

The Importance of Ceremony in Isaan¹

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When we talk about ceremonies as children of God² we usually think about the two ordinances that were commanded by Jesus. These are (1) communion and (2) baptism. In our work³ we have developed several other ceremonies. These are not sacraments or ordinances commanded by Christ but are ceremonies used in the life of the church. Up to this date we have developed twelve other ceremonies but more can be added to them. Why do we need ceremonies? You need to understand this part of Isaan⁴ 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."

When we celebrate one of these ceremonies we are publicly showing our identification with a new way. For example, when a person becomes a Christian we welcome them into the family of God with a ceremony of blessing. Then we explain about communion and study about baptism. This welcome ceremony shows that the person is now a child of God and wants to walk in God's path. Isaan people see this and they understand it.

I have a good friend named Ron, who is a New Tribes missionary. We can call each other any time and help each other because we are seeow⁵. When we talk we can even disagree and still be good friends; that's the kind of a relationship we have. One day he came to me concerned about something he felt I was doing wrong.

"Tongpan, you're making a big mistake. You have a ceremony for new believers. I don't do any such thing for people. You should just pray for them and that's enough. What you do is you pray for them and then you repeat everything over again and welcome them with a ceremony of blessing as new believers. That's wrong. You shouldn't do that."

I told him, " We don't force them to believe. When they are ready they believe. The ceremony merely shows the beginning. It says to everyone that so and so has made the decision at such and such a time to believe and be a follower of God."

We talked some more and he still didn't agree with me. That was fine. He wasn't interested in changing what he thought. We believe in the same God and salvation only by grace but he doesn't see the need for ceremony. For Isaan people, ceremony shows the new beginning. Look at what happens in Buddhism. Buddhists have all kinds of ceremonies. When people look at western Christianity they feel it isn't complete. "What kind of a religion is that?" they ask, "There are no ceremonies!"

In the past when we followed our old ways what had to happen before we went to begin our seasonal work in the rice fields? We had to have a ceremony (Lieng Dta Haak⁶) where we feasted the spirit of the land. Now we have a ceremony for the blessing of the land in the name of Jesus. When people build a new house what do they do? They call in the Brahman priest and hold a ceremony to chase away evil spirits and make sure the owners live in peace. We have a ceremony to bless the house and the owners in the name of Jesus.

As I mentioned before in our organization we have developed twelve different ceremonies⁷. Altogether there are twelve but today I would like to speak about only two of these. The first one is the wedding ceremony.

Most people understand what is supposed to happen at a wedding ceremony. I think this one is our most popular ceremony. We have brought the teachings of scripture into this ceremony in a poetic chanting style called "leeh" - not leeh like me but leeh chanting⁸. I've done this many times. People enjoy listening to it. At one ceremony in Sri Chiang Mai village so many people crowded up the stairs to hear the ceremony that the floor boards of the house started to crack. Why do they enjoy it so much? Because it communicates the meaning very clearly. People are often asking me to do a ceremony for them. What does the usual Brahman ceremony⁹ involve? It involves drinking alcohol, getting drunk and then chanting in Bali¹⁰. It doesn't have anything to do with communicating meaning. All that we do we do in the power and the name of Jesus - not the power of alcohol. Other ways rely on alcohol to get things going.

We used to do wedding ceremonies the farang¹¹ way like they do in the west and it didn't communicate. Old people didn't like it. (Here Banpote joined in, "I got married the farang way in the church. I rented a suit and everything. Hand You will notice that I don't wear a ring. I had one for the ceremony but after fifteen days I went out and sold it. I just could not get to used to the idea of wearing a ring. Of course a real farang would never do that"). The farang wedding is also very expensive for us Isaan people. The man has to have a suit made. That white dress costs over 10,000 baht¹² and then what do you do with it? The Thai wedding ceremony can be done inexpensively but gives clear meaning.

Ceremonies give us a unique opportunity to share what it really means to follow Jesus. The wedding ceremony is one of those special occasions in which the heart of the gospel can be brought right into the event. Why do we do this? To clearly communicate to Isaan people in our Isaan context. It is a chance for the children of God to show their gratitude that God has adopted them into his family. They come together to rejoice in this fact and show it in front of their relatives and neighbors. People see this and understand.

