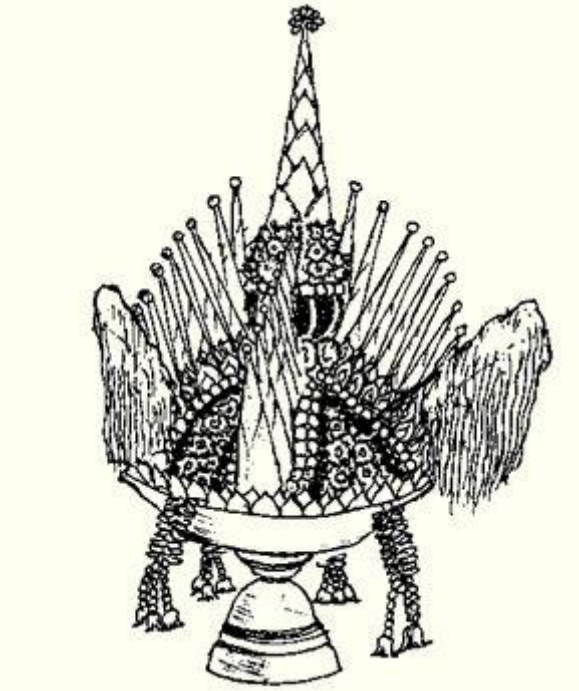
STRINGS: MEDIA FOR GOSPEL COMMUNICATION IN NORTHEAST THAILAND



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Introduction

Today's rapid media advances have left many regions of the globe in the technological dust. Pockets of the forgotten exist in every country and culture of the world. For the on-line, fast-modumed, cellularly mobile up-to-date elite the range of access to information and potential for advance seems to be limitless. But what about the rest of the world? Those outside of this privileged group find themselves falling farther and farther behind the mainstream and increasingly marginalized.

Cross-cultural communicators of the Christian message also must struggle with these issues with those they are hoping to reach. While modern mass media efforts broadcast widely this does not necessarily insure that a wide audience is out there listening with rapt attention. It is clear that not everyone can be reached for Christ solely by the efforts of modern mass media. Other, more culturally appropriate forms must also be identified and used. While proportionally fewer missionaries are being sent from the west each year, the majority of new missionaries coming from the non-western world are trained and equipped primarily in westernized forms of Christianity and therefore tend to carry these non-indigenous forms of communication with them. In spite of the progress in programming in the developed world, many of the unreached cultures of the world today remain unreached because modern media methods alone are not effectively communicating Christ to them in ways that are culturally relevant. It is time to begin to evaluate indigenous methods of communication within these cultures and seek out those which can be redeemed as opportunities to effectively present Jesus Christ and allow him to transform people and their cultures from within.

There is a fairly widespread belief that indigenous media of communication are relics of the past. Those who live and work in the Third World realize how unfounded this belief is. For the Christian mission, traditional or indigenous media and communication systems provide exciting possibilities. The indigenous communication system is consistent with the oral traditions in many countries, where audience participation is not only common but important. The credibility of the information or messages is transmitted through the channels of the traditional media, which are most effective in promoting changes in beliefs and attitudes. There is also a smaller cost involved with the use of indigenous communication systems as compared with modern technology-based media (Søgaard 1993:197).

One marginalized and still unreached people group of the modern world are the rural Lao-speakers of northeastern Thailand known as Isaan. Within this culture, where computers are still a rarity outside of provincial capitol cities and most people do not have access to telephone landlines, the primarily folk Buddhist worldview does not see the relevance of a westernized Jesus nor an interest in what is viewed as the foreigner's religion. Yet within this culture, with its long and proud heritage, there exist cultural forms of communication which need to be examined as potential tools to use in this task.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the contextualization potential and use of the string-tying *sukhwan* ceremonies of the Isaan culture as a media for use in conveying the gospel within this culture. The author and his family have been privileged to live among and work with the Isaan people for sixteen years. I believe that the creative powers of the creator God are evident in the Isaan culture and for the most part remained untapped as a resource for effective communication of the message of Jesus Christ. May this study begin a process that enables others to consider indigenous media forms as a source of redeeming the best of cultures for the conveyance of the best news that this world could possibly hear.

Isaan: A Culture that Knows How to Survive

The language, region and people of the northeast of Thailand are known as Isaan. Amongst themselves most of the twenty million Isaan people refer to their own language, culture and people group as Lao although eagerly embracing their Thai identity. Some of the more rural residents of the nineteen provinces that make up the Isaan region, which has been part of the Siamese Kingdom for several generations[1], still referred to their region as "Lao." Historically and culturally they are linked to their brothers and sisters on the opposite bank of the Mekong River in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Many of those living on the border provinces have family members on both sides. In spite of repression over the years, Isaan culture continues strong in its heartland.

