

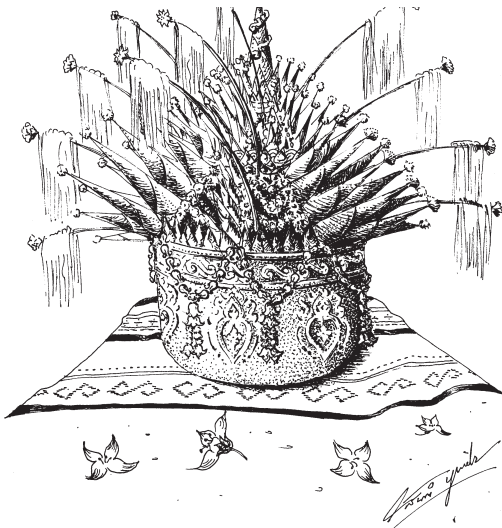
Issan String-Tying Ritual as Missio-Logoi

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ABSTRACT

Within the high-context culture of northeast Thailand, known as Isaan, ritual is essential to life. Any event of significance takes on a deeper meaning when encased in the sacred space of communal ritual gatherings. Ritual combines both discursive and non-discursive communication with a high anticipation from all participants that something is about to happen. In the context of Isaan, I am convinced that there is no better teachable moment for the internalization of the good news of Jesus Christ. Evangelical missiology has tended to shy away from contextualizing cultural rituals for fear of syncretism. There has been a general assumption in much of mission that with time the two sacred Christian events of baptism and communion will eventually serve as functional substitutes for other cultural rituals. But this has not been the case in high context cultures. My paper will briefly review the social functions of ritual in relation to missio-logoi, what its absence means for mission in high-context cultures, concerns raised in utilizing ritual in missio-logoi and will conclude with a case study analysis of string-tying ritual as practiced among the Christ followers in the Isaan region of northeast Thailand.



Traditional Arrangement used in Isaan String-tying Ritual

cannot see. This is the love of God that brings us together and binds us as one. Whether we are coming or going, or Thai or Lao or farang¹ or male or female we are part of God's family. Each of these here are moving in new ways and we want to bless them. We invite everyone here to come and tie a blessing on each of these people today. You do not have to pay any money to do so. You do not have to say special words or speak the foreigner's language. We can speak our heart language and God's spirit will help us understand each other. As we sing come and tie each one in the name of Jesus."

Tong Pan closed with a prayer and again the music began to play. People sang. Then he tied each of our wrists with a string while speaking a verbal blessing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Others began to rise from the circle surrounding us. They started to come toward us in whatever order and fashion they chose. Carefully gathering strings from the bouquet, men and women, young and old, approached us. Each came with a string, a smile, a *wai*² and a verbal blessing. As they tied our outstretched wrists each spoke a combination of unusual and beautiful words: "Happiness... Love of God... Peace of Christ... Happy New Year... God give you understanding... Health... God help you learn... May you come back to Isaan and speak very well... I tie you in the name of Jesus."

Half an hour later our wrists were covered with strings and our hearts were full. All four of us were in tears and many others wept as well. Something had happened. Using common thread a sacred bond of intimacy was created. Still foreigners but not strangers, our string-covered wrists announced that we were one in Christ. "No longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:19-20).

Tongpan closed the ceremony by saying that the strings would not last forever. They were not intended to. The strings would break, he said, but

1 The Thai word for white foreigners, generally with big noses.

2 Thai greeting with raised palms.

the love that we share in Christ Jesus, will never break. It will never leave us because God is faithful. *Satu*.³

Many years and dozens of string-tying ceremonies later, we are still deeply touched by that memory. Each of the ceremonies built upon a foundation of love and growing cultural appreciation for what this ceremony means and does for Isaan people and for us. When the painful time came for us to move our focus of ministry back to the United States we were given a box full of white string and Tongpan told us to “tie the brothers and sisters in America to us.”

And amazingly enough that has begun to happen. String tying blessings have become part of many churches and Christian fellowships in the United States. It has been used at youth camps, send-offs, welcomings, healing services, house-warmings, hospital visitations, funerals, weddings, confirmations, seminary classes, worship services, infant dedications and other occasions. Tangibly blessing each other in the name of Christ by using the string tying ritual of northeast Thailand has spread farther and farther, so much so that I have been asked to write something to explain about it in more detail. This brief review of Isaan string tying is presented in hopes of stimulating more thought, research, and contextualization into other ritual expressions of *missio-logoi* elsewhere in our wider global community.

