Exploration of Spiritual Healing Practices and Cultural Beliefs of Grieving Parents After Child Loss: A Qualitative Study in Northeastern Thailand

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Abstract: Culture is central to many people's belief systems, and death is an arena for the enactment of cultural beliefs likely to be a central part of coping and adjustment in grief caused by the death of a loved one. This qualitative study aimed to explore the cultural beliefs and spiritual healing practices grieving parents in Nakhon Phanom applied to cope with the loss of a child. Twenty parents living in Nakhon Phanom experiencing the loss of a child between the ages of 1 day and 18 years within the last 6 months to 2 years were recruited by purposive sampling according to the inclusion criteria. Data were collected through in-depth interviews from March to July 2024 until data were saturated. Content analysis was conducted to analyze the data. The findings revealed two themes: 1) following traditional ways (which involved calling the spirit home, severing ties with the deceased, realizing the truth of life through scattering cracked rice, dispelling sorrow and enhancing auspiciousness, and inquiry into existence through calling upon spirits or Bueng Vinyan); and 2) following teachings and rituals related to Buddhist beliefs (involving funeral rites related to Buddhist beliefs, and teachings of Isaan proverbs about Dhamma).

This is the first study on this topic in Nakhon Phanom that provides valuable insights into how parents in Nakhon Phanom use cultural and spiritual practices to overcome grief after losing a child. These findings can inform the development of culturally sensitive nursing care plans that better support bereaved families. By integrating culturally relevant practices into nursing care, nurses can help guide families through the grieving process while respecting their spiritual and cultural values.

Keywords: Child death, Cultural beliefs, Death rituals, Grief, Parents, Qualitative study, Spiritual healing

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Introduction

The death of a child is a catastrophic and heartbreaking event that often brings greater sorrow than any other loss, reflecting the deep emotional attachment between parents and their children.[1-4] Grief is a universal response to such a loss, but its intensity and manifestations can vary widely. Research shows that bereaved parents are at a significantly higher risk of developing prolonged grief disorder characterized by symptoms such as persistent longing for the deceased, difficulty accepting the loss, and disruptions in daily life.[1-5] This grief often leads to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and even suicidal ideation.[5-6] The intense grief experienced by parents can profoundly affect all aspects of their lives—physically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually—leading to an inevitable decline in quality of life.[1-8]

Parents who lose a child face unique challenges, including a profound sense of spiritual loss, often described as the loss of the spirit of parenthood.[1-2,8] Studies have documented the psychological, social, and spiritual impacts of losing a child, with parents experiencing depression, self-blame, and social withdrawal.[1-8] Spiritually, the death of a child can shake the foundation of parents' hope and faith, leaving them to grapple with feelings of helplessness, loss of purpose, and doubt in previously held religious beliefs. This reality underscores the urgent need for effective support systems to help grieving parents navigate their loss and prevent pathological grief.[3-4]

In Nakhon Phanom, a province in northeastern Thailand (Isaan), cultural and spiritual beliefs play a critical role in helping parents cope with the grief caused by the loss of a child.[9-11] Rooted in animism, Buddhism, and Brahmanism, these beliefs shape how parents process grief, enabling them to find meaning in their loss.[9-14] Funeral rites, such as calling the spirit home and severing ties with the deceased,[1] are integral to this process, providing parents with a framework for both honoring their deceased child and transitioning spiritually through their grief.[1-2,14-16] Practiced as part of the region's Heet 12, Kong 14 traditions, these rituals offer emotional relief by helping parents accept their child's death and facilitating a peaceful transition to the afterlife.[1]

Before the advent of religion, beliefs about ghosts, the soul, and rituals dominated people's worldview in northeastern Thailand.[9,14] The Isaan people believed that the soul of a person who dies does not disappear but transitions to another realm where ancestors reside.[9] By maintaining a spiritual relationship with their ancestors, the living sustain life and growth in the community. Over time, Buddhism reinforced these beliefs, particularly the concepts of impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anatta), which help grieving parents accept their loss while maintaining a symbolic connection with their deceased child.[14] Funeral rites and spiritual ceremonies allow parents to create meaning through cultural and religious beliefs, shielding their minds from the overwhelming grief associated with the death of a child.

