

Hmong Ethnic Folk Healer' Wisdom for Menstrual Disorders Treatment: A Case Study of Folk Healer in Ruamthai Phatthana Subdistrict, Phop Phra District, Tak Province

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate Hmong ethnic folk healers' wisdom to treat women's health disorders under a case study of a folk healer in Ruamthai Phatthana Subdistrict, Phop Phra District, Tak Province. Questionnaires and in-depth interviews were used as instruments. The study period spanned from April to August 2024 and investigated a folk healer widely respected by the community, with over 20 years of experience in treating women's health disorders. The findings of this study documented treatment methods rooted in Hmong ancestral beliefs and the use of local plants for healing. The research identified the types of medicinal plants used, the plant parts utilized, methods of herbal preparation, application techniques, medicinal properties, and approaches to monitoring patients' symptoms. This study highlighted the Hmong ethnic community's significant role in preserving local wisdom regarding traditional healing practices over generations, providing a dependable source of care for the community despite rapid social changes and development. Furthermore, the medicinal plants used in these treatments have the potential to guide future research into the discovery of active compounds for medical advancements.

Keywords: Wisdom, Folk healer, Hmong ethnic group, Herbal medicine, Menstrual disorders

1. Introduction

Thailand has always been a country rich in ethnic diversity, from the past to the present. Various ethnic groups are dispersed across the country, encompassing all regions. A total of 56 ethnic groups have established settlements across 67 provinces of Thailand. These ethnic groups can be categorized based on their settlement characteristics, such as highland ethnic groups, lowland ethnic groups, sea-dwelling ethnic groups, and forest-dwelling ethnic groups (Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, 2015). These ethnic groups not only settle in different areas of Thailand but also bring their diverse ways of life and cultures to actively contribute to Thai society. The hill tribes in Thailand are a vulnerable group, relying on slash-and-burn farming for subsistence, facing poverty, limited education, and social isolation. However, through the Royal Project initiated by King Rama IX, efforts have been

made to improve their quality of life and preserve their cultural heritage. (Tongdhamachart et al 2023)

The Hmong are a transnational ethnic group who often refer to themselves as “Hmong.” Historically, the Hmong lived in areas that are now part of modern-day China. However, during the 19th century, a minority of the Hmong population migrated to Southeast Asia. In Thailand, the Hmong have established communities in the outskirts of cities across 14 provinces, including Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Phayao, Nan, Phrae, Lamphun, Sukhothai, Phitsanulok, Phetchabun, Loei, Kamphaeng Phet, Tak, and Kanchanaburi (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (Public Organization), 2022). In Tak Province, there are six ethnic groups: Hmong, Karen, Yao, Akha, Lahu or Muser, and Lisu (Jiraporn Rodkhum et al., 2016). These tribes have spread out across various districts, each preserving unique traditions of wisdom, culture, and beliefs that distinguish them from one another. According to the report by the Self-help Land Settlement and Hill Tribe Development Division, Hilltribe Business Group (2016), Tak Province has a Hmong population of 4,545 households, totaling 54,671 individuals. These communities are dispersed across several districts and have been established for generations. Hmong society is traditionally patriarchal, with beliefs, rituals, and heritage predominantly passed down through the male line. This includes ancestor worship and the inheritance of assets such as land, houses, and other valuables. However, certain beliefs and rituals can also be transmitted through women, such as spirit possession rituals (ua neeb) and herbal medicine spirits (dab tshuaj), which are practiced to treat illnesses or ailments within the community (Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2022). Despite the influence of other cultures and advancements in science and technology on the traditional Hmong ethnic culture, the Hmong community continues to utilize local medicinal herbs for healthcare within the community (Sasithorn Srirat, 2021) This demonstrates that the wisdom of Hmong ethnic folk healers remains a primary resource for the community during times of illness.

The researchers have recognized the value of treating women’s health disorders through the wisdom of Hmong ethnic folk healers in Ruamthai Phatthana Subdistrict, Phop Phra District, Tak Province. This community has relied on the knowledge and practices of folk healers to care for the health of its members from the past to the present. The researchers aim to gather and document the knowledge of local folk healers in the area to benefit those interested in studying the wisdom of traditional healers within Thai society.