REDEFINING MISSION THROUGH CONTEXTUALIZED RITUAL

God’s good news always comes relationally in ways to which we as humans can relate. This is the core of the incarnational gospel. According to John 1:14, when the Word literally came and pitched her tent among us, the revelation was clear. This was no ordinary neighbor moving in. The putting on of flesh by that man tangibly showed us insight into who God is; divine glory was made visible to humans. And how was it perceived? Full of grace and truth. Grace by itself might be kind, courteous, socially acceptable communication but insufficient to reveal the amazing reality of God’s glory. Grace without truth, is mere nicety. Truth spoken without grace can be murder. One without the other is insufficient; both are part of the

3 Buddhist word used for “Amen” among this group of Christ-Followers

fullness of God's revelation. In most cultural contexts we experience only partial reflections of God's image among us, that is, one or the other but not both. Relationships that bring both of these together are transformational because they go past superficiality to a deeper level of honesty. Moments of these encounters utilize the best of cultural communication but do not stop there. They are also counter-cultural in ways that both challenge and edify. This John 1:14 incarnational model of reconciliation changes all who participate in it. The transformation is possible because there is a relational connection within my capability to connect.

In the high-context culture of northeast Thailand, the need is not merely for more gracious words but for more worth, proven through demonstration. In a community where face-saving dictates all of social etiquette how does one know what is true? Nice words may be spoken but are they genuine expressions of reality? The answer to this in northeast Thailand requires ritual, a special safe place where spoken words of grace come together with the honesty of truth. If God's mission is truly about reconciliation, and, according to Romans 10:7, faith in the reality of that message comes by hearing (assuming comprehension), that hearing must come about in culturally impactful ways. In the northeast Thai high-context culture comprehensive hearing that allows for response is not only auditory, but also visual and even kinesthetic or participatory. This is what ritual does in a high-context culture. It provides a socially acceptable safe place for grace and truth to come together in transformative ways.

Christian mission in high-context cultures (and all others) must be redefined. It must be freed from its stereotypic foreign baggage. The gospel must be reclaimed as good news again, not more bad news of another form of religiosity.⁴ We must reclaim and reconnect Christian mission with its essentially personal focus: God's reconciliation with humanity through Jesus Christ. This redefinition must be biblically theocentric and not religiously ethnocentric - in other words, let's get the order correct. God initiated mission to lost people with the first question in the Bible (Gen. 3:9). This is a radical

4 Certainly there are enough works-based, human-centric religious practices already extant in Asia (not to mention the rest of the world) without any need to promote more.

redefinition of the direction of reconciliation and the heart of mission. In the normal worldly sense reconciliation starts with the loser seeking to somehow re-establish connection with the victor. But through Christ, God has turned that worldly definition upside down (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Nowhere in scripture is it mentioned that humanity is reconciling itself to God. God takes all the initiative and makes all the arrangements so that humanity can be and is in fact reconciled to God through the work of Christ (Rom. 5:10-11; Eph. 2:14-16; Col 1:19-22).

Contextualized ritual is an opportunity to rescue the core of mission from its historic religious definition. It is a chance to redefine mission not merely as fancy words or foreign practices. It is a way to define the reconciling work of God in my own cultural context in transformative ways. The work of mission enters my world and is available to work in ways that can impact me, my life, my family, my community, and in fact, my entire culture.

In the high culture context of northeast Thailand any practice of mission that is not integrated with the ritual life of the community fails to address the numerous social requirements which that culture has placed upon faith practices. Failure to recognize and address the ritual components of this society will result in unaddressed cultural values and felt needs. It will force the half-helped congregant(s) to seek completion elsewhere - outside the Christian community. Setting up such a scenario opens the door to dangerous dual or multiple allegiances where Christ (as experienced in the limited provisions of a non-ritual embracing Christianity) is experienced as insufficient for all of life since more is needed. This may compel some towards undercover idolatry, completely against God's design and in the opposite direction of human-divine reconciliation.

The biblical model of God's mission incorporates human ritual at all levels throughout scripture. God enters into cultural forms but does not allow them to remain at the surface level. Beginning with the culturally implicit contractual format in Genesis 15, God uses the ritual but takes it to a much deeper level in order to address the deepest agony of the doubting missionary Abram. Contrary to the cultural norm, the contract ritual was transformed into a prophetic promise requiring only observation and belief on the part

of the human participant (Gen. 15:17-18). Jesus did something similar to a very familiar ritual meal when bread and wine were suddenly transformed from cultural routine to a message of deep spiritual meaning (I Cor. 11:23-26). Many other examples could be given of how God employed culturally-recognizable ritual forms and infused them with enhanced depth and breadth of meaning.⁵ The good news of Christian mission should be identified in ways that are understandable, expectant, wholistic, inclusive, informative, transformative, and relational. Contextualized ritual incorporates all of this.