While various studies have explored the role of cultural and religious beliefs in managing grief across different religious groups, such as Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism,[9-21] limited research exists on local practices in Nakhon Phanom. Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of religious and social support in helping parents cope with grief. For example, McNeil et al.[22] found that rituals such as memorial ceremonies and visiting gravesites help bereaved parents maintain a connection with their deceased children, providing a structured way to process grief. Similarly, in Buddhist contexts, merit-making rituals enable families to honor their deceased children while finding comfort in the belief in rebirth and the impermanence of life.[1-2,14] However, some nuanced differences in dealing with grief across Western and Eastern cultures are particularly glaring at funerals. For example, African Americans and Filipinos believe that the body cannot be cremated because the soul must go to heaven. Hindus believe that cremation eases

the passage to another life, and families may keep the deceased's ashes in the home.[21] In the context studied, the deceased will be considered whether they should be cremated or buried depending on their age and cause of death. This reflects that even though grief is a universal experience that all of us will face, how the bereaved cope with grief will differ depending on their culture.

Despite the extensive body of research on grief, a gap exists in understanding how localized cultural beliefs in regions such as Nakhon Phanom influence the grieving process. This study aimed to explore the cultural beliefs and spiritual healing practices parents in Nakhon Phanom apply to cope with grief after the loss of a child. Hopefully, the insights from this study will contribute to developing culturally sensitive nursing interventions, supporting grieving parents in navigating their grief in ways that align with cultural and spiritual values.

Study Aim

This study aimed to explore the cultural beliefs and spiritual healing practices parents in Nakhon Phanom apply to cope with grief after the loss of a child.

Methods

Study Design: This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach[23] to provide the researchers with theoretical approaches, sampling techniques, data collection techniques, and affirmation of the rigor of the results. This approach is well-suited to capture participants' rich, detailed experiences within their cultural context. The Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR)[24] was employed as the guideline for reporting this study.

Settings: The study was conducted in four villages in the Kok Hin Hae and Ban Na Bua subdistricts of Nakhon Phanom Province, northeastern Thailand. These villages were chosen because of their unique cultural practices related to spiritual healing and grief management. This setting allowed the researchers to gather detailed and culturally specific information about participants' experiences.

Participants and Sampling: The participants were parents living in Nakhon Phanom who had experienced losing a child. Purposive sampling[25] was employed to select participants who met the following inclusion criteria: (1) parents, both male and female, who had experienced the death of a child aged between 1 day and 18 years, (2) time elapsed since the death between six months and two years before the study, and (3) ability to understand and communicate in Thai. The exclusion criteria included (1) any signs or symptoms of mental illness or psychiatric disorders, as well as current receipt of mental healthcare services and (2) inability to participate in additional interviews beyond the first, leading to incomplete data. With the assistance of local healthcare professionals and community leaders, 20 parents meeting the inclusion criteria agreed to participate in the study.

Ethical Considerations: The study received ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Nakhon Phanom University (HE3467), with an expedited review on December 6, 2023. Written and verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were informed about the study's objectives, benefits, risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained by using numerical codes for participants, and audio recordings were stored in password-protected flash drives that were destroyed after the study.

Data Collection: Data collection occurred between March and July 2024 after obtaining ethical approval and permission from the Kok Hin Hae Subdistrict Administrative Organization and Ban Na Bua Subdistrict Health Promoting Hospital. The recruitment process was conducted in collaboration with local nurses, who used participants' medical histories to identify eligible individuals. As a gatekeeper, a community leader introduced the researcher to the participants.

The researcher collected data through in-depth interviews, participant observation, field notes, and audio recordings. Each participant was interviewed

individually at home, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. A total of 2-3 interviews were conducted per participant. The interviews were semi-structured, open-ended, and aimed at exploring the participants' experiences with spiritual healing and cultural beliefs in overcoming grief. Questions were developed based on the concept of loss and grief, local cultural beliefs, and related literature. The interview questions were then reviewed by three qualitative research experts. Examples of interview questions included: "How did you manage to return to normal life?" and "What cultural beliefs have helped you adjust to your child's passing?"

The researcher, experienced in qualitative research and knowledgeable about the local cultural context, used participant observation during the interviews and recorded non-verbal behaviors and emotional responses in field notes. Data saturation was reached when no new information or themes emerged, and participants were asked to review the transcripts to confirm the accuracy and completeness of the content before coding for analysis.

Data Analysis: Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection by using content analysis.[26] Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were classified according to the cultural beliefs applied by parents in Nakhon Phanom to alleviate grief. The data were then organized into categories, which were grouped under higher-order headings based on emerging themes. Finally, the researcher selectively coded the data, using verbatim quotations from participants to illustrate key themes related to spiritual healing and grief processing.

Trustworthiness: To ensure trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were addressed.[27] Multiple methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, field notes, and audio recordings, were used to ensure credibility. Data triangulation was achieved by gathering data from various sources, including different people, times, and settings. Member checking was conducted, allowing the participants to review and correct facts before the analysis was finalized. The research process was audited to ensure dependability and confirmability. All raw data, including interview transcripts, field notes, and personal reflections, were carefully stored and reviewed to confirm the research findings. The researchers recorded their own reflections and feelings during data collection and analysis to enhance transparency. A thick description of the findings was provided to ensure transferability, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings.