Central Thai people view the Isaan and their culture with humor and a certain degree of disdain. In the media the Isaan figure is typically presented as the butt of the jokes speaking his backcountry drawl which uses some similar words to central Thai but with distinctly different tonation. In the early 1990s when the South African film "The Gods Must Be Crazy" was dubbed in Thai all the educated figures in the film spoke the central Thai language but the unique clicking language of the desert Bushmen was dubbed into Isaan. Even though this was an affront to Isaan people and their culture it was all taken in typical Thai fashion no one roared louder with laughter in the theatres than Isaan people themselves. More recently the formerly-silent Charlie Chaplain movies dubbed over with a running patter of Isaan commentary and jokes have sold well all over Thailand but especially in the rural northeast.

Composing one-third of the total population of Thailand, Isaan is important as a political constituency and as a marketing target, even though the average income of Isaan people is less than that of other regions. Located on the flat plains of the Khorat plateau, Isaan has the country's poorest soil and most infrequent rainfall. Except for a few sections of irrigated land, most of the residents are subsistence farmers raising the glutinous rice they use as a staple for every meal. Nearly every family has a member who works in Bangkok or some other place and sends money home, which allows the elders to stay in their village. Many of the elderly are raising their grandchildren while the wage-earners are away and hopefully sending money home.

Even though all Thai government schools are taught in the central Thai language the Isaan heart language still thrives outside of the classroom. It is often traumatic for young children from the remote areas to begin to speak good central Thai when they first enter a classroom at age seven or eight having spoken nothing but Lao from their birth. The central Thai government has tried several programs over the years to centralize the Isaan people and their culture with only a limited amount of success.

A Story from Isaan's Recent Past

The following incident told to the author by Banpote Wetchgama, would have occurred sometime in the early 1950s. During this period of time the Thai government put considerable pressure on outlying regions to promote central Thai as the standard language to be spoken by everyone throughout the kingdom. For those in the Lao-speaking northeast there was an additional issue that threatened national stability. A troubling upsurge of interest and support for communism was growing throughout the region from the neighboring kingdom of Laos and Vietnam. The Thai government, with full support of the United States foreign policy, took

a strict non-tolerant view to any communist activity. Later this, and other factors, would lead to the American involvement in the Vietnam War.

When government policy first began to practice a non-tolerant view of other native tongues used in the school classroom there was strong negative reaction from Isaan families. In order to promote the unification policy local political leaders were urged to think of ways to engender adult support to the program. In status-conscious societies such as Thailand, public recognition is very powerful therefore, the government organized public book burnings to eradicate what was considered foreign propaganda and to symbolically publicize social unification of the country.

At that time Banpote's village, *Ban Tdat Tong*, was part of the far western boundary of the eastern Isaan province of Ubon Ratchathani bordering southern Laos. Generations before settlers had migrated from Laos and built their small feudal kingdoms there which were eventually united under the Chakri dynasty as part of Siam. During the time of the incident it was still common to hear elderly people express loyalty to Vientiane as the true capitol even though it was across a political boundary across the Mekong River in what was at that time the recently liberated Kingdom of Laos.

When time for the book burning came to *Ban Tdat Tong* requisite volumes in the Lao script were produced. Some of these texts would have been handwritten on the hinged dried leaves of the sugar palm which were then tied together with ribbons in accordion fashion. Some of them were written folklore and recordings of ancient legends known as *Payaa* stories—usually memorized and chanted at festivals and weddings. Those who brought books to be burned were highly praised. Others were also encouraged to participate. Undoubtedly there were political and social implications that were critical for villagers seeking positions for their children in government employment. Finally when repeated requests failed to produce any more contributions, the pile of ancient writings was sprinkled with kerosene and set ablaze. It is impossible to estimate the value of the many irreplaceable volumes and scrolls which were disposed of in this way.

Later, when all the important people were gone and darkness had spread over the cold fire Banpote witnessed several elderly villagers come out of their homes to begin poking through the ashes of the fire. In the same way that people go through the ashes after a cremation looking for bone fragments, these elders were carefully using bamboo tongs and picking out any recognizable pieces of what had been burned. These ashes were then carefully mixed with clay and made into beads. After they dried they were strung on consecrated strings and worn around the neck by the elders in order that they would never forget their Lao heritage. Lao culture continues to be oppressed in subtle yet significant ways but in spite of this it continues to survive. Among themselves there is a saying describing the central government's policy towards Isaan, *"My hai dtai deh may hai dee."* ("They won't let us die but they won't let us thrive either.") In spite of the fact that roads are good throughout the region investment and infrastructure still remains limited. Opportunities for advance are scarce. However, with a heritage used to hardship, the Isaan continue to survive with gradually more and more of the best from the Isaan region successfully integrating into the mainstream of Thai society. When in Bangkok most Isaan leave their heritage behind as much as possible and seek to make a new identity in order to fit into the dominant culture.