FUNCTIONS OF RITUAL IN RELATION TO MISSIO-LOGOI

Hiebert and others list three main functions of ritual or cultural rites. These are rites of initiation, rites of intensification, and rites of crisis. When ritual is included in the definition of Christian mission the “what” of mission now addresses what does Christian mission do for me? This moves mission from simply a cognitive level to now address the deeper functional levels of human existence whether they are rites of passage (initiation), rites of remembrance (intensification) or rites of problem solving (crisis). In high culture societies these rites are already established and demonstrate God’s gift to all cultures addressing human needs in ways that can point to divine presence when used biblically.

Rites of Initiation

All humans transition through a variety of positions in our social structures from infancy to childhood, to youth, adolescence, puberty, mating, parenting, adulthood, aging, death. These are the predictable stages describing merely physical status. On a social level personal status is also marked at the

5 Two specific examples: 1) Circumcision was changed from a rite of passage into manhood at puberty into a physical symbol of God’s Covenant symbol on the eighth day and 2) The Tabernacle replicated exactly the god tents of other nomadic Canaanite tribes with the major difference being that unlike other groups that packed up their god and traveled as they pleased, in this culture God decided when and where to go and the nation followed.

various levels of education, employment, marriage unions, separation and divorce, leadership selection, recognition and promotion, military preparation and service, widowhood. Some social rituals of transformation leave a physical imprint on the body in such cases as permanent tribal markings or impermanent henna tattooing for weddings. Religious traditions also require rituals in recognizing education in the faith, rites of conversion, membership rites, religious ordination for the selected leaders. Some religious rituals are also permanently physical in nature as in the case of circumcision and religious tattooing. All of these rites of initiation socially mark the transformation of the positions of the individuals and parties involved to a previously unattained level in the cultural structure.

Rites of initiation are often repeated in various societies on a regular basis or at regular times in the social calendar due to the predictable nature of these common stages of life but they are always performed only on the uninitiated. For the participants involved these are one-time life-changing events enabling all in that society to recognize that member with the new specified identity. Except in certain emergency cases involving crisis, it is unnecessary (and in most cases unacceptable) to re-enter a rite of initiation a second time and re-participate. This would go against the social order that has determined one's entry level the first time.

Rites of Intensification

As humans we have a tendency to forget. God made provisions for this by instituting repeated rituals that remind us of the works of God, our relationship to God and each other, who we are and what our responsibilities are to each other and all of creation. Rituals that serve as reminders are called rites of intensification. For Christ followers two primary examples would be partaking regularly of communion and even worshipping on a regular basis. The entire system of a liturgical calendar is based on the idea that seasons of the church are reminders of those things that God desires for us to remember.

Rites of intensification build corporate identity as well. Any anniversary of a historic event serves a communal function. Attending a

rites of initiation can be a reminder to those who have already been through that experience. Weddings remind all who are married of their spoken vows. Baptism can be an opportunity for all who are previously baptized to affirm what God has done in their lives.

Rites of Crisis

On the physical level, rites of healing are due to illness or exorcism in the case of spiritual molestation. Rites for freedom from addictions of all kinds are required in every society. On the social level rites of restoration occur after interpersonal and intercultural conflict. Within the religious realm rites of discipline for wayward members (and leaders) also occur. Rites of crisis may overlap in some areas such as funerals which clearly mark a rite of passage of the dead for the survivors but must also address the unexpected nature of the departed member regardless of age. In some cases a shotgun wedding may be considered a rite of crisis as well as a rite of initiation.

Northeastern Thai string-tying ritual incorporates all of the functions listed above and perhaps others as well. When contextualized with the empowering message of the relational reality of the incarnate Word, the culturally understood formational event becomes transformational. In the process, the work of mission becomes culturally relevant good news and still counter culturally challenging. Grace and truth together in these moments reveals the glory of the Father in ways that words alone cannot fully express.

OPERATIVE FUNCTION OF RITUAL IN RELATION TO MISSIO-LOGOI

What causes the ritual to be existentially operative? Here is where ritual in Christian mission fills its greatest role in God's reconciling ministry. The ultimate effectiveness of any ritual in Christian mission does not come from the human recipients, participants, or even the ordained performer of the ritual itself. The effectual power of a Christian ritual recognizes its source as coming from the Creator God who generously gifts each culture

with appropriate forms to express itself in various meaningful and gloriously diverse forms and ways.

Here is the powerful teachable moment of mission where God can be made even more evident. Why is this moment so full of potential? Because the moment of the ritual is the peak of communal expectation. Previous to this moment the society struggles under the waters of cultural uncertainty seeking direction when suddenly, directed together through the ritual moment, everyone breaks through the surface and with a collective gasp float together on a newly restored level of communal harmony.