1.1 Research Objective

To study the Hmong ethnic folk healer’ wisdom for menstrual disorders treatment in Ruamthai Phatthana Subdistrict, Phop Phra District, Tak Province

1.2 Research Methodology

This study is a qualitative research project conducted through in-depth interviews. Interviewees are allowed to share information freely. The study was carried out from April to August 2024. This study received ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Information Research and Development Institute, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, under research project number COA.1-038/2024.

Population and Sample

The selection of folk healers was conducted with an emphasis on those residing in the Hmong ethnic community in Ruamthai Phatthana Subdistrict, Phop Phra District, Tak Province. The researcher conducted fieldwork in the community and used purposive sampling to select folk healers with expertise in herbal medicine for treating women's health disorders. The selected participants had over 20 years of experience and were highly respected within the community.

1. Research Instruments

1.1 Folk Healer Interview was adapted from the knowledge collection framework for folk healers developed by the Thai Traditional Medicine Division, Department of Thai Traditional and Alternative Medicine. The interview is divided into three parts:

1.1.1 Background and History of the Folk Healer

- Age
- Primary occupation
- Source of knowledge
- Experience in treatment
- Diseases of expertise
- Motivation to become a healer
- Criteria for selecting knowledge recipients
- Successors of the knowledge
- Practices required of a folk healer
- Patients seeking treatment

1.1.2 Knowledge of Disease Treatment by the Folk Healer

This structured data recording form is divided into four sections:

Section 1: Pre-treatment procedures

Section 2: Treatment procedures, including methods, tools, and herbs used for treatment

Section 3: Post-treatment evaluation

Section 4: Restrictions for patients

1.1.3 Herbal Sample Data Recording Form

This form is used to record detailed information about the herbs utilized by the folk healer for treatment.

1.2 Through a review of relevant documents and research on the wisdom of folk healers, the knowledge framework of Hmong ethnic folk healers has been organized into key concepts: (1) Folk Healer's Wisdom in Disease Treatment and (2) Status and Role of Folk

Healers. This includes details such as the biography of the folk healer and the treatment process, including therapeutic methods.

1.3 Cameras, Video Cameras, and Audio Recorders

2. Methodology

This research selected folk healers through purposive sampling. The research process involved gathering initial community information from the Hmong ethnic community. The research team explained the study's objectives to the folk healers and conducted fieldwork in Ruamthai Phatthana Subdistrict, Phop Phra District, Tak Province. Data collection included scheduling interviews and rituals at the folk healer's home. Ms. Nattida Wittayamungman acted as an interpreter, translating Hmong to Thai throughout the data collection process. Data was collected alongside photographs and audio recordings of interviews during the healing rituals. Collected data was transcribed, detailing the history of treatment, rituals, and spells. These were reviewed and verified by the folk healers to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness within the research framework. Data analysis involved organizing and analyzing the information gathered from interviews, audio, and visual records. The findings were then summarized and discussed.

3. Results

This folk healer is highly respected within the community and has been trained through mentorship from revered shamans and family lineage, including parents, grandparents, and ancestors. Community members frequently seek her assistance for health-related issues, which has contributed to her expertise in treating menstrual disorders. She has gained significant proficiency in addressing conditions such as menstrual cramps, irregular menstruation, and vaginal inflammation.

Treatment Method

For patients seeking treatment, the following offering must be prepared:

1. 3 Incense Sticks
2. Monetary offering as per individual faith or belief

Case Study of Patient

A Hmong woman came to the folk healer seeking treatment for irregular menstruation. During the healing ritual, the healer performed the following ritual:

Before the ritual began, the necessary tools for treatment were prepared:

1. 1 Candle
2. Three blood-stained chicken feathers

Keng Keng Rak, Pai Ken Kia, Kia Ta Tao, No Ta Nai, Sai Ta Nao, So Hong Men Ti.
Round 1: After blowing, place the candle directly in front of the left eye and use a blood-stained feather to wipe the left eye. After that, blow on the candle close to the eye three times.

