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TRADITIONAL THAI CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS: PREGNANCY, BIRTH AND THE EARLY DAYS OF THE NEWBORN

There are many traditional beliefs associated with pregnancy. However in most cases modern health practices are now carried out through out Thailand.

Traditional cultural practices may still influence the behavior of Thai families to some extent and provide an insight into how pregnancy and child birth may be viewed.

According to Central Thailand beliefs; conception occurs when a *khwan* (soul) flies into the womb during a sexual encounter. A woman whose period stops and who starts craving sour foods is thought to be pregnant.

Once a woman finds out she is pregnant, she is to tell her partner first, followed by her mother and her mother in law. Infertility is seen as imbalance in one of the *essences*. Certain acupuncture points, however, could be utilized to resolve the issue.

In Thai folklore there is a ghost known as *Krasue* (กระสือ) haunting pregnant women in their homes just before or after the childbirth.) Village legends say that it hovers around the house of the pregnant woman uttering sharp cries to instill fear. It uses an elongated tongue-like proboscis to reach the fetus or its placenta within the womb. This habit, among other unmentionable things that this spirit does, is believed to be the cause of many diseases affecting mainly rural women during their pregnancy.

Diet During Pregnancy

Since pregnancy is considered to be a **'hot'** condition in Thai Medicine, foods to maintain warmth are preferred, such as ginger tea, coconut milk, young coconut meat, salty foods, tamarind, fish, garlic, onion, and warm liquids. Those who consume *pak plang*, a slippery vine-like green vegetable, would have an easy birth, since it will make the baby's body slippery. *Ya tom* herbal medicine could be prepared as tea and would make the baby strong and easy to deliver if the pregnant woman drinks the tea three times a day for three consecutive days

However, *khong salaeng* (allergic foodstuff) must be avoided by pregnant women, since it may cause unwanted problems during labor or for the unborn child. *Khong salaeng* foods include papaya salad, pickled food, spicy hot food (baby may be born hairless), coffee and tea (baby will be not intelligent), shellfish (prevents perineum from drying after delivery), and Thai eggplants (may cause anal pain after delivery). Women are also advised to eat only half a banana, since birth may become obstructed if she eats a whole banana.

Behavior During Pregnancy

According to traditional beliefs, strenuous activities, such as heavy lifting, farm work, and even driving a car may lead to a miscarriage or stillbirth, however this may sometimes be unavoidable by the rural poor. Regular activity promotes easy birth by making the abdomen 'loose' (*tong klon*) and therefore aiding in the downward head rotation of the baby. Idleness and frequent resting, on the other hand, would complicate birth.

Although pregnant women are prohibited from attending a funeral, wearing a brooch on the abdomen would counteract any negative effects on the foetus. Women should also not make any advanced preparations, such as buying or making baby clothes, as this may result the death of the baby.

Other pregnancy-related beliefs include not sitting in the stairway (causes obstructed birth), not burying anything in the soil (difficult birth), and having *magical showers* (to promote easy delivery and emotional calmness). These showers should be "blessed with sacred words known as '*nam mon*' by *mor mon* (a magical healer, or even a monk); they are usually done in an open-aired space from eighth to ninth month of pregnancy.

During the last weeks of normal pregnancy, a woman may choose to go to a masseuse for "lifting of a uterus (*yok thong*) to increase comfort."

Labor and Birth

Setting

In 1960's, 99% of the women in villages delivered at home. Today the number is very much lower, as most Thai women give birth in hospitals and clinics, generally where they go for antenatal care.

Traditionally, Thai women would give birth at home, either in the bedroom or the kitchen. The delivery room at home is usually decorated with *Yant Trinisinghé*, "small flags inscribed with sacred numbers from one to nine" or with letters and sings; each flag is a "symbol of a long mantra passage, believed to have power to ward off evil spirits." Buffalo leather could be used instead of the flags.

Birth Assistant and Attendants

The traditional delivery assistant, who is usually a woman, is called '*Mo Tamaye*' in the Central Thailand and *Mae Jang* in the North. It is generally accepted that the labor starts when the waters break. If the family cannot get to the nearest medical facility, or does not want to, *Mo Tamaye* is called. Usually, the husband and *Mo Tamaye* are present during delivery, but relatives and children may attend as well; however, the woman in labor must be covered from the waist to knee.