CONCERNS RAISED IN UTILIZING RITUAL IN MISSIO-LOGOI

Of all aspects of contextualization within Christian mission, the appropriation of ritual is perhaps most problematic for Evangelicals. There are certainly historic reasons for this. It may be of some comfort to know that even during the period of the Old Testament God refuses to accept the very same ritual which God commanded earlier when that ritual became “ritualotry” (worship of the ritual) and when the ritual became formulaic without any sincerity of heart behind it (Isaiah 9, Amos 5). God refused to accept ritual when it was used as a cover-up for social injustices which the practitioners failed to address and in fact had caused and promoted.

Other oft-cited concerns that will not be addressed here are the concerns that contextualized ritual would create a stumbling block for a Christian sister or brother; that contextualized ritual could fall into the realm of religious magic; that it lays the groundwork for a false or counterfeit form of the truth; and that the required practice of contextualized ritual can become a new form of religious legalism and thus devoid the ritual of its transformational message.⁶

While each of these are indeed important areas of concerns, the most common response that occurs is a fear of syncretism - that in the process of contextualization the gospel message will somehow be diluted

6 Readers interested in pursuing more information on these areas of concern should refer to my doctoral dissertation listed in the source material.

or polluted to such an extent that it is unrecognizable. Mixture of forms, however, is not the real issue. No practices of Christian faith come divorced from cultural expression. Christianity has freely adopted many forms from pagan religious practices over its history and today the inherent meaning has changed in ways that glorify God, build up the body and promote the work of the kingdom. How can it be that this process has somehow stopped or is no longer possible within the Buddhist context? The danger is not in the mixture, it is what Kraft terms as “dual allegiance” where Christ is not enough. When Christian practices fail to address an aspect important to a member’s life and they seek solutions elsewhere this is dual allegiance. In biblical language it is idolatry, but that individual may not be blamed for all of it. What has caused a particular church leader or Christward movement to fail to address particular worldview issues? Why, for example, would string-tying ritual be seen as ungodly when it can be used to express cognitive truths in non-discursive ways that lead to personal and social transformation? These are the questions I raised in my study and will be briefly reviewed in the section that follows.

THE CASE OF STRING-TYING RITUAL AS PRACTICED AMONG ISAAN CHRIST FOLLOWERS

The origin of the custom of tying protective strings around the wrist in Asia is lost in antiquity (Heinze 1982:77). B.J. Terwiel connects Isaan string tying with the Hindu instructions written in the *Grihya-Sūtras: Rules of Vedic Domestic Ceremonies* (1979:49). According to Krishnakumar, these instructions, written between 500–400 B.C., list uses of the string as blessing for dedication of babies, for mothers after childbirth, for initiation (Benét 1965:888), and for ordination (Krishnakumar 2004). String-tying ritual predates Buddhism and is most commonly linked with Brahmanism. Today string tying ritual has been widely incorporated into Thai and Lao Theravada Buddhism.

As a missionary movement, Theravada Buddhism originally traveled from India to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to Siam (Present-day Thailand) (Tambiah 1970:252). Brahmanism, however, traveled a different direction. From India it came to Cambodia (Angkor) and from there spread throughout

the region of the Khorat Plateau (present day Isaan) on its way to Siam. It could, therefore, be theorized that Brahman rituals of this type were practiced within the Isaan region before they arrived to the Siamese (1970:254).

Actual dating of the ceremony is less important than the fact that these practices have continued for centuries in this region and can still be seen at Isaan weddings and many other social events. Tongpan Phrommedda, a Christian Isaan who frequently conducts contextualized string-tying ceremonies describes the function of ritual within the Isaan worldview, this way:

Why do we need ceremonies? You need to understand this part of Isaan culture. Ceremony is the traditional way in our culture to officially mark a new beginning. If there is no ceremony then there has been no new beginning. If we do a ceremony, then it means we have now received or started something new. These ceremonies address our cultural need to show that something has begun. They come from our cultural background and address the deep need we have as Isaan people to show “beginning”. (2001:1)

In the Peoples Democratic Republic of Laos and throughout Isaan the string-tying ritual is often referred to as *sukhwan* (for the *khwan*). *Khwan* is a difficult term to define in English but has been described as “the essence of life, a principle vital and essential for all sentient beings” (Heinze 1982:17). It resides (or enters and exits the body) at the tuft of hair at the top of the head (Bailey 2000:21), the area of the scalp referred to in English as the crown and from there travels in and out. It is for this reason that the Thai people will not tolerate without resentment someone (especially strangers) touching their head (Anuman 1962:128). Although there remains a great deal of confusion today as to what *khwan* actually is, it remains distinctly different from the soul. *Khwan* may come and go and the person may feel a certain degree of personal instability, but the withdrawal of the soul can only mean death.

Do Isaan Christians believe in *khwan*? They would say they have it but many would not know how to describe it. Ritual recognition addressing

the cultural worldview needs of *khwan* (whether spoken or not) still remain prevalent among Isaan Christians.

