

VOICES FROM ASIA

COMMUNICATING CONTEXTUALIZATION THROUGH STORY

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The Story of My Early Life with Missionaries¹

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I want to share some stories from my early experience working with missionaries. Today I am 62 years old and I came to believe in God in the year 1957. Things have really changed since then. You may not believe what I say but these experiences really happened. I share them not to make fun of anyone but so we can all learn. I never believed the day would come when I would have the good fortune to speak about those days in a way that someone could learn from them. Today I have that opportunity. There were many good things. The good things I'll try to share at the end but first I want to share what wasn't so good so they won't happen again.

The first foreign missionary I ever knew was named Acharn³ Neighbor⁴. To this day he is still thought of very warmly in the hearts of Isaan people⁵ from my area of Chaiyapum province. This was before there were paved roads or many vehicles. He got a cart with a huge cow to pull it. It was a sight we didn't forget. Acharn Neighbor would go to where the people were. He worked hard. He shared everything with people, his food, his home, everything. After only four years he got some kind of disease and had to go back to his home in America. He had heart disease or something where he had to be inside a room all the time and so he could never come back to us in Thailand. My people still talk fondly about Acharn Neighbor.

When missionaries first came to our Isaan region of Thailand the Isaan people would call them, "teachers of religion" because they came to teach the Christian religion. In central Thailand missionaries were called "doctors of religion" because they were also medical doctors. But in Isaan we just had "teachers of religion". In those days there was no one to teach the missionaries about our culture so when they got here they used their own culture. There was nothing wrong with their own culture over there where it was from but when they got here it didn't work.

None of those early missionary could ever pronounce my name correctly. My name is Tongpan⁶. Most missionaries called me Ton Ban⁷ or Tong Bang⁸ - just like my big stomach here. I learned to live with it. In those days I had to learn their culture. It was what they had in their hearts, it was what they knew.

Back then missionaries hired people to work for them for 65 baht per month and later it went up to 100 baht. When I first went with them I got 35 baht per month. I became the

missionary's right hand man. As I said, I learned their culture and I would tell the villagers to try to understand the missionary. I was often trying to keep the peace for them. I told the village people not to ask the missionary so many questions because they didn't like it. When we went to share in the villages people would ask the missionary how old he was, how many children he had, how many wives he had, where he had graduated from. The missionary didn't like all the questions but he had to answer.

In those days we did most of our successful church planting with lepers so most of the believers were lepers. We would distribute medicine, take care of wounds, and then have some singing and a message. I remember the first song they taught me. I practiced for three months and still didn't get it (He sang a few bars of the hymn "There's not a Friend Like the Lowly Jesus" in Thai). The farang⁹ who taught didn't have the language so we couldn't sing along very well. The farang did all the teaching back then. Thai people weren't allowed to teach.

One day after we had distributed all the medicine and dealt with the wounds it was time for the Bible preaching and there was no one there to preach to! The missionary was furious. He asked me, "What are we going to do?" I said no problem, next time do it my way: we preach first and heal people afterwards. You have to do it the Thai way. Just like in the Buddhist temple - first the preaching then the eating. If you eat first everyone scatters.

Usually the missionary would talk about Jesus who had come to forgive sin. This was the usual lesson. But there was a concluding comment which was wrong. Someone would ask the missionary, "If we become Christians what do we need to do?" The missionary would say, "Read the Bible and pray. Stop smoking. Stop drinking alcohol and stop worshipping spirits." When he said this people would think, "Hmmm. Can I really stop smoking? Or drinking? I don't think I can do it. Okay, I guess I don't want to follow Jesus after all." This was the wrong approach. These things are all works that people can't do on their own. All this should come later. First the power of Jesus must be introduced. Then God will bring about these changes later. This is how I share. The missionaries at that time did not share the good news of the power of Jesus first, they talked about other things coming first. It was a real obstacle to people come to Christ.

In those days the roads were not paved as they are now and the missionaries drove all-terrain Land Rovers. When it came to passing out tracts, the missionary did not even get out of his vehicle to distribute them. He would just tossed them out of the window of the Land Rover as he drove by. People had to pick them up out of the mud. I wouldn't do that kind of work.