Findings

Description of participants

The 20 participants in this study ranged in age from 30 to over 40 years, with the majority aged 35-39 years (65%). All of the participants were Buddhists (100%). The sample consisted of an equal number of male and female participants. Most participants (70%) came from extended families, with agriculture being the predominant occupation (85%). In terms of the deceased children, most were males (55%) with varied ages, with preschool-aged children (40%) and school-aged children (45%) being the most common. Causes of death included illness (65%), road accidents (20%), and drowning (15%). The participants' characteristics in this study are shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Participant characteristics (n = 20)

KI	AP	GP	FT	OCU	BOD	GDC	ADC	CD
P01	33	Male	EF	Agriculture	1st child	Male	Preschool-age	Road accident
P02	41	Male	EF	Agriculture	Last child	Male	Preschool-age	Illness
P03	35	Female	EF	Agriculture	2nd child	Female	School-age	Drowning
P04	36	Male	EF	Agriculture	2nd child	Female	School-age	Illness
P05	32	Male	EF	Agriculture	1st child	Female	Preschool-age	Illness

Table 1. Participant characteristics (n = 20) (Cont.)

KI	AP	GP	FT	OCU	BOD	GDC	ADC	CD
P06	34	Female	EF	Agriculture	1st child	Male	Preschool-age	Illness
P07	45	Female	EF	Agriculture	Last child	Male	School-age Infant	Illness
P08	37	Female	EF	Agriculture	2nd child	Male	School-age	Illness
P09	33	Male	NF	Government employee	1st child	Female	Infant	Illness
P10	35	Female	NF	General employee	1st child	Male	Preschool-age	Illness
P11	38	Male	EF	Agriculture	Last child	Male	Adolescent	Road accident
P12	31	Female	EF	Agriculture	1st child	Female	Adolescent	Road accident
P13	37	Female	EF	Agriculture	1st child	Female	Preschool-age	Road accident
P14	39	Female	EF	Agriculture	Last child	Male	School-age	Illness
P15	38	Female	EF	Agriculture	Last child	Female	Preschool-age	Illness
P16	36	Male	NF	Agriculture	1st child	Male	School-age	Drowning
P17	37	Male	NF	Agriculture	Last child	Male	School-age	Illness
P18	35	Male	EF	Agriculture	1st child	Male	Preschool-age	Illness
P19	37	Female	NF	Housewife	2nd child	Female	School-age	Illness
P20	39	Male	NF	Agriculture	Last child	Female	School-age	Drowning

Note. AP = age of participant, GP = gender of participant, FT = family type, OCU = occupation, BOD = birth order of deceased child, GDC = gender of deceased child, ADC = age of deceased child, CD = cause of death, EF = Extended family, NF = nuclear family

Spiritual healing of parents living in Nakhon Phanom based on cultural beliefs to alleviate grief after the loss of a child was revealed in the following two superordinate themes: (1) following traditional ways and (2) following teachings and rituals related to Buddhist beliefs, with the following subthemes below.

Theme 1: Following traditional ways

The participants employed various traditional practices rooted in beliefs about supernatural powers to cope with grief. These practices encompassed five subthemes described below:

Subtheme 1.1: Calling the spirit home

Once a child dies, it is necessary to perform a ceremony in the hospital to summon the spirit of the deceased child to accompany the parents back home to perform merit-making and funeral ceremonies according to their traditions and beliefs.

"The elders in the family prepare a bowl comprising flowers and five pairs of candles (khun-ha in the local dialect). Then they light one incense stick and call out the name of the deceased child, telling him/her to return home and not stay here. On the way home, if there is a bridge, they throw 1- and 5-baht coins, or whatever is convenient, to ask permission from the spirits so the deceased's spirit can cross the bridge." (P 01, 33 years old)

"This ritual facilitates my deceased in receiving the merit we parents made during the funeral ceremony; she will have abundant food and utensils, not be in need, and be in a good place. Doing this helps me feel comfortable." (P 03, 35 years old)

Subtheme 1.2: Severing ties with the deceased

The severing ties ceremony, or "*tut-phee tut-chui*," is conducted to symbolically release the emotional connection between the parents and the deceased child, allowing the child's soul to move on and reincarnate. This ritual helps parents accept their loss and begin to let go of their grief.