In 1979 a missionary family working in the Isaan province of Udon Thani had decided, for a variety of reasons, to resign and was preparing to return to their native United States. The group of Isaan believers connected with this work wanted to demonstrate to these missionaries their love and concern and decided to hold a ceremony to mark this event using the tying of strings. This decision to incorporate the tying of strings into the ceremony, according to one of these leaders, was based on a deep heartfelt desire to bless this family whom they had come to love in a way that was more meaningful to them than simply a verbal prayer (2004). The focus of the ceremony was changed from calling up the life essence (*khwan*) to a tangible celebration of what God had already done. For this group of believers it was the beginning of openly using the string-tying ritual to express something of deep meaning for them.

Since that time use of the string-tying ritual continues to be used by many Christian communities in Thailand and Laos. When practiced by Isaan followers of Christ the ritual is simply called *phuk khaen* (arm or wrist tying) and not *sukhwan*. The focus was changed but for the most part the forms were not. People were tied but not objects such as house pillars, images, or vehicles. Just as the usual string-tying ceremony has participants and implements involved, so does the Christian ritual. The meaning is considered more important than the physical elements involved.

When we, as followers of Jesus, talk of using our cultural forms in a [string-tying] ceremony we have to evaluate those things that may remain as they have always been done and those things that must change. The things that are the same are the external forms but the things that are different are the meanings attached to them. The forms remain the same but the meaning changes according to the word of God. Those forms that have a good meaning may remain as usual; those things that are not in accordance with the Bible must be changed to follow God's word. (Banpote 1986:161)

In 2000, at the request of the Isaan leaders of this same Christward movement, I was asked to focus my study of research on the Isaan practice of a contextualized string-tying ritual that had developed since 1979. What did it mean and why was it so important? Since our initial introduction in 1987 all of my family members had been the recipients of and had attended countless string-tying events. Before each home assignment we were tied.⁷ Upon our return we were tied. Each time we rented a new house there was a ceremony and we were tied. After the birth of our three children in Thailand we were all tied. When our relatives visited us they were all tied. And at all weddings, reconciliation ceremonies, send-offs, welcomes and major rites of passage we, as the body of Christ, tied others in ways that were always meaningful, often emotional, and always filled with the spirit of the love of God. This contextualized ritual expression always attracted many Buddhist neighbors to Christ.

Between 2000 and 2005 I conducted a series of interviews and visits throughout the northeast Thai region to learn more. The results of this research became my dissertation. Obviously the limits of this presentation do not allow me to share all the details, but the dissertation is available upon request. Here I present a summary particular to the theme of *missio-logoi*.

In the process of my studies I used Paul Hiebert's model of concentric circles of worldview starting with behavioral, then cognitive, affective and finally evaluative or central values to determine why this ritual persisted. I also interviewed members of other churches who said that within their movement they would never use any forms of string-tying (at least those willing to talk with me about it). The findings were interesting.

I found that relational influences were the number one factor determining an individual's comfort level with participating in string-tying rituals whether contextualized or not. I found among Isaan believers many

7 I believe my Isaan sisters and brothers would probably prefer that I say that each time we were "blessed" instead of "tied" however I leave that to the readers to understand. The essential meaning of the string-tying ceremony (contextualized or not) itself is always to bless the recipient. There is a very real sense that those who tie the recipient also receive a non-verbal blessing in the process of giving. Together it is a safe place where grace and truth come together.

who fell within two worldview perspectives towards string-tying which McElhanon and Neibuhr (among others) had developed: corrective and interpretive (McElhanon 2000b:1032-1033). I also found a third position present among Isaan Christians that I labeled the accommodative position. Below is a brief summary of these three positions with the missiological implications of each.

Corrective Position

In this perspective Christians seek a biblical unifying theme or principle from which to structure a systematic theology of the world with which to replace or reform other non-Christian worldviews. Within this biblical unifying structure, “evangelical theologians generally present the Christian worldview as a systematic theology for the defense of the Christian faith ... to confront and dismantle opposing worldviews. In doing so they use philosophical and logical argumentation” (McElhanon 2000b:1032). Strict proponents of this perspective would view it their task as missional Christians to discover the weaknesses of opposing worldviews and convince the proponents of such worldviews of the superiority of the Christian faith.

There are Isaan Christians who would hold to the corrective position towards indigenous ritual to various degrees. This would be demonstrated by their position against the string-tying ritual which they would consider unsuitable and inappropriate for use within the life of the Christian community. They would see it as a continuation of allegiance to a non-Christian worldview. Some respondents stated that the Isaan worldview value that requires ritual in order to cope with the transitions in life is something that Christ followers should change through discipleship, Christian education, and biblical knowledge. Isaan believers holding the corrective position would feel that all values and beliefs that are not clearly in line with the Bible must be confronted in love and changed through God’s power.