The Reality of Thai Folk Buddhism

Religiously Isaan people (and the majority of Thai throughout the country) have been traditionally Buddhist with a strong allegiance to animism. To most Isaan it is impossible to distinguish their Buddhist practices from those that are animistic as both are now completely woven together. In fact most Thai people take the pragmatic view that whatever works religiously to help them practically is what will be followed particularly if it can help financially. Since most Isaan people live constantly in debt there is endless concern about the issues of the here-and-now: success of the rice crop, finding work, supporting family, and the ability to stay in good health. Buddhism, perceived as dealing primarily with the future and future lives, has adapted to accommodate some of these demands by adopting animistic practices. Those few Buddhist monks who complain about Isaan people's religious inconsistencies and syncretistic habits are dealt with in the politest possible manner of that society—with humor. Several variations of well-worn jokes remain in circulation dealing with this struggle and only grow more comical when retold by the master story-tellers so appreciated in the oral culture of Isaan.

It is felt by many Isaan people that Buddhism in its purest forms deals primarily with death. Merit-making opportunities within Buddhism are primarily perceived to benefit either the future reincarnations of the living or those already on the other side. It is from animistic practices however, that many Isaan people find the security that enables them to continue to survive the struggles of daily life. This assurance is found in a wide variety of rituals and ceremonies performed not by Buddhist monks but by local *phram*, (usually shortened to *pham*), from the Hindu *Brahman*. These men[2] are generally local village elders who have at one time been but are not currently Buddhist priests, and who know the Brahman rituals involved in animistic practices and provide these services to the community for a fee. These individuals can do exorcisms, healings, protections, and even cursings. While these rituals are not Buddhist, they are not purely Hindu or animistic either. It would be impossible for most people to be able to distinguish between them. "It is unthinkable in Thailand that a local *brahman* can be outside the Buddhist faith, or that his rites and those of the monk can be mutually exclusive" (Tambiah 1970:256).

The Importance of Ceremony within Thai Folk Buddhism

As is true for the animist worldview everywhere, ceremonies play an important role. Similarly, the importance of ceremony within Thai folk Buddhism cannot be overstated. As Hiebert explains rituals play critical functions within animistic societies and serve a variety of necessary social roles:

Rituals can be divided into three major types: rites of transformation (to create new order and move individuals and groups through life), rites of intensification (to reinforce existing order), and rites of crisis (to enable people to survive emergency situations). Each of these serves an important function in the life of communities and individuals (Hiebert 1999:302).

From the perspective of Tongpan Phrommedda, an Isaan leader and evangelist, Isaan culture requires ceremony to be able to specify the significant starting points and rites of passage throughout life:

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 (Tongpan 2001:35 Translation by Paul De Neui).

The Concept of *Khwan* and *Sukhwan* Ceremonies

Within Isaan culture perhaps no ceremonies are more important for the day to day survival and well being of Isaan people than those ceremonies coming under the category of sukhwan ceremonies. The concept of the *khwan* probably dates back to the earliest animistic traditions of the area (Bailey 2000:17). *Khwan* is a difficult term to define but has been described by Thai informants 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. In Thai each "complete" (that is healthy and not handicapped) individual has thirty-two members and each of these members has its own *khwan*. When a baby is born well the proud father will announce that his child is *"Krohp samsip song"* (complete with all thirty-two). Few Thai can actually define what each of the thirty-two members are[3] but individually and collectively these are known as that person's *khwan* or life-essence. The word *khwan* is used in everyday vocabulary in such terms as the word used for gift (*khong khwan* "something belonging to the *khwan*"), words of encouragement (*kham khwan* "words for the *khwan*"), and many others. Heinze has listed 36 common occurrences of the word "*khwan*" used in daily Thai language (Heinze 1982:35).

Even though *khwan* is essential to successful life, it is fickle and can come and go. It can be scared off; it can be disturbed, and it can vacate the individual thus leaving the person open to disaster. According to the Isaan thinking "the *khwan* must be recalled and aggregated to the body in order to make the person whole" (Tambiah 1970:243). This is done through a variety of ceremonies all known as *sukhwan* ("to the *khwan*") or *tham khwan* (literally "making the *khwan*"). These two terms are used interchangeably to describe the ceremonies for bringing the *khwan* back or insuring that it continues to reside with the person.