> *"According to our belief, if the parents are too sad, the souls of the deceased cannot be reincarnated, because the deceased child is still tied to the grief of the parents."* (P 04, 36 years old)

> *"The elders place a banana stalk near the coffin, so all parents and relatives can hold one side of a banana stalk. Then the elders communicate with the spirit that, from now on, the deceased and relatives are in different realms and have no connection with each other in any way, asking that the spirit go to a good realm. Finally, the banana stalk is cut off and burned with the body."* (P 07, 45 years old)

Subtheme 1.3: Realizing the truth of life through scattering cracked rice

While transporting the corpse to the temple or crematorium, rice or cracked rice is scattered on the ground to ward off bad luck. The scattering of cracked rice during the funeral procession serves as a powerful reminder of life's impermanence. This ritual is performed only in cremation contexts. The scattering of cracked rice symbolizes the finality of death, helping the parents come to terms with the fact that their child cannot return, just as scattered cracked rice cannot regrow.

> *"At my child's funeral, there was a scattering of cracked rice by the elderly people while transporting the deceased child to the temple or crematorium. This ritual is commonly seen in the northeastern region. It is a strategy that helps parents accept the truth of life."* (P 02, 41 years old)

> *"Just as cracked rice that has fallen to the ground cannot grow again, so a dead person cannot be resurrected. It is a strategy that helps parents recognize the truth of life."* (P 05, 32 years old)

Subtheme 1.4: Dispelling sorrow and enhancing auspiciousness

After the cremation or burial, the participants engaged in rituals such as washing with holy water and performing the "*bai-si-su-kwan*" ceremony to dispel sorrow and enhance auspiciousness. These rituals are equally important for both buried and cremated children. The parents believed that washing with holy water and receiving blessings from elders helped dispel bad luck and renewed their emotional strength to continue their lives.

> *"Older people say that, when returning from a crematorium, it is a place that makes people feel demoralized or weak. Therefore, it is necessary to wash our hands with holy water or sprinkle it on our heads to wash away bad things from our body before entering the house."* (P 06, 34 years old)

> *"After the cremation ceremony is over, relatives perform a ceremony to tie our arms to bring the spirit to be with us. They tie our wrists and bless us with happiness and healing from all sorrows. It's like a ritual that can encourage us to feel strong and have the willpower to carry on with our lives."* (P 08, 37 years old)

Subtheme 1.5: Inquiry into existence by calling upon spirits or Bueng Vinyan ceremony

This ritual involving communication with the spirit of the deceased child through a medium is typically performed when the death is sudden or unexpected, such as in the case of drowning or other accidents. For these parents, the spirit-calling ritual is a way to inquire about their child's well-being in the afterlife and to address any unfinished business.

"This ritual was important to us, as it offered a way to connect with our child's spirit and ensure that he had safely transitioned to the afterlife. Hearing from our child through a medium, that the child was not suffering in the afterlife provided much-needed closure." (P 12, 31 years old)

"I was glad to know at least that my deceased child was not in distress and had received all the merit that we had dedicated to him." (P 11, 38 years old)

Theme 2: Following teachings and rituals related to Buddhist beliefs

This theme reflects the participants' close relationship with Buddhism and how it shaped their understanding of suffering and provided them with a way to achieve emotional healing. The subthemes here focus on (1) funeral rites related to Buddhist beliefs and (2) teachings of Isaan proverbs about Dhamma.

Subtheme 2.1: Funeral rites related to Buddhist beliefs

Funeral rites in Nakhon Phanom combine Buddhist teachings with local beliefs and traditions. The parents believed that these rites not only facilitated their child's transition to a better realm but also provided comfort for the living such as merit-making for collecting bones, requiem prayer ceremonies, or merit-making on the anniversary of the death. The participants expressed that these practices gave them peace of mind, as they believed their child was receiving the necessities for the afterlife.

"The monks pray requiem for the deceased child and place 32 coins in different parts of a bone puppet. By doing this, my deceased child will be reborn with a healthy body and complete organs. The monks also sprinkle holy water on the bones for good fortune or according to the belief that the deceased's soul will rest in peace without any worries." (P 14, 39 years old)

"The requiem prayers helped us understand the impermanence of life, enabling us to accept our child's death." (P 13, 37 years old)

"I invited five monks to come and make merit in the morning to dedicate merit to my deceased child. Doing this gives me peace of mind that my child will not be in trouble and have enough necessities for the next world." (P 12, 31 years old)

Subtheme 2.2 Teachings of Isaan proverbs about Dhamma

Isaan proverbs recited at funerals reinforce Buddhist teachings, providing moral and spiritual guidance for grieving parents. These proverbs emphasize the inevitability of death, the importance of karma, and the cyclical nature of life and death. For the participant parents, these teachings helped frame their loss within the broader context of Buddhist philosophy.