We have studied the old traditional Isaan ceremony and used the same form in our ceremony. First we wrote up what is called in Lao the "bot suud or bot suat."¹³ It is not Thai, that is another style from this. The poetry is different. We had to search for this Lao style by talking with the elders in the villages and learning from them. We also researched as much as we could find in books. In Thai they call their poetry "singing" but the Lao style is called "klon lom"¹⁴. We put the Bible message into the poem and used this for the ceremony to communicate the meaning.

Here is an example of the Lao "leeh" from the wedding ceremony which Isaan people understand. At this point Tongpan began to chant the following Isaan poem:

"Praise to God Almighty whose name is Jehovah
And to his son whose name is Jesus
And to the Holy Spirit, Present and Invisible.
We come together today to life your name.
We praise you God, on this special day.
Today is an event of blessing, a special day of matrimony.
The noises you hear are the happy sounds of the family and neighbors gathering;

They're gathering to sit around the couple in a circle of friendship.
The elders are here, the grandparents are here.
The fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters are here.
All are joyfully excited. Now, nobody get nervous,
We're all just one big family, no strangers.
We've come together to give our support, to build up,
And to encourage this new young couple.
We've come to bless you
Our two children. Be at peace, Yes, yes, yes oh, yeeeees!"¹⁵

(As Tongpan is finishing the drawn out words of the last line several people call out, "Praise God!" and "May God be praised!")

Do you hear that? You have to understand that in the Brahman ceremony when there is that fun trill at the end of the line all the people usually call out, "Come, Kwan!"¹⁶ "Come!" In the Brahman ceremony they call this the "bpouw dta kae"¹⁷ or the calling out to the angels and the spirits. We call out to God to be with us. In this way we share the meaning of marriage and the teaching of God to everyone in the process.

After this the bride and groom give thanks to their parents by bowing down to them and there is another poem chanted to them. Following this they learn about their responsibilities to each other based on what the scripture teaches.

When people hear this ceremony it makes a lasting impression on them. You need to most Isaan villagers have never had any marriage counseling. Many of them never had a wedding ceremony either! You'll excuse me if I use the Isaan proverb, but most Isaan people (as the old folks used to say), "Take a buffalo for a husband or a buffalo for a wife."¹⁸ Does that make sense to you? They don't have any ceremony at all; they just start living together.

When people become followers of God we have done marriage ceremonies after the fact. Even in some cases where there were already five or six children. It teaches the meaning of marriage, it reinforces the commitment we have with our wife (or our husband) that we are one in the love of God.

By doing ceremonies we teach meaning. No matter what ceremony it may be we must first research the original meaning and look for what communicates best to our people. Some people say, "I can't lead a wedding ceremony like that. I don't know how to do it." I believe you can learn if you want to. I am happy to teach you. We have cassette tapes that you can use to follow along with the booklet.¹⁹

I am not saying here that you must do everything the way I do it. You may have your own style of chanting or singing or doing a ceremony. Each region has its own cultural differences. The important thing is that once it is done people will know what was said. It is a useful time of teaching. Every time I have done this style of wedding ceremony people who are not yet children of God will come up to me and ask them to hold a ceremony in their village. They say it has good meaning for them. There is also another reason they want it. Normally, when a Brahman wedding is celebrated there has to be lots of alcohol drinking first. People want to feel elated so they drink before and during the ceremony - even the leader of the ceremony²⁰. One glass, two glasses, it just depends. But this makes the tongue of the leader speak in a way that is hard to understand.

In the past when we did the farang ceremony people didn't want to come. They didn't understand it, no one could explain it and it didn't give any meaning. It didn't feel like the marriage had really started. There was no cultural sense of beginning.

Some of the things in the old ceremony we cannot and do not use. You know that normally a silver bowl is placed under the hands of the couple as they are tied in blessing. There are some objects placed in this such as bananas, boiled rice, cooked eggs, candles, incense, or other things that are used for fortune telling. There is concern over the number of items since nine is lucky²¹ and certain other numbers are not. We don't use good luck charms. We do use the strings to tie the couple together - just like the farangs use the ring to be linked together. The strings have a good meaning for marriage that we can use. Some people use flowers with pretty smell for the spirits. We do not use flowers for that reason. We try to use the love flower, or dok sam pi²² that do not dry out quickly but make the ceremony attractive. If we don't explain the meaning of something it can become idolatry. We have to study it first. We have to see what can be used and what cannot. Don't do any ceremony without researching into its meaning beforehand. Then we have to carefully explain and teach in detail what we are doing.

