

RESEARCH NOTE

Folk Beliefs and Ancient Health Care about Pregnancy in Thai Tradition

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to study folk beliefs and ancient health care relating to pregnancy in Thai culture. The methods of study include document study and observation. The study results point out that folk beliefs and ancient health care relating to pregnancy in Thai tradition can be divided into two periods, namely pregnancy period and post pregnancy period. However, the folk beliefs relating to pregnancy connect with healthcare methods and the prevention of the potential risk to mothers and their babies. Without the western medical technology, the ancient health care has focused on the care covering and connecting between bodies and souls, which could be seen in the forms of various prohibition and practical guidelines.

Keywords: *Ancient Health Care, Folk Beliefs, Pregnancy, Thai Tradition*

Introduction

Health behavior of people in each community relates to or is framed by the community's social factors (World Health Organization, 2010). In the past, prior to the existence of medical science and new technology, the belief paid vital roles in shaving up health care behavior of people in the community, especially the beliefs in Holy Spirit or superstition.

Pregnancy is a process of the beginning of the birth of human life and the pass on of human race for the existence of the society. In the ancient time when medical science was underdeveloped, pregnancy was regarded as critical and risky

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conditions with worry and fear among family members. Social members, therefore, created mechanical factors to control and lessen such fear, and this led to the beliefs, traditions, and principles of healthcare relating to pregnancy.

In Thai society, the existence of beliefs and principles of healthcare relating to pregnancy differs ranging from the period of pregnancy to birth giving, and these beliefs have been passed on from the old generation to the present one. However, nowadays despite the great influences of western medical science on the treating system and health care of Thai people, folk beliefs relating to pregnancy and the birth still pay essential roles for Thai people to adopt together with new medical science.

The study of folk beliefs relating to pregnancy is, therefore, necessary to gain the insight in the ancient people's thinking systems and intellect concerning health care, and to make use of these beliefs to create principles for social members in terms of prohibitions and practical guidelines for the balance and the existence of people in the society.

Folk beliefs relating to pregnancy

According to ancient Thai people, pregnancy is the results of the relationship between humans and stars in the zodiac. It is believed that a shooting star indicates the birth of a holy son to the spouses in the home where the shooting star appears. The son is from the spirit of the holy creature from heaven.

Based on the beliefs of Muslim people in southern Thailand, pregnancy is the will of Allah, who grants the birth. Pregnancy is, therefore, regarded as the prosperity to gain a Muslim infant who needs great care, and abortion is strongly prohibited. Principles and religious teaching should be followed strictly including praying, reading and fasting so that the baby perceives the religious principles and roles of a good Muslim since his existence in the mother's womb (Wiwatpanich & Sasiwongsaroj, 2007).

Moreover, the ancient Thais forecast the infant's gender by using omen or dream (Attagara, 1976). For example, the dream of getting jewelry, gold utensils or the sun's float into the room signifies the son, while the dream of makeup or giving making to his wife or the moon's float into the room signifies the daughter. Some text books suggest the consideration of the womb. The circular womb signifies the daughter, while the swollen womb signifies the son. Some suggest noticing the pregnant woman's foot. The red left foot signifies the daughter while the red right foot signifies the son. Some suggest noticing the navel look of the pregnant woman prior to the state of birth giving. If the skin around the navel is elastic and covers the hole of the navel, this signifies the daughter while the uprising naval signifies the son, etc.

According to some ancient Thais, it is believed that during the time of the baby's growth in his mother's womb called 'head revelation,' food consumed by the mother could immediately be absorbed in the middle of the baby's head. If the mother consumes hot spicy food, the baby will get the heat and be tolerant. However, if the mother consumes cold and useful food, this will be absorbed and will empower the baby. These beliefs lead to a variety of prohibition and practical guidelines concerning food consumption. Moreover, food consumption and health care during pregnancy lead to fate. That is if the mother pays great attention to the care of the baby in her womb, after birth when the child grows up, he will have moral obligation to look after the mother in her late life. On the other hand, if the mother does not pay attesting to the care of baby in her womb, the child will pay no attention to care his mother in her late life, which is the result of fate (Wiwatpanich & Sasiwongsaroj, 2007).

In terms of the symptoms of morning sickness, ancient Thais believe that these reflect the rebirth of some creatures.

For example, the mother's need to eat fish or fishy-smelling food is forecasted as the rebirth of creature from hell, while the need to eat sour and bitter thing is forecasted as the rebirth of creature from Himmapan forest, and the need to eat honey, sugar cane juice and sugar is forecasted as the rebirth of creature from heaven. Moreover, the need to eat fruit leads to the rebirth of the animal while the need to eat soil leads to the rebirth of Brahma and the need to eat hot and spicy food leads to the rebirth of the human being, etc.