"I applied the teachings of Isaan proverbs that stress the importance of doing good deeds in life, as these will benefit a person in the afterlife or ความตายนี้แขวนคอทุกบาดหย่าง ไผซิถางแหกฟ้าหนีได้ บ่ฮ่อนมี ทำดีไว้ตายไปซิได้เพิ่ง ทำชั่วไว้ตายแล้วก็ใช้เวร บ่ฮู้จักท่อนี้อย่าเกิดเป็นคน ผู้ใดจำได้แล้วพ้นทุกข์ไปสู่ความสุข (dialect language in Thai)." (P 18, 35 years old)

"Another participant reflected on a proverb about the balance between happiness and suffering, which helped the participant understand that suffering is an inevitable part of life or สุขทุกข์นี้ของกลางเทียมโลก บ่มีไผหลีกม้มสิลงหั้นสู่คน (dialect language in Thai)." (P 15, 38 years old)

Discussion

The rich findings demonstrate that cultural practices in Nakhon Phanom provide a structured framework for parents to process grief. Deeply rooted

in the community's spiritual and religious beliefs, these cultural practices offer emotional relief and help prevent prolonged grief. The rituals of "calling the spirit home" and "severing ties" are particularly significant, as they enable parents to find peace by honoring their deceased child's spirit. In addition to these traditional practices, religious rituals such as "merit-making" and "Buddhist proverbs" help parents make sense of their loss and imbue their grief with meaning. These findings align with broader studies on grief in cultural contexts, offering new insights specific to the beliefs and rituals of Nakhon Phanom.

Cultural and spiritual practices for coping with grief:

Parenthood is a deeply emotional experience, fostering strong emotional bonds and a profound sense of identity through the caregiving role. The death of a child, therefore, represents not just the loss of life but the loss of the parent-child bond itself. The grieving process is thus intertwined with spiritual healing facilitated through cultural beliefs about the afterlife. In Nakhon Phanom, this healing occurs through following both traditional ways and religious practices. This interpretation resonates with the works of Rosenblatt[28] and Walsh and McGoldrick,[29] who observed that culturally specific rituals provide structure for families to process grief and regain a sense of control in the wake of loss.

Following traditional ways:

The traditional practices observed in Nakhon Phanom comprise several rituals that assist parents in coping with grief. These include calling the spirit home, severing ties with the deceased, scattering cracked rice, dispelling sorrow, and enhancing auspiciousness. These practices are not only rooted in local beliefs about the supernatural but also serve as tangible ways for grieving parents to manage grief.

Calling the spirit home can be explained based on beliefs in an afterlife and that the soul of a person who dies does not die but rather moves to another realm where the spirits of ancestors reside.[9,11,14,30] The spirits of ancestors are a life force that inspires growth on Earth and they can communicate with the living, their descendants, and other relatives, by using rituals as a medium.[9,11,14-16,31] This reflects the importance of ghosts as supernatural powers that are very important to the Isaan people. To help the deceased's spirit move to heaven where the spirits of ancestors reside, calling the spirit home ceremony is performed, especially when the death occurred outside the home, as in this study where all participants' children died in hospital from illnesses including road accidents and drowning. Doing this helps keep the spirit of the deceased from becoming a wandering spirit and allows the deceased to perform merit-making and funeral ceremonies based on traditions.[14] The parents believe that, if the spirit of the deceased child can receive the merit the parents made during the funeral ceremony, it will help the deceased child be happy and in a good place resulting in the parents feeling comfortable.[9,14,30-31] Similarly, Yasien-Esmael and Rubin[32] revealed great variance in the ranks souls in heaven may attain. Every soul that arrives attains its place based on deeds performed in life. To increase the religious merit of the deceased, therefore, the bereaved may perform several deeds to send greetings and request that God forgive the deceased.

In this study, the ritual of calling the spirit home was described as essential for ensuring that the child's soul did not become a wandering spirit, allowing the parents to feel a sense of peace and connection.[9,14-16,30-31] This ritual was performed regardless of whether the child was buried or cremated. For children who were buried, however, the parents performed the ritual outside the home. The participants emphasized that the ritual helped them feel that their child's well-being was secured in the next life, alleviating feelings of guilt and offering emotional comfort.

