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## **Lying with the fire**

### **The Yu-Fai Ceremony in Two Isan Villages**

**By Jeff Petry - Udon Thani Magazine Guide Issue 16**

Isan, the largely rural northeastern region of Thailand, is truly a land of tradition, of ceremonies, rituals, processions and a strong belief in the efficacy of performing the right ceremony at the appropriate time, of adhering to the old ways and respecting both old people and the deceased. In fact, it could well be called the “Land of Tradition.”

Sometimes it seems they’re performing one ceremony or another every other week in my village, or in my household. But although many depend upon the Buddhist calendar, and the moon or the season, others are purely circumstantial: the birth of a child, for example, or an accident.

This is the case with the yu-fai ceremony, sometimes translated as “confinement by the fire” when referring to women who have just given birth. A more general—and more literal—translation, however, one based on observations in my village, would be “being with the fire,” or “lying above the fire.” The latter certainly best describes the two instances I observed in December 2010. (See photos below)

The traditional lying by the fire has evolved into something much more like an herbal sauna these days. A charcoal fire is ignited on a sheet of corrugated metal, which is placed below a platform with wooden slats; two kinds of herbal leaves—bai nadt and bai pao—are then placed between the slats and a mat that the person lies upon. The heat, rising up through the slats, warms the leaves, and the resulting herbal heat then penetrates the prostrate body.

In his groundbreaking longitudinal covering over forty years in the village of Baan Phraan Muean (BPM)—“the hunter Muan’s village”—educational psychologist Anders Poulsen documented the passage of a woman in the village from conception through pregnancy to childbirth, and then through the yu-fai ceremony after giving birth. (See his *Childbirth and Tradition in Northeast Thailand: 40 Years of Development And Cultural Change*.)

This was a period of cleansing and restoring the body, in confinement by a fire, which all women in this part of Thailand traditionally underwent. There was a longer period for the first child than for any children who came later, though it was always an odd number of days. Forty years ago the first child warranted 21-25 days by the fire, while in recent years one to two weeks is considered adequate. It must, however, be an odd number of days, odd always being better than even, as is the case with the number of monks at any given ceremony, for example.

The same holds true in my village today in Nong Khai Province, approximately 30 kilometers from BPM which is located in Udon Thani Province, about 17 kilometers north of Udon Thani on the road to Ban Phue. (If any readers live in this village, could you please contact the author of this article?)

This ceremony is not required for those mothers who have received C-sections, only for those who have given natural vaginal births, so as not to negatively affect the stitches the mother has received in her C-section. Worth

noting, as C-sections have greatly increased, the performance of the yu-fai ceremony (for natural birth mothers) has greatly decreased; mothers are now more able to choose to avoid suffering, and are doing so.

Although this ceremony has almost exclusively been noted with respect to childbirth, it is practiced in my village near Khai Bok Wan in other circumstances as well, namely following accidents—such as a car, motorcycle, or bicycle accident—and particularly after one slips and falls, a result of walking on a slippery surface.

Most villagers state very similar reasons for the fire ceremony. Actually many (usually with a smile) call it yang—to BBQ someone—while the critical Western literature refers to the practice of “mother roasting,” and states the potential negative effects of the process, including blood clots and heat rashes.

For Thais, this open-air herbal sauna is seen as a restorative act, meant to bring the body back into balance, calm the nerves, increase blood circulation, cleanse the precious bodily fluids and get the organs back into their proper place, or riep rooi.

Along with the lying above the fire, some will wipe the body down with an herbal concoction made of the same leaves, and the “patient” is also encouraged to drink an herbal tea-like liquid during the confinement. After the designated number of days has passed, the person is seen as being healed and whole again, and can then reintegrate into society and the life of the village.