Abortion is considered as the most dangerous state during pregnancy resulting directly in the baby and the pregnant woman. Based on the beliefs of the traditional local healers, abortion is caused by 5 main causes as follow: 1) the hyper sexual needs and sexual intercourse during pregnancy, 2) the consumption of food endangering the baby in the womb, 3) the pregnant woman's emotions of being fierce, angry and furious, 4) serious physical harassment, and 5) superstition or black magic. Based on these beliefs, it is necessary for the pregnant woman, the family and the community to set up practical guidelines to raise awareness and care to prevent such bad deeds in their society (Wiwatpanich & Sasiwongsaroj, 2007).

Health care during pregnancy

The purposes of health care during pregnancy include preventing bad deeds for the mothers and the babies so that the birth of the baby will be safe and sound. Healthcare in this stage is in the forms of prohibition and principle guidelines as follows:

1. Mental health care for pregnant women

Pregnant women extremely need morale and encouragement due to the potential stress and worry. This kind of stress easily deteriorates the pregnant women's morale comparing to common

people. Ancient Thai people, therefore, hold a ceremony to boost the pregnant women's morale for the purposes of creating encouragement and power during giving birth. This ceremony is, also, regarded as the life-prolonging rite for pregnant women who are about to face the risk of losing their lives.

In a society with the beliefs of superstitious power, health care has been related to mascots. For example, wearing special holy wristband around the pregnant woman's wrist or wearing holy necklace around her neck is believed to ward off evil spirits supposed to harm the pregnant woman (Phya Anuman Rajadhon, 1989). These kinds of holy mascots kept with the pregnant women will, hopefully, lessen the women's fear and worry.

In a society with the beliefs and fate in principles of Lord Buddha's teaching, the pregnant women are supposed to behave under the accepted norm of life focusing on making merit, purifying their minds, and abstaining from killing animals to collect merit and to prolong the baby's fate.

In addition, lots more cultural principles have been set up by the society to build up the pregnant women's spirit and her babies. For example, pregnant women are not allowed to see other women giving birth, to go to a funeral ceremony or to visit the seriously ill patients. That is because these will spoil the women's morale or hurt their souls. However, the pregnant women should take a chance to claw under the elephant's belly to lift up the morale and encouragement during the time of giving birth. It is also believed that this deed will enable the flow of birth-giving process, and the baby will be brought up happily.

2. Health care of pregnant women

Based on the ancient Thais' beliefs, boiled lotus could be eaten to lessen morning sickness symptom, and to help strengthening the baby's health as well as to prevent the mother's vomiting (Phya Anuman Rajadhon, 1989). The treatment of morning sickness includes the use of various recipes of herbs based on the symptom, such as medicine for blood tonic, breath tonic to adjust the balance of 4 immune systems in the body, laxative to prevent constipation and hemorrhoids. In case of the itch at the belly believed to be caused by the annoyance of baby's hair at the uterus and the belly flesh, apply the crushed turmeric at the area of itching to lessen such symptom. Moreover, food made from bon leaf is prohibited.

Moreover, it is believed that the pregnant women should work and use their strength as usual to give birth easily, and sleeping on one's side is recommended because lying supine enables the baby to hurt the womb. Too high or too low pillows will make the birth process difficult (Wiwatpanich & Sasiwongsaroj, 2007).

During pregnancy period, lots of prohibition concerning eating habit to prepare for the body and the expectation of smooth the birth process exist. For example, fruits, namely guava, bitter

eggplant and Tanee banana, should not be eaten because they will cause severe hurt during birth process. Eating sticky rice and egg may cause strong smell during the birth process while eating coconut juice will enable the smooth birth process. Moreover, taking a bath or apply water on the body at night is not allowed to prevent the accidental fall, and water may cause too cold body temperature affecting the baby in the womb.

3. Care of the baby in the womb.

Based on the belief that the baby in the womb should not be too big, the custom to control the pregnant women's eating behavior exists with the purpose of controlling the mother's weight and the size of the womb. The custom ranges from the control of food consumption and the food with meat. Women are some society is therefore, allowed to eat only rice with salt or with dried fish. The spicy and salty food causes the baby's eyes watery. Sipping hot spicy soup makes the baby bald head. Eating twin banana and fried sticky rice may result in having twin babies. In the past, giving birth to twin was regarded as a risky situation. It is, therefore, suggested eating only one banana (Wiwatpanich, 1997).

4. Antenatal care

Antenatal care will assist the pregnant women to gain the insight into the practical guidelines and the correct and suitable ways to take care of the baby in the womb. In the period of the near birth process, the pregnant women prefer to take a massage with local healers or ancient Thais called 'massage the womb' to lead the baby's head to the pelvis and to alleviate the stress in the womb. That is because in the near birth process the womb would be large and this will cause a backache. In case of aborting, the dead body of the baby is still in the womb. Local medicine healer will use local medicine including decaying Tanee banana, green winter melon, and local vegetable. Applying the crunched ingredients above on the womb for a while will make the dead body out of the womb. (Kaumara-Bhrtya, 1991).

The beliefs concerning postpartum

The state of postpartum is the period when the body of the woman is weak. The ancient Thais, therefore, create ritual ceremonies to save the woman from the superstitious power which may hurt the woman. For example, the rites include setting up the strap of cloth in front of the home, putting tamarind leaves and jujube leaves in the hole of the house to ward off evil spirit or asking the woman to wear a holy necklace with mascots to protect herself and prevent any harm.