Another example of determining meaning from the old wedding ceremony is the use of the boiled egg. This is where a boiled egg (placed in the blessing bowl earlier) is shelled and cut in half. The bride and the groom then feed each other one half of the egg and then they have to eat it down quickly to symbolize that marriage is not such an easy proposition. It is like trying to swallow boiled egg with no water to wash it down. This actually has a very good meaning but the problem comes when they use the egg to predict the future of the couple. All the stages of this event are interpreted. From the peeling of the shell to the cutting of the egg even to the feeding and the chewing and swallowing are all used as means to determine how stable the marriage will be. The same thing is done with the boiled chicken. The chicken's head is opened and the angle of the tongue is used to determine whether the marriage will go up or down, be successful or short-lived. Because of all this fortune telling we have had to say no, we cannot use these. We use what is meaningful but nothing that is idolatrous. We explain that we believe the lives of this couple are in the hands of God and pray for his blessing upon them.

Most people look at this method of adopting and using ceremonies and find it very useful. However churches in other groups do not agree. They won't have anything to do with these ceremonies. They say that the Thai ways cannot compete with the farang ways. They want to use the white outfits because then they feel their children look better in the pictures. They see our brides wearing their native silk outfits on the wedding day sitting in a circle in the home for a ceremony and they are afraid. They don't think it is right anymore. They are afraid it is displeasing to God. The thing they are afraid of most is that this ceremony is for the evil spirits and therefore they are too afraid to use it.

A second ceremony we are often called to perform is the house warming ceremony.²³ This one is also very popular. If we don't do it the family will have a problem. For example, let's say that in a family one person is a child of God but the rest are not. If they have built a new house then they will go ask the Brahman leader to ask him to perform this ceremony for them. If we didn't have a ceremony the one believer would have no where else to turn except to the old ways. Our ceremony includes singing as well²⁴. We explain the two meanings of home - our temporary home on this earth and our eternal home in heaven. People enjoy hearing this.

What makes this ceremony so popular? Can you guess why? It saves money. In the old Buddhist ways almost every ceremony involves a large financial outlay by the host. Do you know why? Alcohol. The host has to make sure there is lots of liquor²⁵ at the party for everyone. These days alcohol has become very expensive. People spend thousands of baht just to see it thrown up later all over their property²⁶. At our ceremonies there is no alcoholic served so people like it since they can save some money. Secondly, the ceremony in Christ has a good meaning which is easier to understand. Third, it is a new way to explain something old.

We use the word of God to teach in the midst of this ceremony. We do include the traditional flower arrangement. We also have the flowers and the strings. But we don't do it for the old reason. Do you know what the old reason was for this ceremony? Tai dap.²⁷ The Brahman ceremony leader would break the power of the spirit's sword, and attempt to appease the spirit. We say, "God is the one who will protect the residents of this house." In this way we have victory over the spirits.

Today it is not considered progressive among certain Thai people in the newer generation to admit to belief in spirits anymore. Teachers, government workers, and others don't want to indicate that they are animistic. They would much rather have the kind of ceremony which we have. And no one is accused of not having the proper initiation ceremony of the house. When people feel like things are being done in the right way they are open to listening. When we do this ceremony the followers of God can have their needs met and at the same time the gospel is also being expressed in a clear way that everyone can understand.

In some cases where most of the family were not yet believers before the ceremony, family members have decided to become believers afterwards. Why do they do this? They hear the words, "You are a child of God and God is with you to protect you. This house belongs to the children of God." We talk inclusively about the whole family as believers in God. Some who are not yet believers hear this and say, "But I'm not a child of God yet." So we encourage them to become a follower.

This is the house-warming ceremony. There is no alcohol involved but all kinds of people still enjoy coming. Our Bible doesn't forbid drinking alcohol. It forbids drunkenness. What does Buddhism say? It forbids drinking alcohol. But what happens? People get drunk. It is the nature of people. The more you forbid something the more they want to do it. Why do Isaan people drink? Because they like fun and believe they can't have fun with it. We don't know how to drink - we can't stop. So we don't drink at our ceremonies.

Endnotes:

1. This talk was originally given as seminar number twelve at the Isaan Intensive conference in Udon Thani, Thailand, May 19-21, 2001.
2. "Children of God" is the term used among the Thailand Covenant churches to refer to Christians. The reason the term "Christian" is not used is that in Thai it refers to followers of a western religion and all the western practices of that religion and therefore creates barriers among Thai people desiring to follow Jesus Christ and still be relevant to the Thai culture.
3. The work of the Thailand Covenant Church working with the Lao speaking Isaan in the Udon Thani, area of northeast Thailand.
4. Isaan is the Thai word for the language, people and geographic area of northeast Thailand. It is a distinct people group of approximately twenty million people. Among themselves Isaan people refer to each other, their

language and culture as Lao thus explaining the frequent references in this seminar to "Lao." Isaan people are culturally linked with the lowland Lao across the Mekhong river.

