 1961–62. My own subsequent investigations make it clear that Suu Khwan Maemarn is known in extensive areas of the upper northeast but not in villages in the most southerly part of the northeast. It is, however, known in a quite identical form in villages on the Laotian side of the Mekong River.

We are here apparently facing an area of the traditional peasant culture in northeastern Thailand which has not yet been particularly well investigated. At any rate, the ceremony is not described in books written in western languages about either northeastern Thailand or Thailand as a whole.

The two research groups incorporated in this study—a group of older mothers in 1968 and a group of quite young people in 1978—confirm that in this village, in this special aspect, traditional culture is still fully observed.

rites for previous mothers

There is a fear in the village that “old mothers,” or “previous mothers” of the child may wish to take the child back immediately after it has been born.

The representative of the Great Creator is in this case Mae Gao Mae Lang, often in everyday speech called Mae Kamlerd. She is a person with evil intentions, coming to take the child. The child may die while being born, or be born with poor health—symptoms called “kamlerd,” as Mae Kamlerd is “the mother” or the cause of these symptoms.

A rite must be performed so Mae Kamlerd will allow the child to remain in the place where it is now being born. This special rite, Taengkae Maemarn, must be performed as closely to the birth as possible, as Mae Kamlerd can be relied upon to appear just around the time of birth.

She is thought also to be able to return at any time after the child has been born, and she will then cause serious symptoms in the child.

Whether she is responsible for an actual illness during childbirth can be ascertained only by the diagnostician, the *Mau song*. He, and only he, can suggest how the case should be treated.

In reality there are three rites for Mae Kamlerd.

Taengkae Maemarn. This should be performed before birth, and as closely to the birth as possible. It is an elaborate rite with extensive ritual objects, including a “child,” roughly cut from a banana rod, which is meant to satisfy Mae Kamlerd when she comes at the time

when the child is to be born. Before birth this rite is expected to have prophylactic qualities, to help the child to be born safely.

Taengkae Mae Kamlerd. This is performed after the birth, if the child has serious symptoms of illness. Here also is a number of ritual objects, but these do not include the offering of a "dummy child."

There might be situations, such as less alarming symptoms, where one does not find it necessary to have the "strong" and complicated *Taengkae Mae Kamlerd* performed. One could in such cases initially try to manage with the lesser rite, called *Pao Kamlerd*, where the master will just "blow" (*pao*) magic words onto the child.

The intention is the same—treatment and removal of symptoms caused by *Mae Kamlerd*.

One might ask, "Who is *Mae Kamlerd*, and where does she belong in the cults?" To date she is not mentioned in any literature on Thailand, except in Tambiah (1970), from the same village as my fieldwork is based. This could be due to the fact that she is narrowly limited to a small area around Udorn, but this is almost certainly not the case. My interviews have established that *Mae Kamlerd* is known in villages in large parts of the upper northeast, and also in villages on the Laotian side of the Mekong. She does not appear to be known in the southern part of the northeast. Possibly she confirms the close cultural connection between the village populations in northeastern Thailand and the lowland peoples of Laos.

Mae Syy. Central Thailand has a cult which is also concerned with the wellbeing of the infant. This cult is mentioned in only a few works on Thailand (Hanks 1963: 67, Attagara 1967: 77, Rajadhon 1952, 1961), and is today obviously not nearly as vital and important to the people as the *Mae Kamlerd* cult in the northeastern village under study here.

Rajadhon has dealt most extensively with *Mae Syy*, which in Thai means the "purchasing mother." But Rajadhon cannot find any elements of "purchasing" in the cult as it is now practised in the Central Plain.

Such elements, however, are to be found in the *Taengkae Maemarn* rite in the northeast. Probably *Mae Kamlerd* and *Mae Syy* most likely have the same origin, though the original form vanished in the Central Plain long ago.

H. Wales wrote, as early as 1933, (p. 451) "It should be pointed out that it is from the more primitive Lao people of northern and eastern Siam that one might hope to obtain further information concerning Thai customs and beliefs in relation to childbirth as these people pre-

serve more respect for the world of phi and consequently devote more attention to the performance of propitiatory rites than do their more advanced cousins the Siamese" (!).

Personally I have no grounds for an opinion that the farmers in the northeast are what we today generally understand by "primitive." Risks during childbirth are a reality to them, and they must help themselves as well as they possibly can. The young mothers in this north-eastern village were in 1978 as completely occupied with the dangers of Mae Kamlerd as the older generation was in 1968.

SPIRITS AND CHILDBIRTH

Two spirits (*phii*) are especially dangerous during childbirth. The *phii praj* is the spirit which may result from an unnatural and sudden death, such as accident, homicide or childbirth. If death occurs before the normal life cycle is completed, there is then a risk that the *winjan* could become a dangerous *phii tai hoeng*, a term known all over Thailand.

If such young people die they are believed to still be strongly tied to life on earth, and their spirits will attack especially weak persons.