Extreme demonstration of the corrective position in Isaan Buddhist society promotes a distinct Christian appearance (and therefore largely foreign). It would stress separation from anything with the appearance of

culture social harmony (one might even say grace) is more highly valued than truth. In light of this, in many cases the corrective position cannot successfully demonstrate itself openly on a dialogical level.

A rigid corrective position is difficult for Isaan believers to maintain. Isaan churches that do not practice the string-tying ritual are not completely corrective in their position at all times although it would appear from the survey data that this is the tendency and even the goal for some churches. The reality is that Isaan Christians who are members of churches tending toward the corrective position neither desire nor are attempting to maintain a social disconnect from family and friends. In fact my data startlingly revealed the disturbing number of seventy-five percent of those in the survey who come from churches claiming the corrective position admitted to involvement in string-tying and other rituals *in Buddhist contexts* from time to time.⁹ This indicates the stronger worldview value that prioritizes social harmony over truth. However the greater concern is for what Kraft calls “dual allegiance” for those in the allegedly “corrective” position. For many, this seemingly social separation is unsustainable and Jesus, as presented in their church contexts, is not enough. In scripture this would be called idolatry.

Accommodative Position

In contrast to the corrective position, within the accommodative position the string-tying ritual is accepted for the most part at face value. It is considered an important Isaan ritual and given affirmation from a Christian source. Where the corrective position would seek to doctrinally divorce itself from anything seen as a worldview opposing the gospel, the accommodative position would embrace many components of former practices under the rubric of Christian.

In the accommodative position the string-tying ritual might be practiced within a Christian context but without any particular explanation or contextualization towards deeper Christ-ward meaning given. Unlike the corrective position, the communication of meaning in the accommodative

9 Specificity of the frequency of participation in Buddhist rituals was unfortunately not part of my survey questionnaire.

position is not considered a priority. When an Isaan believer, for example, asks his pastor or priest to bless Buddhist strings with holy water and then uses them *sui generis* for a string tying ceremony without explanation, depending upon the audience, the default social understanding of empowerment of the strings remains. For most uses in the popular Buddhist context the enchanted strings themselves effect the blessing. When the teachable moment is claimed and the message contextualized (even while forms remain the same), the operative source of blessing is fundamentally changed. The accommodative position avoids conflict but at the same time embraces (and may unintentionally reinforce) popular Buddhist meaning. Whenever an explanation of the operative force of the ceremony is not added even during what practitioners may feel is a Christ-centered contextualization of the ritual, meaning falls back on previous levels of surface level understandings and may not reinforce a Christian focus, depending upon the recipient's point of worldview value change.

Opponents of the accommodative position stated that it embraces almost all that is from the old ways and communicates almost nothing new. They would state that within the accommodative position there appears to be little or no questioning of Isaan worldview values. Critics feel that addressing Isaan worldview in what even gives an appearance of traditional ritual ways is a concession to the culture, selling the gospel short. What really needs to happen is to maintain a clear distinctiveness toward the God of the Bible. For some participants the power of the event continues to be in the string itself, however it is no longer empowered through a traditional Buddhist source of empowerment but through a Christian empowerment such as sprinkling with holy water, for example. This could lead to dual allegiance as mentioned earlier. At times there appears to be a willingness to indiscriminately provide whatever is necessary to accommodate to the felt need to connect with spiritual power.

The relational aspect of the accommodative approach presents something that is new but not foreign. Historic Roman Catholic evangelistic efforts in what is now northeast Thailand capitalized on the worldview needs of Isaan people and made available the resources in Jesus Christ to free people from spiritual bondage. The response to this approach of

Christian communication resulted in more respondents than that of any other approaches in the early history of missions on the Khorat Plateau. It would be incorrect to state that all Catholics in Isaan hold a strictly accommodative position towards worldview nor that all Protestants hold the corrective position. There is a surprising mix among Christian traditions. While remaining highly attractive, the accommodative position runs the risk of falling into dual or multiple allegiances that fail to prioritize Christ as the source of power in its focus on forms.

Interpretive Position

This position towards worldview, used by some Christian missionaries, begins with Biblical understanding placed in the cultural context of those they wish to reach (2000b:1032). This is a cultural and relational approach that prioritizes people as they encounter, interpret, and respond to the teachings of scripture from within their own contextual worldview framework. Proponents of this perspective would, “regard the contextualization of the gospel as an expression of the Christian faith through culturally appropriate concepts which are compatible with Biblical truth” (2000b:1032). It should be noted that this understanding of Biblical truth must come from local believers themselves as they interact with the whole of scripture from within their societal and worldview context, so that the resulting response is genuinely faithful to the God of the Bible as well as authentically Isaan. A number of Isaan Christians stated that encountering the message of God’s love through the string-tying ritual was important to them in that it brought together cognitive understanding, affective encounters, and even value challenges in the context of a social and culturally familiar experience.

