

**STRING-TYING RITUAL AS CHRISTIAN COMMUNICATION IN
NORTHEAST THAILAND**

By

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ABSTRACT

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Description. To follow

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words

NOTES FOR THE READER ON THAI AND LAO WORDS

This study employs the transliteration for Thai words suggested by Thailand's Royal Institute. This includes neither tonal markings nor vowel length. Thai has five tones and Lao has six. Spoken Lao has all the same consonant and vowel sounds as found in Thai except for "ch" and "r." Lao also has a consonant phoneme ñ (the palatal nasal) not found in Central Thai (Haas 1978:20). In both languages "ph" and "th" indicate aspiration, and not the English sounds "f" as in "fun" or "th" as in "thick." The author has had to forgo tonal markings and vowel lengths in the notations.

When referring to prominent Thai and Lao figures the author has followed the custom in the literature and the society of these countries to refer to the first, and not the last name. Thus, for example, the Lao author Mayoury Ngaosyvathn is referred to as Mayoury rather than Ngaosyvathn. Bowing to the conventions of anthropological referencing requirements honorifics have been dropped even in such cases as Maha Sila Viravong or Phraya Anuman Rajadhon and are listed simply by first name.

Anno Domini (A.D.) was chosen in reference to sequence of years instead of the more widely-accepted C.E. (Common Era) to avoid confusion regarding the Thai numbering system known as the *Chulasakarat* Era also abbreviated as C.E. For a more detailed explanation of the chronological systems used over various periods of history in the Khorat Plateau refer to Appendix J. The author's own translation comments throughout the document are shown within [].

Any inadequacies in these approaches are the author's own.

DEDICATION

To all who desire to bring Christ to the people of Isaan.

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LIST OF MAPS

MAP 1 MAP TITLE (to be added)**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AD	Anno Domini
BC	Before Christ
BCE	Before Common Era
BE	Buddhist Era
CE	Chulasakarat Era also known as “Little Era”
C&MA	Christian and Missionary Alliance
CCT	Church of Christ in Thailand
CSTR	Christian string tying ritual
ECCTM	Evangelical Covenant Church Thailand Mission
EFT	Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand
LAO PDR	Lao People’s Democratic Republic
NIV	New International Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
RE	Ratanakosin Era
RSV	Revised Standard Version
STR	String tying ritual
TCC	Thailand Covenant Church

PART I

STRING TYING RITUAL WITHIN ISAAN WORLDVIEW

CHAPTER 1
FOUNDATIONS FOR A STUDY ON STRING TYING
RITUAL

The citizens of Thailand prefer to compare the shape of their country to that of an axe pointing to the right. If this can be visualized then it is the blade that constitutes the Khorat Plateau or *Phaak Isaan*, the northeastern region. Isaan is generally viewed as the poorest and least developed area of the country or in a way David Wyatt attempts to correct as, “some empty space in between more active and economically rich areas” (2002:7-8). Poverty has been a reality for generations¹ but empty space is a myth. With over twenty-one million residents Isaan is Thailand’s most populous region. Inactivity is also a myth. Anyone who has ever visited the ruins of Pimai, Ban Chiang, or Phanom Rung will marvel at the civilizations that were behind them. The residents of the Khorat Plateau possess a long and diverse cultural history with deeply held worldview themes still evidenced today in the lively music and dance, the spicy food, loyalty to family, and the persistent devotion to social and religious ritual.

Presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people of the Khorat Plateau began 125 years ago. Today the total estimated membership of Christian churches in Isaan, both Catholic and Protestant, stands at less than 130,000.² Even doubling this figure to include fringe members and independent groups this totals less than a fraction of one percent of the total Isaan population. Currently new missionary interest has been generated towards this unreached people group however it appears to be oblivious of two

¹ This image was popularized by Khamphun Boontawee in his novel *Luk Isan* (Child of the Northeast) which won the 1979 SEA Write Award.

² This figure based upon statistics from the Roman Catholic yearbook of 2004 and independent survey research by Marten Visser email 22 Nov 2004.

critical concerns. First, there appears to be a general unawareness of the missiological lessons that should be learned from the efforts of missionaries to the region in the past. Today there is no area of Isaan that is a completely blank slate where people are without certain long standing cultural preconceptions towards Christianity based upon past interactions with Christians both Thai and expatriate. These interactions, some firsthand most secondhand, contribute to a worldview perspective towards Christianity as being for “them” (those who have made a decision to become Christians) as opposed to “us” (Isaan Buddhists). Secondly, and perhaps more critically, there appears to be a general lack of interest among both Thai and expatriate communicators of the gospel in the lengthy diverse cultural and religious history of the region through which God has been speaking to make himself known for centuries, even before the arrival of outside messengers.

String tying ritual (STR) is one ancient tradition still visible throughout Isaan. Locally known as *sukhwan*, it involves the tying of cotton threads onto the wrist of a recipient. It has been practiced by the Buddhist and animist population on both sides of the Mekong River for centuries.³ A small group of Isaan followers of Christ are using this tradition as an expression of their response to the gospel from their particular worldview. For the majority of Isaan Christians (and for Thai believers from other regions) this is problematic. It appears to mix old ways with new and raises many issues regarding what is appropriate media for Christian communication in northeast Thailand. As the research progressed, defining the meaning of STR for Isaan Christians led to larger questions. Why was string tying so important for certain followers of Christ that it be retained after Christian conversion when other practices of non-Christian origin were not? And why, for other Isaan Christians, was string tying rejected outright? The answer to these questions indicates three existing positions towards worldview held by Isaan believers.