Health care during postpartum state includes lots of steps. To gain acceptance, ancient Thais connect the process of healthcare with the beliefs of fate. That is because, in the postpartum state, the woman has to stay in a warm place, eat hot food, take a bath with hot water, and sleep in a hot place. In some regions, this is called 'staying in fate' or people who suffer torture (Kheawying

et al., 1991). Staying in fate can be compared to the time when men enter monkhood to serve the parents' obligation. To become a perfect mother, the woman needs to learn how to pass such difficulties as men do to recognize the parents' obligation. It is a kind of life cycle.

Moreover, Thai people believe in the balance of 4 elements, earth, water, air, and fire. The imbalance of these elements or the variations of these elements lead to a disease (Mulholland, 1971). In the woman's body in postpartum state, the imbalance of the four elements occurs because the birth process requires strength and the woman loses blood leading the state of weariness, the loss of blood, and the remains of bad blood in the body. This causes lots of illness in the future. It is, therefore, necessary to keep up and maintain the woman's health during the postpartum state to balance the four elements, and to clean the body by washing away the remaining blood, waste, and toxic so that the woman will become strong, fresh with beautiful look, and she will not become easily infected with diseases.

Health care during postpartum

In the past health care during postpartum is called 'stay heated'. That is because the term relates to the use of heat to warm the body in habilitation in postpartum. The care includes such activities as sleeping next to the fire, staying in a tent or heating the body with herbs, drinking warm herbal juice, using the brick which is fired redly, watered, and wrapped with cloth to warm the womb to lessen swollen, massaging, being seated on salt pot, and applying herbs on the skin, etc (Jamjan, Khantarakwong, Hongthong, & Jampates, 2014). Most women stay heated to rehabilitate their bodies to normal state and to heal wounds caused during birth process or to heal the stitching wounds, to lessen the inflammation, to clean the dirt caused during birth process and to help the uterus back to its origin. It is believed that those who do not stay heated will be unhealthy and be easily infected. Nowadays in some regions, thermostat bag or stay heated kits can be used to provide heat, and taking a bath with warm water added with herbs will help the flow of blood and lessen the swollen. The period of stay heated could last from 1 hour to 1 month depending on the woman's choice with the beliefs that the longer is the better skin with plenty of milk, and the better health without a backache. However, Thai people prefer 'stay heated' and 'leave the stay heated period' on the odd number day due to the belief that 'stay heated on the even number day leads to having babies in short interval of time while stay heated on the odd number day leads to having babies in longer interval of time. The rites on the day when the mother leaves the stay heated period include putting various food such as rice with fish, sour shrimp, and fish in a banana leaf bowl as a commission for mother of the stove used in stay heated period. The purpose of this rite is to pay the last respect to the mother of the stove before putting out a fire in the stove. After that, the mother would bathe herself with holy water to ward off evil spirit as the final step (Wiwatpanich & Sasiwongsaroj, 2007).

In terms of the prohibition such as not eating food like meat or preserved food, it is because of the beliefs concerning getting rid of the decaying substances out of the body and enriching the body after leaving the stay heated period. The food for body enrichment includes spicy food, namely

vegetable curry, banana flower curry in coconut milk, etc.

Conclusion

From the above, it can be concluded that various kinds of folk beliefs in Thai tradition concerning pregnancy relate to health care and the prevention of possible danger expected to harm the mother and the baby in her womb. Healthcare among ancient Thai in the period when technology and western medical science were not available was regarded as the care of health covering and connecting both human body and mind in the forms of various prohibitions and practical guidelines.

These beliefs reflect the philosophy or notions of treatment based on Thai ancient medicine healers focusing on the four elements; earth, water, air, and fire. Moreover, the beliefs show the characteristic of Thai society in terms of the ability to smoothly integrate traditional beliefs concerning spirit and superstition with the beliefs based on Buddhism. This kind of local intellect relating to local healthcare has been passed on as a part of a local way of life in terms of the integration of current western medical science with local medicine treatment or alternative medical care based on experience and human resources available in the society.

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Onusa Suwanpratest, PhD, was born in Thailand. She received her B.A. and M.A. degrees in Thai language and literature from Faculty of Arts at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. She received honory support to pursue higher education from the Program Strategic Scholarships for frontier research network for the Joint Ph.D. Program from the Commission on Higher Education, Thailand. She received her Ph.D. in folklore from the Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University, Thailand. Her Ph.D. dissertation focused on King Naresuan, a Great King in Thai history, which was published as a book: *King Naresuan the Great: the Dynamic Power Behind the Nation* (Bangkok, Thailand: Amarin Printing and Publishing, 2009) funded by the Kingkeo Atthakara Foundation. Since then, she has worked as a faculty member in the Department of Folklore Philosophy and Religion, Faculty of Humanities, Naresuan University, Thailand. Her main focus is on comparative literature and folklore.