The interpretive position attempts to bring a faithful communication of the gospel into the deepest core of Isaan worldview in an evaluative way. Isaan believers holding the interpretive position would view the contextualized string-tying ritual as a means of allowing Christ to enter into their cultural forms in order to communicate to Isaan people in ways which can be understood from within their worldview. For this position, use of culturally relevant biblically acceptable forms of communication are a priority. Not only would such practitioners embrace the string-tying ritual,

but they would also embrace the use of certain types of local music, language, instruments, dance, and other cultural expressions that could be used as a means to express or interpret God's message to Isaan people to the inner core of the evaluative level of Isaan worldview.

The interpretive perspective would place importance on the meaning generated within the worldview of the receptors through the various Isaan forms and rituals. Popular Buddhist forms may or may not be rejected depending upon the understanding of messages conveyed and how they stand up in accordance to the teachings of the whole Bible as understood by the practitioners. For example, some Isaan Christians felt that using white strings was acceptable within their Christian community while others felt that the ritual was acceptable if the color of the strings was changed.

Apart from usage to address life's predictable rites of passage, and for the welcoming of new believers, the string-tying ritual with a focus on Christ as used by those from the interpretive position has been used to deal with issues related to power that arise in what Hiebert calls the middle zone of life as evidenced by several cases known to the author. In one case, a member of a Christian family painted a large white cross on what other villagers considered a sacred tree next to his house. A few days later the family's house was struck by lightning that was deflected off of the tin roof and struck the center of the cross leaving red sap flowing from the middle. The believers came together for a string-tying ceremony in the name of Christ to bless the family and to celebrate the protection found in the blood of Jesus. In another incident following a minor car accident that left the author and his passengers physically unharmed, believers were insistent that a string-tying ceremony be held to demonstrate God's power over any mental anguish incurred. Following this, the author was freed from disturbing dreams of ten-wheeled trucks racing at him which had led to stiff legs in the morning from attempting to press down on the brake pedal.

Of the three positions, the interpretive position is the most complex to discern and difficult to maintain which may explain why it appears least among Isaan believers. It requires a high level of biblical understanding, spirit-led direction, and deep cultural insight. Approaching such topics

demands skill and sensitivity to be able to lead a discussion about issues that are neither black nor white and are often highly controversial. There is a sensitive prophetic role required of the leader who could be local or an experienced expatriate.¹⁰ God has prepared and continues to prepare just such individuals from within the communities of Christ followers for tasks such as these. Careful discernment in the high-context culture of northeast Thailand will require evaluating rituals not only for the major transitional rites of life of Christians, such as weddings, funerals, conversion experiences, baptisms, and communion, but equally importantly for those events that fall within the middle zone of Isaan worldview including the relationship of the living with the dead, the role of the ancestors, and the complicated concept of the *khwan*.

The interpretive position can allow local worldview values to be engaged with the gospel message in culturally appropriate ways that encourage transformation without emphasizing the social disconnection found in the corrective position yet are not merely accommodative either. Based on observations in Isaan churches, this approach appears to have more appeal to Isaan people who seek spiritual solutions without leaving their social and relational network. The interpretive position would see the use of God's power as wholly within the context of a relationship with Jesus Christ. The communicative nature of this position seeks to extend from within the Christian community to beyond in ways that remain engaging to those still outside, and still transformative to those who are moving closer to Christ in discipleship. The missiological impact of this approach is one that seeks to transform, rather than accommodate or ignore, the Isaan worldview pursuit of power from personal motivation to a higher level that focuses Godward and extends outward to others. It seeks to reach into the deepest cores of worldview motivational values both individually and corporately and allow those values to be revealed in the light of the gospel for cultural transformation.

10 God used the apostle Paul as an expatriate in some of the cross-cultural contexts in which he established churches to help encourage believers to stand firm in what the followers of the Way understood to be the teachings of the Law and of Christ in spite of the opposition of the non-Gentile Christian majority.

Summary of Positions

Each of the three positions has those to whom its approach appears attractive to varying degrees. For those who have been taught the corrective perspective on worldview and culture, a separatist attitude toward forms that externally appear to be Buddhist is extremely important. Such persons might be attracted to a church that brought a message of hope in Christ from a non-Thai or what could be considered a traditionally western Christian perspective. Every culture appears to have a certain element within it of those who want to disenfranchise themselves from their culture, but in the high-context culture of Isaan (and most of Thailand) it would appear that this percentage is very low.