The *phii tai hoeng* of women who die in childbirth is called *phii praj*. It is difficult to protect oneself from the *phii praj* as it roams about particularly during the night, most often in the shape of some or another animal and its young one. The *phii praj* will seek places with human impurities, and blood above all. If bleeding is difficult to stop, this is because the *phii praj* is sucking it. Blood from childbirth especially attracts this spirit. If a mother is already having her blood sucked by the *phii* there is not much that can be done, and therefore there is every reason to do as much as possible to protect the confined mother.

In general conversation in the village *phii praj* is always mentioned together with another spirit, the *phii paub*. This *phii* is primarily characterised as being able to have a living person as a host, in contrast to other spirits, who are disembodied spirits of deceased persons. A living person can, then, be a *phii paub*, and so we approach a conception of what we generally describe by the word "witch."

In the village under study the *phii paub* is also believed to attack weak persons—it likes the mother giving birth, and her blood. If a mother is attacked, and the spirit not exorcised successfully, the mother will die.

All symptoms mentioned as symptoms of *phii praj* attack have to do with the physiological well being of the mother, but *phii paub* symptoms are all connected with her mental well being. These *phii* are so dangerous that there are good reasons for the villagers to take the following precautions in childbirth:

1. Branches with stiff thorns are placed on the ground beneath the confinement room: This is observed by almost everyone, both in the group of older mothers in 1968 as well as by the young group in 1978.

2. Rice-grains are scattered around the house, and magic invocations are recited. This is also followed by almost everyone in both groups.

3. Before going to her confinement by the fire (*yu-fai*) the mother must walk three paces in the room. In her hand she must have a long knife, which at each step has to be rammed hard into the floorboards. Then she stabs the knife blade down between the floor planks. The noisy action and the iron blade will frighten the *phii*. In 1968 most observed this custom, for the reasons mentioned. In 1978 almost as many followed the custom, but only a few did this with an awareness of its protective power. The others were simply following a tradition.

4. After childbirth the mother is protected with powerful cotton strings around her neck, both wrists and ankles. This was done by all, both in 1968 as well as in 1978, and all were convinced of its power against the *phii*.

THE LYING-IN PERIOD, *YU-FAI*

Lying by the fire after childbirth is a very strong tradition in this village. Here virtually all mothers, both the older and the very young, continue to observe a very traditional *yu-fai* by an open fire. This is longest for the first child, and lasts an uneven number of days. The only change is that the young generation has a shorter fire rest than their mothers did. The young consider 13–15 days sufficient for the first child, and 7–9 days long enough for the youngest. The older group in 1968 found that 21–25 days were necessary for the first child, and never less than 11 days.

Yu-fai is not observed only in a village setting. Sixteen women teachers in village schools, aged 25–47, twelve born in towns in the northeast, and four in villages, had all observed *yu-fai* for their total of forty-eight children. Most of these were not by an open fire as is done in the village, though; they used the more modern charcoal basin.

Yu-fai is regarded as a treatment and a cleansing, and everyone, humble village mothers as well as well-educated middle-class teachers, regard it as an important and necessary part of regaining health and strength after childbirth.

There are a great many authors who mention that *yu-fai* is almost obsolete all over Thailand, and most authors describe the lying by the fire as a bad and harmful custom. "Mother-roasting" is the expression used by some western authors, as well as other terms with negative

connotations. I have not, however, been able to find literature which deals seriously with the effects of *yu-fai* from a medical point of view. Discussions over the years on this matter, with professionals, can be summarized as follows:

1. One group says the heat is directly harmful, that it induces hemorrhaging, and causes burns and heat rashes. The long confinement causes risk of blood-clots. There is no sensible reason for *yu-fai*. It is a tradition from which one must disassociate oneself. All that is possible must be done to make the women stop going through *yu-fai*.

2. Another group says that the heat in itself is harmless, but of course there is a risk of heat rashes and burns. Too long a confinement can cause a risk of blood clots. Doubtlessly *yu-fai* has a psychological effect, and is for that reason of assistance to the woman. During this period she is waited upon. If she did not observe *yu-fai* she would probably not have a reasonably long period free from hard work, after giving birth. *Yu-fai* should therefore not be discouraged.

It is not without interest to note that the first group centers mainly on discussions held in the 1960's, and the latter group's statements are a synopsis of evaluations collected in 1978 and later.

The considerable differences in the weighing of the various factors may be coincidental, but this is unlikely.

It can hardly be erroneous to take this as an expression of a change in attitudes, which is interesting in a socio-psychological and cultural sense. This change corresponds closely with recent new evaluations of circumstances in non-western cultures.

Foreign cultures, for example, are no longer ashamed of themselves, and the West is not quite as convinced of its own excellence as it was a few years back. We still lack a real answer as to whether the effects are negative or positive, medically speaking when the body is exposed to a lengthy heat-action after a childbirth, in a tropical climate, and under hygienic conditions which in the village may give rise to all imaginable infections. Nor do we know what effects there might be on the infant itself.

CHANGES IN CHILDBIRTH CUSTOMS

My extensive study of traditions related to pregnancy and childbirth has found no major changes from the older generation in 1968 to the new and very young generation of 1978. It is my guess that a large number of changes will occur within the next decade.

In the village of my research almost everybody follows the same general patterns of behavior in this area of their culture, but the details

vary more than one would expect.

The cultural tradition is very strong, but so also is the individuality of the Thai as a person.

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