Stanley Tambiah has noted in his research on northeastern Thai spirit-cults, six major categories of the *sukhwan* ceremonies: 1) rites of passage, 2) pregnancy, 3) threshold ceremonies before starting an enterprise, 4) ceremonies of reintegration, 5) rites for those suffering from prolonged illnesses, and 6) rites for dispelling bad luck betokened by inauspicious happenings (Tambiah 1970:224-226). A study by Ruth-Inge Heinze lists six major occasions for *tham khwan* ceremonies. These are 1) illness and mental stress, 2) first hair-cut of a one-month old baby, 3) coming of age (cutting top-knot), 4) ordination into monkhood, 5) weddings and 6) "when a person returns home after a long absence or, especially in the northeast, for almost every life crisis, that is, when a person changes status or residence and when visitors are given a welcome or farewell" (Heinze 1982:45).

The Use of Strings in the *Sukhwan* ceremonies

The essence of *sukhwan* ceremonies revolves around the use and tying of cotton strings onto the wrist of the recipient. Usually these cotton strings are gathered in strands of three and knotted together and then these threads knotted onto a stick and collected in a special flower arrangement known as the *don bai sri* (a bouquet made of flowers and banana leaves) and placed on a low bamboo tray called the *phakhwan*. For a visual description of the *phakhwan* refer to Appendix A. The strings in the *bai sri* would have been consecrated before the ceremony by having hot wax of burning candles drop on them while mantras (mainly verses

from the *Pali* Canon) are chanted (preferably by monks), or by having lustral water (*nam mon*, produced by the same process) sprinkled on them (Heinze 1982:140-141). This empowering process is known as *puk sekkatah* ("tying on the consecration").

The consecrated strings are then tied onto the recipient's wrist with an oral blessing being spoken by the one tying so in effect tying the words of blessing and his khwan to the person at the same time. Traditionally it was believed that tying the right wrist let the *khwan* come and tying the left wrist let the *khwan* stay (Heinze 1982:77) but according to the author's observations in northeast Thailand today there is little attention paid to this detail anymore. What is significant, however, is that the wrist be tied. Why the wrist? "The most frequently given reason (for this) is that the life, that is, the beating of the pulse, can best be observed at the wrist" (Heinze 1982:77).

It is interesting to note that unlike Buddhist ceremonies that are chanted in Bali (which is unintelligible to most), the *sukhwan* rituals are therapeutic in nature and therefore must be given in the local language. This allows the meaning to be clearly conveyed to the recipient of the ceremony and all those in attendance.

The words recited in *sukhwan* ritual have necessarily to be understood by the participants. In so far as the ritual is instrumentally constructed to act as a prophylactic or therapy, the contents of the verbal message have to be understood for achieving the specified effect, which is of course buttressed by the other message contents and the role of the elders. By contrast, the semantics of the rituals conducted by (Buddhist) monks are more complex and the effects sought non-specific (Tambiah 1970:242).

Khwan ceremonies hold an important function within the Thai folk Buddhist social context. They provide a way for problems and personal psychological disturbances to be solved before they reach dangerous levels. They can restore a sense of well being after a tragedy or accident. Perhaps most importantly on the cultural level they can bring a renewed sense of community within the social context.

In summary, we can say that the symbolic act of tying the wrists has the following functions: (1) to keep the *khwan* inside the body of the recipient and to strengthen his essence of life; (2) to protect the recipient against evil forces from the outside; (3) to seal a contract between the individual and the supernatural and (4) to assure the recipient of the care and goodwill of those close to him by means of a socially sanctioned rite (Heinze 1982:83-84).

A Thai Christian Perspective on Sukhwan

What is the Thai Christian's perspective on *sukhwan* ceremonies? First of all, most westernized Christian groups ignore the issue of *khwan* entirely and do not address it in the church. This does not mean that the Thai believers in these churches do not believe in *khwan*. In fact they may covertly seek out *pham* to perform *sukhwan* ceremonies when they are needed. If this were to be made public it would be considered idolatrous and syncretistic among Christian groups.

There are however a few Thai Christian groups that view the concept of *khwan* and its corresponding traditions differently. Sinchai Khaochareonrhat, writer and evangelist with the Thailand Southern Baptist, gives some advice regarding *sukhwan* ceremonies for Thai Christians in his book, *Khristachon Bon Witii Thai* (*Christians on the Thai Path* Thai language). Khaochareonrhat prefers not to take a direct position on the issue of the existence

or nonexistence of *khwan* (even though by most it is still understood to exist even if not discussed among Christians) but instead he focuses on appropriate ways to deal with it.