Those that come from a background where their own culture has been or is being somehow repressed, degraded, or marginalized by outsiders appear to have a tendency to stand up for those values which are most under threat. These would include especially threats that might impact the survival of the *boonkhun*¹¹ network, other family members, friends, livelihood, and society. An example of this in Isaan history occurred during the period when Thai centralization policies forbidding the use of Lao language and cultural expressions were enforced. Today this is not the case. A church in this situation that identified itself with the oppressed and encouraged the use of the language and cultural forms mushroomed in the Udon Thani region in the 1980s.¹² Groups of Isaan people newly arrived from the rural areas to Bangkok also give evidence of this. They are attracted to groups (Christ-centered communities and even churches) that promise a sense of community with the language, food, humor, and values of their own minority culture in the midst of the dominant central Thai culture. For this reason an approach of the gospel that incorporates and prioritizes relational aspects of the gospel message above cognitive knowledge would be one that would appeal to most with the Isaan worldview.

11 Social structures that bind people to each other in socially obligatory relationships for life. For example, a child is always indebted to parents in this way.

12 A detailed description of this church planting movement in northern Isaan can be found in my work, *The Development of a Multi-Dimensional Approach to Contextualization in Northeast Thailand* (2002).

The preceding discussion of the three positions of Isaan Christians in the survey population toward the string-tying ritual and Isaan worldview is not intended to be prescriptive. It appears from the research data that these three positions are descriptive of the situation among believers in most churches in northeast Thailand and perhaps other regions of the country today as well. It is apparent from the interviews and from the survey data that within churches there are individuals with a variety of positions and these individuals may also change their positions from time to time. Actual numbers of Isaan Christians who held the corrective, interpretive, and accommodative positions would be difficult to estimate precisely since few Isaan Christians are able to stay strictly within one category. It is perhaps more helpful to think of tendencies or directions rather than concrete categories.

Respondents from churches that never practiced a contextualized string-tying ritual indicated that they would be interested in learning more about an interpretive approach regarding its contextualized use if someone would only teach them. Here is the need for leadership willing to work with the community to do the hard work of cultural exegesis and scriptural application.

CONCLUSION

God used secular rituals and cultural forms to communicate his messages to people throughout biblical history. In each case it can be seen that the goal was not cultural accommodation but to lead God's people deeper into a relational awareness of missio-logoi. God presented cognitive knowledge from within the context of affective feelings and commitments of loyalty and obedience, and required that spiritual inward understandings be demonstrated by outward behavior. God did not affirm all the values of the local worldview in the cultures of his called people. In fact, he especially countered religious worldview values throughout the Old and New Testament when they became obstacles to the understanding and practice of a genuine allegiance to himself. God's correction came not through affirming local cultural forms or from complete separation from all cultural forms, but through the interpretive use of media and methods, including coming

himself in human form, that repeatedly did not appear sufficiently distinct to appeal to the majority of the religious authorities of the time.

It would appear that a similar situation exists today. Each of the positions toward the cultural worldview prioritizes different inner core values, but the religious values on the evaluative level are the most difficult to change, and the most emotionally charged. These are the values to which Isaan believers hold their highest allegiance. In the face-saving high-context culture of northeast Thailand these are not easy topics for anyone to discuss. For this reason perhaps they are the very issues that need discussion most. Kraft writes how important it is to recognize the different areas of allegiance held by people from different cultures. “Of all problems that occur when people of different societies come into contact with each other, those arising from differences in worldview are the most difficult to deal with” (2001:1-8). Would it not be an honest, albeit painful, admission that within the church of Jesus Christ in northeast Thailand, and the rest of the world, there are in reality a number of different Christian subcultures each clinging very tightly to some of their most deeply held worldview themes? For those involved in communication of the gospel, the use of carefully researched cultural rituals infused with the message of the gospel, particularly those not traditionally considered part of the Christian subculture, can provide a powerful means of bridging the division between the presentation of a cognitive message and the internal response of meaning that can point people in the direction of a closer relationship with Jesus Christ.

Reactions to the string-tying ceremony practiced by Christ followers has been overwhelmingly positive in Thailand, Laos, and even in western contexts. In the same way that God affirms cultural forms throughout scripture, God never leaves them at a surface level but desires a deeper work to begin in and through the ritual expressions. This inner connection clearly touches to the realm of values, allegiances, and worldview identity. I close with two examples. I vividly recall the words of one Bangkok Thai woman who after experiencing this ritual as a visitor to an Isaan Christian fellowship said through her tears, “This is the first time in my life I felt I could really be a Christian and still be a Thai.” At another event of string-tying held during a worship service in Pasadena, California one participant told me how moved

she had been. “You know,” she said, “it was one of the first times that we could really speak the truth about each other out loud in church.”

Our social settings may not all be high-context cultures, but certainly we all need to be reaffirmed in who we are in Christ individually and together. Western contexts are starving for honest expressions of real community. God has gifted each culture with appropriate ways to do this that often involve the use of ritual. Let us seek to find more opportunities to reflect the image of our Lord as we partner with God’s initiative transforming missio-logi full of grace and truth.

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