Inquiry into existence by calling upon spirits is the strategy of the bereaved in caring for themselves through believing in the supernatural.[11,15-16] This ceremony relies on belief in ghosts which is an original belief of the Isaan people combined with the belief in

Buddhism in terms of the law of karma and the truth of life through rituals about ghosts.[9-11,14,30-31] This reflects the important role of the belief in ghosts for the Isaan people in terms of creating mental stability arising from the fear and ignorance of humans toward unexplained phenomena that affect life both positively and negatively, leading to belief and rituals. These beliefs likely anchor the bereaved to feeling comfortable and lucky with a sense of well-being.[11] In this study, when the participants faced the loss of a child, they sought help from "Mho-Mo" (in the local dialect) who is the representative for communicating with the deceased child's spirit or ghost or supernatural powers to inquire about the deceased child's well-being and allow the parents to do certain things for the deceased that were unfinished business when the child was alive. This is particularly true when the death is an accident preventing the parents from being able to care for, talk to, or say goodbye to their child in the final moments of life. In such cases, grieving parents usually respond to the loss by yearning or searching for the deceased again. The findings align with a study revealing that the ceremony for calling the spirit allows grieving parents to talk with the child who has died. Importantly, it helps parents realize that the loss is real, allowing the parents to be free from clinging to impermanence, leading to acceptance of the loss and finally letting go of grief.[16] This ceremony, therefore, plays a crucial role in alleviating grief in parents after losing a child.

The severing ties ceremony in which the deceased's soul is symbolically released helps parents detach from their overwhelming grief, enabling the child's spirit to reincarnate. This resonates with a study on overcoming grief in Thai women experiencing perinatal death revealing that the *tut-phee tut-chui* ceremony, which is a ritual for the severing of mother-child ties, releases the souls of deceased children and enables rebirth. Therefore, with love and desire for the deceased children to be reborn into a good world, the women in this study tried to accept and express their feelings of grief with a sense that they understood it well.[1] The participant parents in Nakhon Phanom found solace in the belief that, through this ritual, their children could be reborn in a peaceful place.

In addition, the scattering cracked rice ceremony is aimed at teaching the living that, once its lifespan has expired, the body cannot be brought back to life again. While scattering the cracked rice, one should pray *"Bhijjatiputisantehomaranantanghichiwitang"* (In the Pali language), which means "Everybody will decay and perish because every life ends in death."[14] This belief facilitates grieving parents in learning to accept the truth and intend to do good deeds to dedicate merit to those who have passed away and create good deeds for themselves while they are still alive.[10,30] Therefore, the symbolic scattering of cracked rice further deepens parents' understanding of the finality of death, echoing the findings of Smid et al.,[33] who showed that symbolic acts during mourning help individuals make sense of their loss.

Dispelling sorrow and enhancing auspiciousness is a ritual for encouraging parents to feel strong and have the willpower to carry on with their lives. These findings align with a previous study stating that coping with grief is a social and cultural enterprise infused with ancient and contemporary rituals, customs, beliefs, and deeply held values.[19] This is also congruent with a study on overcoming grief in Thai women experiencing perinatal death revealing that cultural awareness in terms of the *bai-si-su-kwan* ceremony involves beliefs in religion, supernatural powers, and traditional ways followed to promote a sense of encouragement and relief from grief.[1-2] Therefore, dispelling sorrow and enhancing auspiciousness, including cleansing with holy water and blessing ceremonies, are believed to provide emotional resilience, a concept supported by previous studies that highlighted the importance of cultural beliefs in promoting emotional strength when facing devastating events.[11,13-20,28-31,33]

Following teachings and rituals related to Buddhist beliefs

Religious practices, particularly Buddhist traditions, played a central role in helping the parents

in this study frame their grief within a broader spiritual context.[1-2] Reliance on Buddhist funeral rites, including merit-making and requiem prayers, helped the grieving parents maintain a connection with their children while providing a pathway for emotional healing.[1-2,14] This aligns with Worden's grief model,[34] which highlights the role of religious rituals in aiding individuals in adjusting to loss. For instance, the merit-making ceremony for collecting bones was an essential practice for the parents in this study, ensuring that the deceased child would be reborn with a complete body.[14] Rooted in a belief in reincarnation, this act helped the parents maintain psychological security by believing that their children would be reborn in a better place, which means that rituals often sustain continuing bonds with the deceased, thereby providing comfort to the bereaved.[9-10,14,30]