One day the missionary told me to meet him at a specific spot to be picked up by the Land Rover. The mission had a rule at that time that only eight people could ride in the Land Rover. However, the day when I was to meet the missionary there were eleven people who showed up to go with him. Only eight could ride - that was the rule! And the missionary had a whip! What was the whip for? It was for the kids. Most village kids hadn't seen many vehicles before and would jump all over one when it came to stop in their village. The missionary wouldn't really whip them but he would wave the whip around to scare them off. Well anyway, along came the Land Rover with the missionary driving. The missionary's wife was sitting in front so that was two spaces already filled. Only six more could ride - the rest he told to go home. What would you do if it was you? He said that only I could go since I was his right hand man. Well, I told him I wasn't going with him either. I said I would take these people to another village. You see I was always the peacemaker trying to smooth things out.

So I walked from my village several kilometers to meet with the missionary. When I got there there was a problem. In the past the first place to meet a guest was in the central hall of the village (known as the sala)¹⁰ Today these are almost all gone. Whenever important people came to the village they would be met there. And in those days Thai villagers considered the white foreigners to be special people. They hardly ever saw one and never in their own little village so they would arrange for them to use the central sala. The village headman would have the missionary stay at his own house. When it came time to eat the missionary would not eat with the people. He would not drink the village water either. He had his own boiled water which he brought with him. Actually, we have to have some understanding for the missionary. If they had drank our water they would probably have gotten sick to their stomach. The headman offered him a fresh coconut which he cut open to drink. The missionary said no thanks, he had his own water. He said the coconut milk was dirty. What do you think, is coconut milk dirty? But I always looked on the positive side. The knife was probably dirty and the cup was unclean. I tried to explain this but the headman was upset. Later I told the missionary, "Next time go ahead and drink the coconut milk but tell them not to pour the milk out into a cup - just drink it right from the nut itself." We don't want to insult people anymore. If an Isaan person gives us something to drink and we don't drink it is very insulting.

The missionary also ate his own food. He brought it in a can. He ate about half of it and then asked others if they wanted any. People were upset getting offered the leftovers. I told people to try to understand, that the foreigner's culture was very different from ours.

In the past when a special visitor came to visit, villagers would bring out their special handmade triangular pillows for the visitor to lean against as they sat on the mats. The missionary, however, would take three or four of these and pile them up and sit way up on top of them like a throne! I tried to tell the headman that the foreigner's furniture was soft and that the missionary couldn't sit on the floor. Today missionaries aren't like this. They have learned more than that. But back then what do you think the Thai villagers thought?

In the morning the missionary had to wash his clothes. You may hear this story and not believe it could be true. In those days no one had laundry detergent. Only the wealthy could afford it. The village people in Isaan used a plant called Don Kee Mawt which was rubbed up and down on the washboard in a basin of water. This made a little foam and you could wash your clothes with it. Only the most wealthy people could buy the boxed detergents. Well, the missionary brought along his powdered detergent and when he was done washing his clothes he still had foamy water so he would ask the village headman, "Do you want to wash your clothes now? I'm done and this foamy water is still left over." There was no way the headman would consider doing that so then the missionary asked me. I also declined. The missionary intended good but he didn't make friends. The headman was upset because he had sat on his pillows, and insulted his food and water. Next time when we came to this village the headman would not welcome us. The missionary had to sleep in the public sala because the headman had been insulted and would not house him again. This became a real barrier to building good relationships.

Normally on a Sunday morning when there are lots of people gathered together there will be people bringing things to sell. The sala was a regular market. But when the missionary arrived on a following Sunday to the center of the village, the public sala, where he had preached before he began to tell people, "You can't sell things here! This is the temple of the Lord!" He was quoting the words of Jesus, you know. And he started to move the vender's carts out of the area. He intended good but the slope down was very steep. One of the carts was full of

sweet rolls and the ground was steep so the cart fell over into the mud. All the rolls fell out into the mud. The missionary didn't even offer to pay for them. Think about it: if you were the seller of those rolls what would you think? Do you think the missionary was making friends or making enemies? He probably thought he was doing what Jesus did but it was a real barrier in connecting with people.

