

Anders Poulsen, *Childbirth and Tradition in Northeast Thailand: Forty years of cultural development and change*. Copenhagen, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2007, xvii+267 pp., NIAS monographs #109, ISBN 978877690034.

This is a richly detailed account of an anthropologist's 40-year relationship with the people of a northeastern Thai village. Anders Poulsen first visited Phraan Muean village in 1961 as part of a multidisciplinary UNESCO team investigating village life in Thailand. His self-described main purpose is the systematic documentation of north-eastern Thai traditions and knowledge related to childbirth in English. Yet the value of these four decades of scholarship on Isan village life far exceeds his modest description.

Dr Poulsen's book is a meticulous report of change over time in Baan Phraan Muean village, and of the behavioral and cultural response of the villagers. This work has broad relevance for helping us understand the psychological impacts of social change, and learn how to mitigate their harm, particularly as the pace of change quickens and reaches into previously remote areas.

The design and visual appeal of the book captivates the reader and opens a fascinating window on Thai village life. Illustrations include the author's own black and white photographs taken over a period from 1961 to the present day, and photographs of the palm-leaf

manuscript of a common *khwan*, or life spirit rite, the *suukhwam maemaan*, the calling back of the fleeting soul.

Significantly, given the book's emphasis on the value of ritual in the care of body and soul, this village was the site of the social anthropologist S.J. Tambiah's studies of ritual, magic, and spirit cults in northeastern Thai Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s. A powerful lens has been focused on Baan Phraan Muean for nearly half a century. The village is a microcosm of global change that can teach us how to weigh more accurately the gains and losses of development. The longitudinal and detailed approach reported here represents a major contribution to scholarship that has relevance for many disciplinary fields.

Several introductory sections establish the historical context of the research, and highlight the universality of themes that emerged within the longitudinal perspective, including a foreword by the UNESCO Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific, the author's foreword, and the editor's introduction. Part 1 draws attention to the vulnerability of village cultural practices as a result of environmental, demographic, and political change. The book reminds us that preserving ritual is a way of protecting the identity and self-determination of vulnerable, disadvantaged groups.

Chapter 1 provides a general introduction to village life on Thailand's Khorat plateau, and the change that has come to the region with development. Dr Poulsen chronicles known changes

such as the shift from barter to a cash economy, and lesser known trends that counter stereotypes of Isan village life, notably the evidence of good coordination and civic planning in the village, and a gradual shift away from the Buddhist temple towards the community center as the locus of village life.

Chapter 2 details *khwan* rites and their importance, not only to pregnancy and childbirth, but to the general well-being or quality of life. These practices have analogies in Western psychotherapeutic theories and practices, notably the fleeting, multifaceted *khwan*, the life spirit that sometimes gets away, and the psychoanalytic concept of ego fragmentation. Ritual is also important because it addresses mind-body dynamics, a gap in healthcare that is gaining attention in the West in fields as diverse as oncology and the prevention of domestic violence. Dr Poulsen constructively sums up research needs in the region, including specific details of knowledge gaps, and he poses questions that will stimulate and guide future researchers.

Chapters 3-6 chronicle changes in village practice from 1961-2005, focusing on ritual and other practice concerning pregnancy and birth, confinement, and care of the young baby, respectively. This report documents the shrinking pool of people, mostly men, with detailed knowledge of the meaning of rituals, and provides comparative data on ritual use from people young and old, village midwives, and ritual experts.

In these chapters, Dr Poulsen discusses the evolution of and decline in ritual

surrounding pregnancy and childbirth. Importantly, the study demonstrates that this decline is partly due to improved access to healthcare, including prenatal care and sterilization. Chapter 5, The Confinement, includes a detailed discussion of the widespread *yuu fai*, or fire bed ritual, for an odd number of days after delivery. Incredibly, given the ubiquity of this practice in northeast Thailand, science knows little of the ritual's intent, or its health effects on mother and child.

Part 2 provides an introduction to the ritual texts, photographs of the original palm-leaf manuscripts of the *suukhwam maemaan* rite, and detailed renditions of that rite, as well as the *taengkaem maemaan* and *taengkae mae kamlerd* rites in Thai and English. There are briefer treatments of several smaller rites, including relevant magic spells and recipes for herbal decoctions.

Part 2 provides depth and texture that enriches the book and distinguishes it from others in the field. Dr Poulsen's compassion and respect for Isan people are evident throughout. I would have appreciated more page headers in this section. I was hesitant to mark this beautiful and useful book. I have already used the glossary and the texts to clarify and specify information obtained from my interviews in Isan villages, but I found myself getting lost in this section.

Part 3, the book's information-rich appendices, include a summary of the longitudinal research process, a guide to the Isan language and to pronunciation and transcription of ritual texts, an

appendix on poetic techniques in the ritual texts, an excellent glossary, and a focused review of the relevant literature. This comprehensive and detailed supporting information brings the village to life on the page.

My only substantive criticism of the book is that the research methodology that generated this wealth of information is relegated to an appendix. Although this decision probably stems from the fact that research took place over many years, was supported by a range of agencies, and is well-reported elsewhere, de-emphasis of the research process overlooks a valuable lesson in today's world. In an era of shrinking research budgets, coupled with greater crisis-fed recognition of the value of regional studies and social ecological approaches, this methodology offers a rare and wonderful model. I predict that Dr Poulsen's book will delight, inform, and inspire a wide range of readers in years to come.

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