Traditions During Labor

Culturally, there is no need to keep silent during the birthing process.

In case of birth complications, the traditional birth assistant would give the woman some holy water or press on her belly. There were no specific foods mentioned to eat during labor. To promote an easy delivery, all windows and doors must be *open* and the woman must be facing *East* to symbolize the emergence of new life. The husband should also pile logs outside facing East. Any fastened nails must be undone, and no one should be punching nails to avoid stalled birth. To be born with an umbilical (holy) cord wrapped around neck was considered a sign of fortune

The Cord and Placenta

Following a traditional delivery, *Mo Tamaye* would milk the umbilical cord three times away from the baby "to remove dirt," then push it back, tie the cord in two places with a special cotton string, and cut the cord in between the two fastened places. The cut cord is then burned, and placenta is buried, usually by the father.

Woman's Rite of Passage

After a woman gives birth to her first child, she is considered an adult. She then undergoes the *Jufaj* (yu fai) when she must *lie near fire* for an odd number of days, usually around 11 days, so that her uterus will shrink back to the normal size. After each following births, the number of days spent near fire may be decreased. Also, a wooden box with a fire pot may be placed on the woman's stomach to serve the same purpose. Fire is also said to scare off evil spirits, especially combined with the lemongrass aroma. After a *Jufaj*, a woman is allowed to move out of her parents' residence, where she would live before and during the pregnancy, since she is now a mature adult.

Postpartum Diet and Behavior

As with the pregnancy diet, warm foods are encouraged, such as hot curries. A woman's diet must consist of rice and vegetables in the first few months after pregnancy; meat, with exception of fish, must be avoided. From a Traditional Thai Medicine perspective, "sour tastes [do] not dry out the body, but built up water; egg [is] too cooling; jackfruit [brings] in wind [air]; glutinous rice and the sugar of sweets wet the uterus; fruits [do] not give strength and [are] excessively cooling." Teas out of herbs (*naam puu loey*) should be consumed, and showers with herbal water (*naam puu loeyand naam bai paw*) should be taken daily without washing hair the first two weeks.

Woman's household duties would be taken care by the husband, female relatives, and older children. Traditionally, the female relatives would also check on the new mother.

Newborn

There are many variations in traditions across Thailand. Central Thai people say the baby is *tog fag* (falls on bamboo) when he or she is born. After *Mo Tamaye* cuts the umbilical cord, she washes and beautifies the baby with yellow and white powder.

On the third day after birth, *Lon Dek Nai Kadon* rite (translates to “rock the cradle in which a new born baby is sleeping”) is carried out. A baby is placed into a basket with a pencil and a notebook (for brightness), and money (for richness); girls are also given knives (to cut and comb hair) and cooking utensils. The basket with the baby and instruments is then handed over to “a respectable man in the village. This means that the baby became his adopted child temporarily, which reflects that the parents expect their baby to be rich and respectable like the adoptive.”



Another tradition includes making offerings at a temple (*wat*) on the third day after the baby is born to obtain a blessing from a monk. *Fire-Shaving ceremony* takes place when the child reaches the age of one month and one day, which involves cutting of the baby’s hair. As a precaution, babies must be kept away from the rain.

Care for the Baby

For the first month of the baby’s life, the mother must stay very close and “breastfeed the newborn on its slightest demand.” Babies are also sometimes given a mixture of banana, honey, and water to prevent diarrhea. If the baby cries too much and cannot sleep, it is believed that the baby’s guardian spirit, *Mae Sue*, is teasing the newborn too much. Usual interaction with *Mae Sue* is normal, during which the baby will play and laugh by itself.

Naming

Traditionally, a name is given to the child on the fourth or fifth day after birth by the father; however, there could be variations in this practice across Thailand. Today, both the mother and father can take part in deciding on a name. A child may not hold the same name as Royalty.

Twins

There is a variation in the view of twins. While some view twins as needing more resources and being too demanding on a family, others see having twins as lucky, since it is convenient to take care of them at the same time.