We learned a lot of things from watching where the missionary family lived. Have you heard about ringing for the servants during dinner? I don't know if they still do this. In those days when they wanted someone they had a little bell they would ring and people would come running. This was a kind of colonial leftover. This was very offensive to be rung at by bells like cattle.

We tried to learn how the missionaries lived. I learned that when missionaries are eating you never bother them. I found out that if you are going to come to a missionary's house for a meal you have to telephone first. Telephone!? Who had a telephone? So we joked about how we had to write a letter to tell the missionary we were going to come over to eat. This wasn't right. I'm sure this doesn't happen anymore. We've learned a lot now.

One night we came back from an evangelism trip very late and I could not get home. I had never spent the night at the missionary's house before. Ma'am (the missionary wife) told her husband to back the car out of the garage and told me I could sleep in the garage. I couldn't sleep in their house but I could sleep in their garage. If it was, you what would you think? Sleep in the garage! Not just one person but several of us, all church leaders and evangelists.

I guess that the cultural differences were not even in their imagination. We thought it might be a rule of the mission because we noticed what happened to missionaries who treated us well. If a missionary allowed Thai people to come into their home, eat a meal with them or sleep in their houses that missionary never came back. They must have broken their rules so they never were allowed to come back.

When we went out on our visitation to villagers the missionaries would give free medicine to lepers but for others who were feverish or sick they had to pay for it. One time when the missionary got home he brought the money in a sack to the maid and told her, "Iron this money." The maid looked at the missionary confused and asked, "But, acharn, why?" And the missionary said, "To kill the germs." Now if the missionary had just said this to his wife and this had stayed in their family it would not have been a problem. But the maid went to her home village that night and told everyone the foreigner believed that our money was dirty so she had to iron it to kill the germs. Everyone who heard was infuriated!

We have a saying, "Nok me hu, nu me beek¹¹" (birds have ears and mice have wings). The word spread everywhere. Isaan people love to talk! The next time the missionary went to that village church he was asked, "Acharn, do you really despise us? Are we so disgusting to you that you have to take our money home and iron it?" What did the missionary do? He broke into a sweat and turned red in the face. When he got home he told the maid, "You can collect your things and go home. We don't need your kind around here any more." And what was the result of that? Only making enemies.

When someone is sick and needs to be transported into the main town to go to the hospital who do Isaan people turn to? Our brothers and sisters. Well, we were Christians now so we didn't have any brothers and sisters anymore except for our missionary. So we turned to our

brother in the Lord when there was an emergency. One night we came to him with an emergency. The acharn was on his way out to buy food. He asked us, "What did you come for? I am not free right now. I'm on my way into town." Then he released his big foreign dogs on us and they came howling at us. Of course the maids had all been fired by this time. When the church elders heard about this they were upset. "Isn't there another denomination we can join and get away from this foreigner?" they asked. I told them, "Be patient. If someone bothered you, you would do the same thing." I was always trying to keep the peace.

In those days missionaries stayed for four years and then moved on to another place. When a new missionary came he would come down the cart paths in his Land Rover. I would walk several kilometers to meet him. One time I met the new missionary and I was expecting to be able to ride back with him. But this new missionary wouldn't let me ride. You see his new vehicle was light and would get stuck in the mud so he had filled it with sacks of sand. He told me, "Go ahead and walk and I'll meet you."

If it was you which would be more important: people or vehicles? What those missionaries did was really insulting but for me I believed that they had their reasons. I took the attitude that we say in Thai, we need to put their heart inside of our heart. But other people would look at missionaries and say, "What a rude person." They didn't understand the cultural differences. Their culture isn't wrong but using it here is wrong.

Whatever things the missionary no longer wanted they gave to us. I got my first pair of shoes from a missionary. I had never worn any shoes ever before in my life. I didn't even own plastic sandals! When I was going to go out with the missionary I needed to dress nicely so they found an old pair that had belonged to the missionary's son which were large and loose and gave them to me. I took them even though I had no idea how to wear them. Normally a person would know that they should put their pants on before their shoes but I didn't know this. After I had bathed I put on my nice new shoes and then tried to pull my pants up over them. Wham! I fell down flat on my back looking up at the ceiling. There is a Thai saying about this, "The Elephant Has Shoes" - and doesn't know what to do with them!. I had a lot to learn.