Some of our ancient traditions had their origin in truly meeting a felt need but some of the original meaning may now be lost. An example of this is the *sukhwan* ceremonies for those who have experienced some kind of accident. The ancients believed that each of us possesses *khwan* residing in our body and whenever there is some accident or some startling experience the *khwan* will flee from the body. At this point it is important to have a *sukhwan* ceremony in order that the *khwan* return to the body of that individual. It is obvious that this was developed as merely a way to encourage and console those who have experienced something traumatic in their lives. Since this is the case Christians can keep this ceremony and may continue to practice it while giving a clear explanation of the historical origin and meaning behind it (Khaochareonrhat 1998:25 Translation by Paul De Neui).

A Contextualized Model from Isaan

Another Christian group in Thailand, the *Chrissajak Prakhun Khong PraChaow* (CPKP) which began in the northeastern province of Udon Thani, sees the needs for Christian ceremonies to address the issues of the *khwan* as well as other needs within their church community and have expanded the cultural form of the *sukhwan* for use in their worship. They have developed ten Isaan Christian *sukhwan* ceremonies which are practiced in their churches all of which use strings which have not been consecrated. This is carefully explained as part of each of the ceremonies. The strings are used as a visible representation of what is not seen, that is the love and power of God available to his followers through Jesus Christ. Usually the following words are included in the words of blessing the recipient, "While this string will eventually break, the reality of God's love will never break and can never leave us." The individual is then tied in the name of Jesus Christ. The ten ceremonies employing string-tying which have been developed for use in the Isaan church by the CPKP are the following:

1. Dedication service for servant leadership in the local church (the new leader is tied).
2. Ceremony for the request of healing (the ill person is tied).
3. Restitution ceremony (those who have recovered from a serious illness or from an accident are tied).
4. Reconciliation ceremony (between people who have resolved some serious differences. Both are tied).
5. Infant dedication (the parents and child are tied).
6. New house dedication (the owner of the house and the family members are tied).
7. Welcome ceremony (the welcomed member is tied).
8. Sendoff and blessing ceremony (the one leaving is tied).
9. Freedom from addiction ceremony (the one troubled with addiction is tied).
10. Wedding ceremony (both bride and groom are tied) (Soon Wichai Kan Pattana Yang Yern 1993).

Each of these ceremonies was carefully researched beforehand with missionaries and local Christian Isaan leaders working together. The result of this study was written up as a volume entitled *Kho Phrakamphi Somrap Phiti Dangdang Leh Rabiep Kan Brakop Phiti* (*Bible References for Ceremonies and Order of Ceremonies* -Thai language) published in 1993. As Tongpan Phrommeda one of the founders of this group describes, these ceremonies serve a

special function apart from the two sacraments commanded by Christ (baptism and communion). The two sacraments are also observed regularly (and order of worship for celebrating them are also included in the above mentioned volume) but these ten other ceremonies (plus two more which do not involve the tying of strings)[4] are important for the normal daily life of the church within the Isaan cultural context.

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. 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. (Tongpan 2001:35 Translation by Paul De Neui).

Role of Outsiders in Developing Contextualized Ceremonies

The original research on these ceremonies took place before the author's involvement with the work of the CPKP. However, later needs arose within the Isaan church context which required the development of other specific ceremonies. As the needs developed, it was necessary to continue to do further research into other ceremonies using Biblically based standards to analyze local ceremonies and to do what Hiebert has called "critical contextualization.[5]" Missionaries, even though outsiders, can have an important affirming role in this process. As much as they may not like it, their influence is strongly felt by national church leaders and what missionaries approve of can often determine how quickly certain forms are adopted or rejected. This can be used to advantage when it comes to researching into the use of cultural forms. "In many church situations we have seen outsiders provide the incentive that will make a group feel free to use their cultural heritage in worship and in proclamation" (Søgaard 1993:197) One of the roles that missionaries can provide is that of the neutral outsider simply to ask questions about meaning and seek reasons why certain practices are performed.

The missionary can also help in guiding group discussion about what of the cultural practices is considered positive and what is considered negative based upon the Bible. "Each society has ascribed roles to each medium, so it is helpful to develop a general list of advantages and disadvantages of the individual media in specific contexts" (Søgaard 2001:3/1). An analysis done by the author of considerations for using contextualized *sukhwan* ceremonies in the community of Christ followers is found in Appendix B.

Missiological Implications

Christian communicators working in the Thai folk Buddhist context will need to discuss the implications for their own ministry regarding the concept of *khwan* and the *sukhwan* ceremonies. The majority of cross-cultural workers in Thailand have decided to simply ignore these issues and hope they go away. Their position towards cultural ceremonies is therefore also communicated in the process. Churches need to talk together and discuss the role of *khwan*. Is *khwan* idolatry or not? Does the use of contextualized Christian *sukhwan* ceremonies contribute to better communication of Christ and the expansion and maturity of the church? What has been the effect on the believer's lives who have participated in these contextualized ceremonies? What has been the effect on the church?