Keng Keng Rak, Pai Ken Kia, Kia Ta Tao, No Ta Nai, Sai Ta Nao, So Hong Men Ti.
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Keng Keng Rak, Pai Ken Kia, Kia Ta Tao, No Ta Nai, Sai Ta Nao, So Hong Men Ti.
Round 1: After blowing, place the candle directly in front of the left eye and use a blood-stained feather to wipe the left eye. After that, blow on the candle close to the eye three times.

This section will serve as a chant related to the healing ritual to honor ancestors. Then, place the candle directly in front of the left eye and use a blood-stained feather to wipe the left eye. After that, blow on the candle close to the eye three times. Complete the ritual over three days, twice a day, morning and evening, and the patient must attend for all three days.

Prohibitions: Learning about incantations must only be conducted at night. It is forbidden to walk under any circumstances while bending over when passing under our laundry.

As for the herbal remedy for menstrual cramps, it is called "Chua Liem Mop." The preparation method involves boiling the herbs similarly to making tea. Start by boiling approximately 2 liters of water until it reaches a rolling boil. Then, clean the "Chua Liem Mop" herbs with clean water and add them to the pot. Allow the mixture to boil for about 5 minutes to extract the herbal essence. Once the herbal infusion is warm, it can be consumed.

Scientific identification of these plants was accomplished by consulting Dr. Rumrada Meeboonya, a botanist at College of Allied Health Sciences, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Samut Songkram Province, Thailand

Figure 1: Plant materials of Cordyline fruticosa (L.) A.Chev (Chua Liem Mop)



4. Discussions

The folk healers of the Hmong ethnic group in the community of Ruamthai Phatthana Subdistrict, Phop Phra District, Tak Province, possess knowledge in treating menstrual disorders that have been passed down or learned from their ancestors. They heal ailments based on the beliefs of Hmong indigenous religion, which includes beliefs in spirituality and the veneration of ancestral spirits (Setthian Chantha, 2004). Nevertheless, certain principles

can be linked to traditional Thai medicine, which incorporates the use of local herbal remedies as part of the healing rituals (Chinpath Chaloemram, 2020). Traditional medicine serves as an alternative medical practice, with each community or ethnic group having its own traditional healers who are experts in their healing arts, passed down through generations. Generally, these practices focus on specific ailments. Although not part of mainstream medicine (WHO, 2013), it is a discipline that effectively addresses both the physical and mental well-being of community members.

The protocol involved inquiring and examining the lesions on the patient's skin. There was close monitoring of treatment outcomes through daily visits to the traditional healer until the condition improves. The treatment approach of the Hmong ethnic group's traditional healer was closely related to Hmong indigenous religion, or Hmongism, also known as "Kev Dab Qhuas" or "the worship of household spirits," as well as the lifestyle of Buddhists who hold beliefs in Hmongism characterized by animism (Tapp 2009). In Addition, there are deities and ancestral spirits that serve as a central focus, influenced by beliefs and rituals derived from Taoism since ancient times, as well as influences from indigenous religions in China that emphasize the balance between nature and human needs and beliefs in the supernatural. (Lee 2010) The Hmong ethnic group in the community of Rum Thai Phatthana holds strong beliefs in the supernatural and the inheritance from ancestors. Therefore, the healing practices of Hmong traditional healers do not solely focus on the use of local herbs; they also emphasize healing that incorporates incantations and rituals. The treatment process begins with addressing the mental state of the patient before taking their medical history, and there is a ritual to pay respect to the teacher to enhance confidence and show reverence to ancestors. Furthermore, local herbs are also utilized in the treatment of menstrual disorders

5. Conclusion

This study can summarize the connection between beliefs, knowledge, and the treatment patterns of traditional healers in the following key points: The knowledge of treating menstrual disorders among the Hmong ethnic folk healers relied on a combination of knowledge and treatment patterns. These cannot be separated, as they involve both physical and mental healing. The only follow-up on treatment outcomes was based on the knowledge gained from the accumulated experiences of folk healers, who inquired with patients about whether their symptoms have improved or worsened

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