Buddhist funeral rituals in various ceremonies, especially death, always contain mysteries and philosophy.[14] Similarly, in the bone collection ceremony, the bones of the deceased child are assembled to form a person based on belief in the afterlife that, if the deceased were reborn, he/she would have a complete body. Importantly, this ritual reflects the mystical riddle of transformation, aiming to teach the living that transformation from a human being to ashes represents "*anatta,*" which means "no self" and "not ours." Therefore, we should not cling to it. Additionally, requiem prayer ceremonies reflect Buddhist metaphysics appearing in the chant of Matika-Abhidhamma, which is a recitation of the mind, Cetasika, Rūpa, Nibbāna.[14] This ceremony reminded the parents in this study of Buddhist teachings on impermanence, helping them come to terms with the transitory nature of life. This practice allowed the parents to cultivate mindfulness and develop wisdom, which enabled them to transform their grief into spiritual growth. This transformation mirrors the findings of Shi,[20] who described how Buddhist contemplative practices could guide individuals through grief and toward emotional serenity. Moreover, merit-making on the anniversary of the death, which is influenced by beliefs about sin, heaven, and hell,[35] teach the living about gratitude and reincarnation. The power of merit made for the deceased will result in the deceased being reborn in a good realm in the next world. Importantly, the act of merit-making on the anniversary of the death allowed the parents to reaffirm their bond with the deceased child. By making sacrificial offerings and expressing their hopes for their child's well-being in the afterlife, the parents were able to process their grief and find strength in their faith while continuing to promote the development of a continuing bond with the deceased who stayed with them forever in spirit with love.[1-2,36] This reflects findings from Silverman and Klass,[37] who demonstrated that maintaining continuing bonds with the deceased is a central part of the grieving process.

Although the funeral rituals found in this study facilitated the parents in letting go of their grief and gave them peace of mind, the ritual of the bone collection ceremony is not performed for deaths involving road accidents or drowning because these causes of death are considered unnatural death, which is a bad death, or what is called *"tai-hong"* in the Isaan dialect, which means a violent death. Cremation in these cases is prohibited as it may bring disaster to the family.[14] Interestingly, neonatal death or death shortly after birth or the death of a child that was too young involves bringing the body for burial without the bone collection and requiem prayer ceremonies. In such cases, the deceased had no teeth yet, which means the deceased died without sin. In this regard, according to Christian belief, baptism is how a person who repents receives remission of sins, thus opening the door to the kingdom of God. However, a little child who dies before age eight, when he cannot yet be responsible for any sin he has innately inherited, the mercy of God confirms and redeems the child. This perception results in no culturally sanctioned rituals or traditions to help the bereaved say goodbye.[38-39] In some contexts, this results in the bereaved being forced to cope in isolation, thwarting their capacity to mourn and subsequently achieve psychological adjustment.[39] Nevertheless, in

the context studied, making merit to purify the mind is believed to bring merit to both parents and their deceased children. It also brings parents happiness and peace of mind.[2]

In addition to religious practices, Isaan proverbs were instrumental in helping the parents in this study navigate their grief. Often recited at funerals, these proverbs convey moral lessons about the inevitability of death, non-attachment, and the cyclical nature of life.[14] Kittivanno[40] noted that these traditional proverbs serve as a vital source of comfort and wisdom, teaching individuals to accept suffering as part of life while encouraging mindfulness and compassion. The proverbs provided the parents in the study with a philosophical framework for understanding their loss, echoing the role of religion as a coping mechanism and offering individuals a way to find meaning in their grief. In this study, Isaan proverbs were read as condolences at funeral rites, which helped the grieving parents absorb the moral teachings of Buddhism in terms of the principles of common characteristics as the ordinary laws or definite requirements of all *sankharas*, namely impermanence, *dukkha*, and *anattā*. This reflects the mystery of Dhamma philosophy in that the emergence of all things depends on causes and factors. Everything is just an element and not sustainable, but conditions are always dynamic. Isaan proverbs, therefore, facilitate grieving parents to understand suffering and learn true happiness in life.[14,40]

In summary, the cultural and religious beliefs in Nakhon Phanom provide grieving parents with a structured, meaningful way to process their loss. The rituals and practices associated with death help parents maintain a bond with their deceased child while also guiding them toward emotional and spiritual healing. These findings align with broader grief literature emphasizing the importance of ritual, community, and faith in navigating the mourning process. This study contributes new insights into how specific beliefs and practices in Nakhon Phanom help bereaved parents overcome their immense grief.

Limitations

This study was conducted within a specific cultural and geographical context, namely Nakhon Phanom Province in Northeastern Thailand. Thus, the research findings should be applied to similar contexts with careful consideration.

Conclusions and Implications for Nursing Practice

This study provides valuable insights into how parents in Nakhon Phanom use cultural and spiritual practices to overcome grief after the loss of a child. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of grief within specific cultural contexts and offer practical implications for nursing practice.

Grief reflects the love and attachment parents have for their deceased children, and rituals provide a structured space for parents to express this grief. Death-related rituals, such as the severing ties ceremony and spirit-calling rituals, allow parents to honor the memories of their children while also guiding them through their journey from pain to healing. This study emphasizes that these post-death rituals are as important for the living as for the deceased, facilitating both emotional and spiritual growth.