From the perspective of one organization that has fully embraced the use of sukhwan ceremonies when redeemed for the gospel, the functions of Christian *sukhwan* ceremonies serves the three important functions mentioned above by Hiebert within the church community in Isaan which uses them namely, transformation, intensification, and dealing

with crisis. They serve to reinforce transformation of the social order in weddings, leadership dedication, recognition of conversion, and freedom from addiction ceremonies. They serve to bring about important intensification of the social order as expressed in welcoming and sendoff ceremonies, baby dedications, and new house dedications. These ceremonies also help restore order through crisis resolution in a significant cultural form and are used particularly in ceremonies for healing, restitution, and reconciliation. Refer to Appendix C for a diagram of this summary. For those Christian organizations working in Isaan or within the Thai folk Buddhist context, if these ceremonies do not exist what has been provided as a substitute to meet these cultural needs?

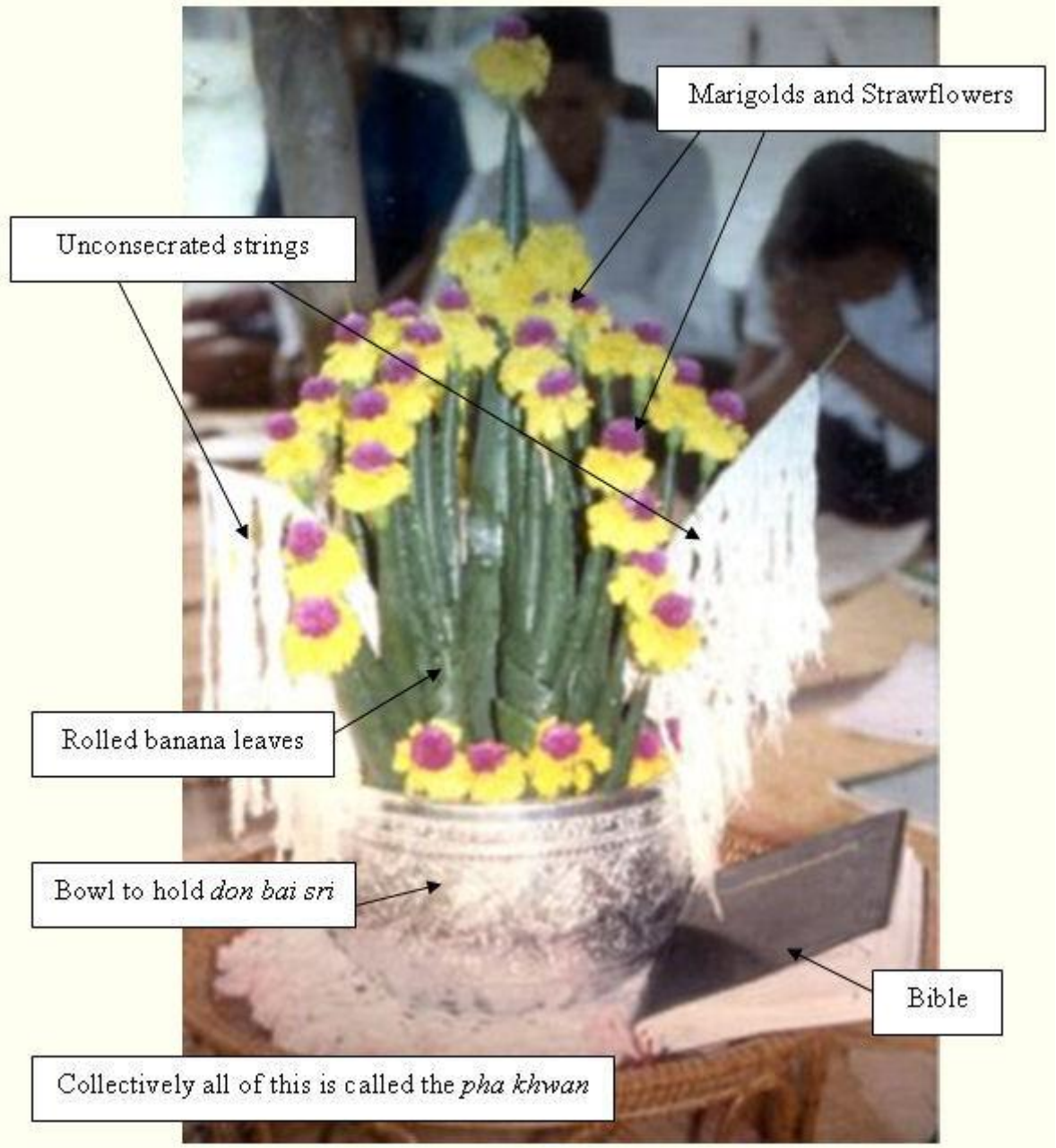
From personal experience I believe that the use of redeemed *sukhwan* ceremonies carries a powerful message to Isaan folk Buddhists who are choosing to follow Jesus Christ. For those of their families who are still seeking spiritual direction several messages are clearly conveyed. One message is that there truly exists a caring community among the believers. Secondly, there is a clear message that the church community and its head care about dealing with the tough issues that Isaan people face in the present, as well as a concern for issues about the afterlife. Finally, and most importantly the message is also clear that Jesus Christ is not a foreign or irrelevant god but has come and identified himself as one with Isaan people, to help and redeem one of the repressed cultures of the world. Church communities who use these ceremonies regularly are enriched by them both in numbers and in spiritual maturity. They experience God's grace as a body and are drawn closer together by it. This is critical to the animist worldview.