5. The term in Isaan is pronounced "see-oh" (low tone). This is a special relationship, usually based on similar age but can built on other interests as well.

6. Haek Na is the name of the entire Isaan ceremony performed before going into the fields to begin plowing for the rice crop. It was traditionally held during the sixth lunar month either on a Monday or a Thursday of a waxing moon, never during a waning moon which was bad luck. The purpose of the ceremony was to insure an abundant rice crop. The actual performance is known as Lieng Dta Haek (the Grandpa Haek feast). A rice paddy owned by an elderly man is selected. It could be any elderly man as long as he was known as Dta (maternal grandfather). The grandfather who owns this land (with the traditional name of Grandpa Haek) forms mud from the dike of his rice paddy into a square pyre shape in a corner and plants on it eight rice seedlings. This pyre is the protection for the area to make sure that cows and buffalo won't eat the rice plants, neither will field crabs nor insects bother the crop. (Pintong 1989:1040)

7. Members of the Thailand Covenant church use a booklet which has Bible studies and orders of worship for fourteen ceremonies. The first twelve ceremonies include: anointing church leaders, the giving of the first fruits, ceremony for healing, ceremony for restoration, ceremony of reconciliation, infant dedication, house dedication, welcoming ceremony, sending and blessing ceremony, ceremony for freedom from addiction, wedding ceremony and funeral ceremony. The last two are the ordinances of Christ: baptismal ceremony and the communion. (Srisuwan 1993:iii-iv)

8. The Isaan word "leeh" can mean dark (as in skin color - which Tongpan is) and also is used to refer to the traditional style of Lao accapella singing where a man chants a poem following the tonal characters of the words.

9. Buddhism in Thailand borrows heavily from the Brahman religious practice of India as well as Hinduism and animism.

10. Bali and Sanskrit are the holy languages of Buddhism but unless translated are unintelligible to the average Thai or Isaan person.

11. "Farang" is the Thai word for white Caucasians.

12. The Thai baht was worth about 45 per one US dollar at the time of the seminar.

13. "Bot suud or bot suat" literally means a "chanted lesson."

14. "Klon lom" means poetry that is chanted in the Lao style.

15. "The Ceremony of the Kwan Blessing on the Wedding Day," Srisuwan 1993:33

16. Kwan is the life-giving and life-preserving force all around each individual in the Thai and Lao worldview. It can come and go. It needs to be catered to. This ceremony is designed to invite the "Kwan" and encourage it to stay with the couple. Note the name of the ceremony above.

17. "Bpouw dta kae" is to call out to spirits.

18. Since the water buffalo, seen all over Isaan, is a symbol for ignorance and stupidity this is an obvious insult.

19. The order of worship booklet and tape are available through IACM at www.thaicov.org.

20. The leader of the ceremony is not a Buddhist monk but is normally a local respected elder with recognized abilities in Brahmanistic practices. He usually drinks quite a lot in order to get warmed up for the ceremony.

21. The Thai word for nine is the same word for "going ahead" or progress. It is therefore considered lucky. Six is the same word for "fallen down" (as in a numeral nine which has fallen on its head) and is therefore considered bad luck.

22. Dok sam pi (literally means the three-year flower. It is a small globe-shaped straw flower which can be either magenta or white in color.

23. The traditional Isaan house-warming ceremony (literally "Going up to the new house" since most Isaan houses used to be up on stilts) is done when construction of a new house has been completed and the family is going to take residence therein. The purpose of the ceremony is to please the spirit of the land so that the family would be blessed with a peaceful dwelling.

24. Organized group singing is not part of the traditional ceremony. However, it is not uncommon for Isaan people to sing when they are drunk.

25. Rice whiskey is the usual alcoholic beverage at these events and is normally served mixed with other soft drinks.

26. The phrase used here is "A five baht (baht as a weight of gold equals fifteen grams - (Yanbrateep 1987:302) necklace of gold is swallowed down but never gets sent back out the rear end; it always comes out in vomit instead." Hopefully most readers can interpret this phrase without further explanation.

27. "Tai dap" means to free from the sword, in reference to freedom from the power of evil spirits.