According to our findings, healthcare providers, particularly nurses, can play a vital role by offering culturally sensitive support. Nurses should be aware of local grieving rituals and spiritual beliefs to provide care that aligns with parents' cultural needs. Integrating these insights into nursing education and developing tailored bereavement care plans will equip nurses with the skills needed to offer better support during the grieving process. Providing spiritual counseling based on religious teachings and local proverbs, as well as creating spaces for families to perform rituals, can further enhance the healing process. Additionally, nursing practice guidelines should incorporate the

importance of cultural beliefs such as severing ties, scattering cracked rice, merit-making, and requiem prayer ceremonies. By supporting these practices, healthcare providers can help parents process their grief in a manner that respects their cultural values, ultimately fostering smoother emotional recovery.

Finally, future research should continue to explore cultural differences in death-related cognitive and emotional processes, considering cultural beliefs as an essential factor in understanding grief and healing.

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การสำรวจแนวปฏิบัติการเยียวยาจิตวิญญาณและความเชื่อทางวัฒนธรรมของบิดามารดาที่เศร้าโศกจากการสูญเสียบุตร : การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทย

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บทคัดย่อ: ความเชื่อทางวัฒนธรรมเป็นศูนย์กลางของระบบความหมายระดับโลกของผู้คนจำนวนมาก และความตายเป็นเวทีกลางในการแสดงออกถึงความเชื่อทางวัฒนธรรมซึ่งอาจเป็นส่วนสำคัญของการรับมือและการปรับตัวต่อความโศกเศร้าที่เกิดจากการเสียชีวิตของบุคคลอันเป็นที่รัก การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจความเชื่อทางวัฒนธรรมและแนวทางการเยียวยาทางจิตวิญญาณที่บิดามารดาในจังหวัดนครพนมใช้รับมือกับความโศกเศร้าจากการสูญเสียบุตร ผู้ให้ข้อมูลเป็นบิดามารดาที่อาศัยอยู่ในจังหวัดนครพนม 20 คนที่สูญเสียบุตรอายุระหว่าง 1 วันถึง 18 ปี โดยมีระยะเวลาการสูญเสียบุตรระหว่าง 6 เดือนถึง 2 ปี ด้วยวิธีการเลือกแบบเจาะจงตามเกณฑ์ที่กำหนดไว้ เก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลโดยการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกระหว่างเดือนมีนาคมถึงเดือนกรกฎาคม 2567 กระทั่งข้อมูลอิ่มตัว และวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลด้วยวิธีวิเคราะห์เนื้อหา ผลการศึกษาพบ 2 ประเด็น คือ 1) การปฏิบัติตามแนวทางแบบดั้งเดิม (เรียกวิญญาณกลับบ้าน ตัดสัมพันธ์กับผู้ตาย ตระหนักรู้ความจริงของชีวิตผ่านพิธีกรรมโปรยข้าวตอกแตก ปัดเป่าทุกข์โศกและเสริมสิริมงคล พิธีเบิ่งวิญญาณ) และ 2) การปฏิบัติตามคำสอนและพิธีกรรมต่างๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความเชื่อทางพุทธศาสนา (พิธีศพตามความเชื่อของชาวพุทธ ผญาอิสานสอนธรรม)

การศึกษาในประเด็นนี้เป็นการศึกษาครั้งแรกในจังหวัดนครพนมซึ่งให้ข้อมูลอันมีค่าในการทำความเข้าใจแนวปฏิบัติทางวัฒนธรรมและจิตวิญญาณที่บิดามารดาในจังหวัดนครพนมใช้เป็นกลยุทธ์ในการเผชิญความเศร้าโศกหลังจากสูญเสียบุตร ผลการศึกษาสามารถนำไปใช้ในการพัฒนาแผนการดูแลพยาบาลที่คำนึงถึงวัฒนธรรมซึ่งจะช่วยสนับสนุนครอบครัวที่สูญเสียผู้เป็นที่รักได้ดีขึ้น โดยการบูรณาการแนวทางที่เกี่ยวข้องกับวัฒนธรรมเข้ากับการดูแลพยาบาล พยาบาลสามารถช่วยแนะนำครอบครัวในการก้าวข้ามกระบวนการเศร้าโศกไปพร้อมกับการเคารพคุณค่าทางจิตวิญญาณและวัฒนธรรมของผู้สูญเสีย

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คำสำคัญ: การเสียชีวิตของบุตร ความเชื่อทางวัฒนธรรม พิธีกรรมเกี่ยวกับความตาย ความเศร้าโศก บิดามารดา การเยียวยาจิตวิญญาณ การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพ

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