In rituals a group experiences itself most intensely as a unified community, and members recognize themselves as belonging to one another. The performance communicates to all the participants the strength that lies in solidarity and collective existence. If an individual can claim any significance, it is only by virtue of belonging to the collective, and this is determined by being allowed to participate in the rituals of the group. Moreover, it is during ritual performances that individuals take and are allowed to take their place in society. This provides them with their own self-identities (Hiebert 1999:301).

Finally, the joy and love expressed during these ceremonies powerfully demonstrates the presence of Christ in their midst. From it many have been motivated to go to their families and friends and tie them as well sharing what God had done for them. It is an unforgettable experience from which others in Thailand and even those outside the Thai folk Buddhist world can greatly benefit. May we as communicators be courageous enough to boldly step out and risk evaluating the multitude of creative cultural expressions waiting to be redeemed and employed for effective communication of the gospel.

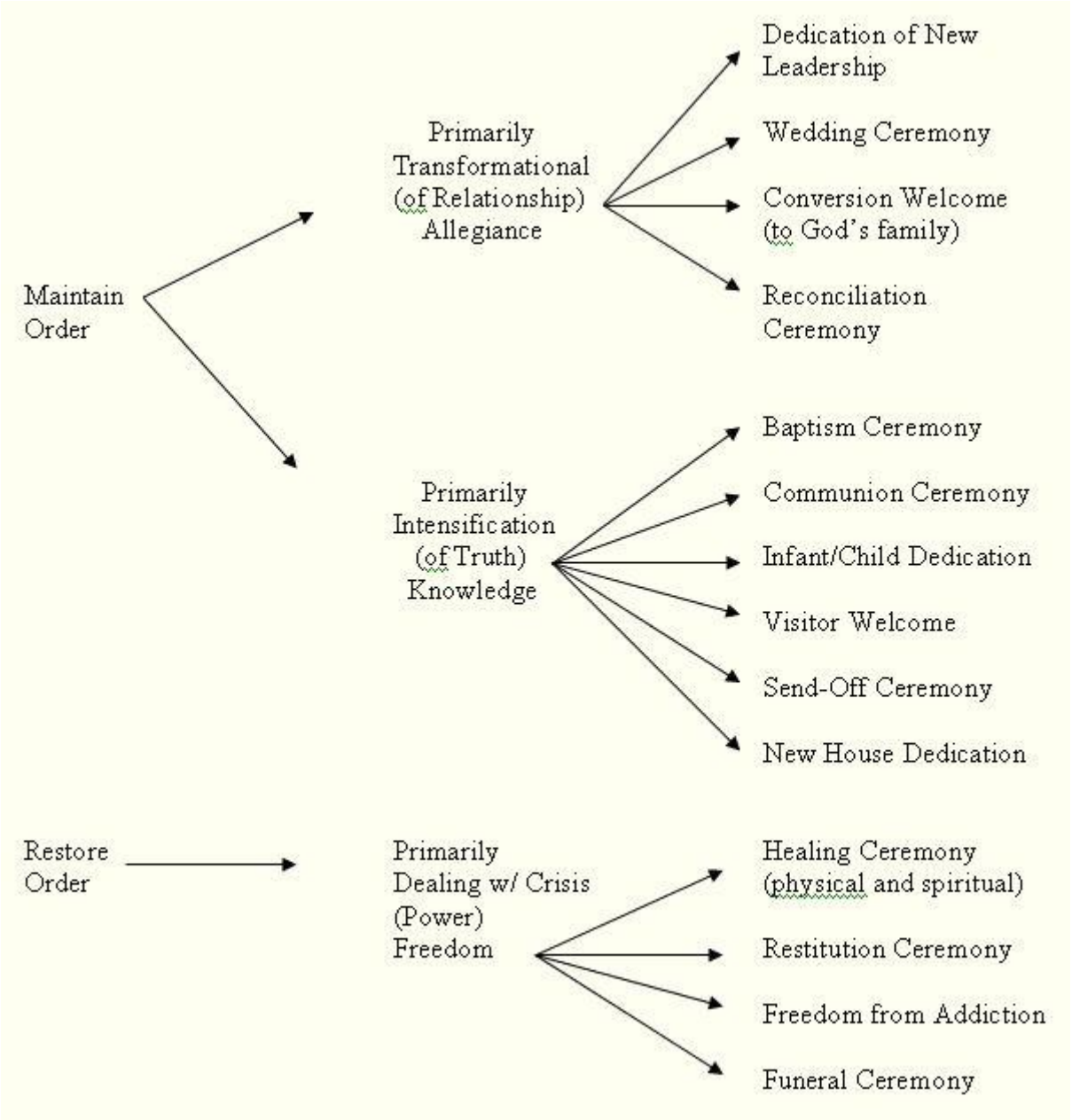
"Get your joy from being tied to the rest of the family by the Father's love"
Colossians 2:2 *Letters to Street Christians*