In those days the roads were muddy. We didn't have the pavement everywhere like we have today. When the missionary walked down the road he took off his muddy shoes. On one such occasion the governor (nai amphur) was walking by and the missionary lifted his shoes to his face to greet the governor with a wai - instead of setting down his shoes to wai he lifted his muddy shoes and wai-ed them at the governor. This was extremely insulting. Isaan people would say, "His mother must be a dog!" Usually I tried to pacify people and explain away the mistakes of the culturally-insensitive missionary. That one took a lot of talking to get resolved.

Here is another story about the muddy roads. As I said, there wasn't pavement yet. On one turn in the road a missionary was driving very quickly and his Land Rover sprayed mud all over a monk who was walking down the road with his begging bowl. He got muddy up to the top of his head. He was furious. But the missionary didn't even stop. The word got around about what happened. Even the head of the ministry of religious affairs found out about it and they called the missionary in to defend his behavior. The missionary never went. He left the country instead. If it was me I would have stopped and asked for forgiveness. I would have said they could have me executed or whatever it would take I would do it. But the missionary

didn't come - he wanted someone else to speak for him but no one would. He avoided the problem and left. As Christians we need to face our problems and be honest.

These are all some of the barriers we experienced. This is how Isaan people viewed the missionaries in their own eyes. Not everything missionaries did was wrong. I am thankful for the message of salvation that the missionaries brought to us. If they had not come we would never have known. I share these things not to criticize or tear down anyone but always hoping to share these experiences as a lesson. Don't let these things that happened at that time long ago ever happen again with us.

Today Isaan people view missionaries three ways. Number one, they come to spread religion. Number two they come to start a business and number three, what shall I say? They come to invest money in our land, to be a tourist or to be with lots of missionaries like in Chiang Mai. They like to stay in the big cities. If you just look around you will see that missionaries like to be in nice big houses where things are convenient. Lots are going to Bangkok. The money is better there.

It is important to study the culture of the Isaan as much as possible. I want to say that there are good missionaries. Are you willing to really love the poor? Would you be willing to give your life for them? I want to add that missionaries should really love the Isaan people. We hear the words of love but don't see it in actions. Making them sleep in a garage is not showing love. Cooking a chicken and preparing a nice place to sleep, that shows that you care. The missionaries that treated us well we don't forget. I still think of Acharn Neighbor. He went home and we never saw him again but he is still dearly loved. Let's use the best of our culture in ways that communicate with people.

Endnotes:

1. This talk was originally given at the end of a three day seminar called the Isaan Seminar in Udon Thani, Thailand in May 2001 and was entitled, "Missionaries in the Eyes of Isaan." This was the final talk so the speaker had no time remaining to discuss more positive aspects of missionaries than a few brief comments at the end. The experiences he shared in this seminar were both painful and humorous and were given with much laughter. They cover a period of approximately fifteen years between 1957 and 1971. While missionaries today may feel that they would never do the things mentioned here it is an interesting perspective to begin to understand how the other side feels. It was Tongpan's heartfelt desire that these stories not be viewed as merely complaints but as lessons from which new missionaries could learn. This talk was given in Isaan or the Lao language.
2. Rev. Tongpan Phrommedda, a native of northeast Thailand was born in Chaiyaphum province. At the time of this seminar he was the president of the Thailand Covenant Church with which he had worked since its inception for thirty years.
3. Acharn is the Thai honorific which translates as either professor or Reverend. It is still used in reference to all missionaries. It is also the term which Jesus uses in Matthew 23:10, "Nor are you to be called `acharn,' for you have one Acharn, the Christ."
4. Neighbor was the man's last name. He was with the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination based in New York.
5. 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.
6. Tong pan means "gold birthmark"
7. A nonsense word, unless most Thai names which have auspicious meaning.
8. Tong bang when pronounced with the right tones can mean "protruding stomach."
9. "Farang" is the Thai word for white Caucasians.

10. Known in Thai as the sala klang ban.
11. ?????? ????????