Appendix A
DESCRIPTION OF THE *DON BAI SRI* AND THE *PHAKHWAN* USED BY ISAAN FOLLOWERS OF JESUS IN SUKHWAN CEREMONIES



Appendix B

FUNCTIONS OF *SUKHWAN* IN THE ISAAN COMMUNITY OF FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST



Appendix C
CONSIDERATIONS IN USING *SUKHWAN* IN THE COMMUNITY OF ISAAN FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST

Advantages

1. Speaks to the deepest levels of the Isaan person's being.
2. It is holistic—it addresses and integrates the social, spiritual, and psychological needs of the recipient and his/her community.
3. Expresses unity with local tradition.
4. Expresses unity with local church community in a meaningful way.
5. Allows opportunity for individuals to share deeply and honestly with each other.

6. Provides a physical way to represent restitution, reconciliation, and healing. It is a means of God's grace both to the recipient and the participants.
7. It is non-western and helps incarnate the reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ for Isaan people.
8. It is equally fitting for men or women of all ages.
9. It is inexpensive; materials to do it are readily available.
10. It can be done almost anywhere and can be easily performed by lay leadership.
11. The purpose of the ceremony is clearly communicated in the cultural context.
12. The transformational effect of the ceremony on the recipient is often obvious to all involved. It can be readily adapted and repeated for a variety of situations.
13. There are a number of references in the Bible to being tied together with Christ and his body, which this ceremony tangibly reinforces.
14. It is often the first time a person from a Thai folk Buddhist background truly experiences an integration of what it means to be a follower of Jesus and still remain a Thai.

Disadvantages

1. Can be viewed as syncretistic.
2. Not readily appreciated by westernized Christians.
3. Requires repeated clear explanation that the strings are not consecrated and have no power in themselves. They merely serve as a physical representation of something we cannot see which is the love we share in Jesus Christ.
4. Local *pham*, who receive money for performing *sukhwan*, may not appreciate Christians providing a similar ceremony for free.
5. It is originally culture specific.

NOTES

1 In 1893 the Franco-Siamese Treaty was signed by which Siam agreed to withdraw from the left bank of the Mekong, and to recognize Laos as a French protectorate. North-east Thailand finally passed into the undisputed political control of Thailand (Tambiah 1970:31).

2 In some rare cases pham can also be women. She would never have been a Buddhist priest, of course, but in most cases had at one time been a mee chee, a female Buddhist devotee.

3 Thirty-two parts are mentioned in the Khuddakapatha (a prayer book for daily use in the Pali Canon): kesa (hair of the head), loma (hair of the body), nakka (nails), danta (teeth), taco (skin), mamsam (flesh/muscles), naharu (sinews), atthi (bones), atthiminjam, (marrow), yakkam (kidneys), hadayam (heart), yakanam (liver), kilomakam (membranes), pihaham (spleen), papphasam (lungs), antam (intestines), antagunam (entrails), udariyam (stomach), karisam (faeces), pittam (bile), semham (digestive juice, phlegm), pubbam (pus), lohitam (blood), seda (sweat), meda (fat), assu (tears), vasa (lymph), khela (saliva), singhanika (snot, mucus), lasika (synovial fluid of the joints), muttam (urine), and matthaka or matthalungam (head or brains) (Heinze 1982:128).

4 The two other non-sacramental ceremonies described in this volume not involving string-tying are a ceremony for giving the first fruits of the harvest (stewardship) and the Christian Isaan funeral ceremony.

5 Hiebert's concept of critical contextualization is best described in his 1994 volume entitled Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues published by Baker Books.

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