³ STR is also practiced to a lesser extent among the central and northern Thai as well as numerous ethnic hill tribe groups in Thailand and PDR Laos. Meanings vary for each group.

Introductory Foundations of the Research

This section will describe the purpose, the goals, the central research issue and the research questions covered in this study.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to present missiological insights from a study of the deep level meaning and communication effects of STR as practiced by Isaan followers of Jesus in northeast Thailand. These insights are derived from a descriptive analysis of Isaan worldview themes viewed from the historic perspective, the biblical and theological perspectives, and observation, interview, and survey data.

Goals

The four intended outcomes of this study are:

1. To provide a historical perspective on worldview development and ritual expressions of values found among the residents of the Khorat Plateau emphasizing prevalent cultural themes of Isaan people today (Part I).
2. To produce a hermeneutic based on biblical and historic Christian theology from which to view ritual as a means of communication of God's message and as an expression of response to God's message with consideration for the concerns and benefits involved (Part II).
3. To present the range of perspectives regarding the use of Christian string tying ritual (CSTR) as communication of and response to God's message as represented by Isaan Christians in the study population (Part III).
4. To provide missiological insights relevant to the context of popular Buddhism in Isaan regarding the use of string tying ritual as communication of and response to God's message (Part IV).

Central Research Issue

The central research issue of this study is the role of string tying ritual among northeastern Thai followers of Christ as a means of communication of and response to the gospel in order to discover missiological insights applicable in the context of popular Buddhism as practiced in Isaan and the rest of Thailand.

Research Questions

1. What have been the major historical influences upon the development of worldview and ritual expression prevalent as cultural themes in Isaan? These are addressed in Part I of the dissertation.
2. What do the Bible and historic Christian theology have to say about ritual as a means of communication of and response to God's message? What concerns and benefits should be considered? These are addressed in Part II of the dissertation.
3. What are the perspectives of Isaan Christians in the study population regarding the use of CSTR as communication of and response to God's message? These are addressed in Part III of the dissertation.
4. What missiological insights can be gained from a study of the use of string tying ritual as a means of communication of and response to God's message relevant to the context of popular Buddhism in Isaan? These are addressed in Part IV of the dissertation.

Definitions

Culture: The actions, beliefs, worldview, and lifestyle inseparable from the people who live and practice it (Kraft 2001:5-11-12).

Deep-level meaning: The use of the term deep-level meaning of string tying ceremony refers not to the external symbolic elements but the total cumulative effect of the event

upon the participants at the inner core of their human experience. In this context it can also be described as the communication effect of the ritual. String tying ceremonies exhibit impact and have deep level meaning not merely on an individual cognitive level but also in a corporate sense on the behavioral and affective levels. Meaning is always in the minds of the receptor(s) not in the messenger or the means of communication.

Isaan: The term literally means the northeast direction in the Pali language. Since 1922 the Thai government has applied this word to the northeastern region of the Khorat Plateau that is populated predominantly by Lao-speaking people. The term Isaan is now used by Thai citizens to refer to the region of the Khorat Plateau, the people living there, and their language and culture. In this study the phrase northeastern Thai is used interchangeably to refer to the Isaan people, and the terms northeast Thailand or the northeastern region are used interchangeably to refer to the geographic region of Isaan.

Modified life story interviews: Robert Atkinson theorizes that “we discover deeper meaning in our lives through the process of reflecting and putting events, experiences, and feelings that we have lived into oral expression (1998:1). In order to facilitate this for research purposes he developed the life story interview as a qualitative research method for gathering information on the subjective essence of one person’s entire life(:3). The author found this method fit well with the oral culture of the Isaan people and employed it in a modified way to pursue the topic of the meaning and impact of string tying ritual in the life of the one being interviewed following questions found in Appendix A.

Popular Buddhism: The dynamic combination of Brahmanism, Hinduism, primal religious practices, and Theravada interpretations of the philosophical teachings and practices of the followers of Guatama Buddha that have become an inseparably interwoven wide range of rituals and beliefs within a culturally accepted religious and social understanding throughout Thailand. The author has chosen to use the phrase popular Buddhism instead of folk Buddhism because the latter retains largely pejorative

connotations. Practices vary from region to region so the author has used the phrase popular Buddhism as practiced in Isaan as it embraces the focus topic of string tying.

Ritual: Deliberately repeated culturally-understood participatory experiences performed by groups of individuals from a similar social context for restorative, relational and transformational purposes. In this study the word ceremony is used interchangeably with the word ritual.

String tying ritual: In Lao and Isaan this ritual is referred to as *sukhwan* and includes any number of practices in which cotton thread is used to tie on the wrist of a single or multiple recipients. In applying it for use within the community of followers of Christ Isaan Christians, for reasons described later in this study, have tended to refer to it as the ritual of tying string upon the wrist. The author has chosen to simplify this lengthy title to simply string tying ritual as a collective singular for a genre of cultural ritual found in Isaan in the same way that the terms marriage ritual or puberty ritual are used in ritual studies. The term of string tying ritual is used throughout the research study to refer to both the Isaan Christian version of the ceremony as well as the ritual used within popular Isaan Buddhism. For the sake of repetition string tying ritual has been abbreviated to STR and Christian string tying ritual to CSTR. The term string tying ceremony is used interchangeably with string tying ritual.

Worldview: Basic assumptions about the nature of reality collectively held by members of a particular group of people (Hiebert and Meneses 1995:41). Within worldview are “deep level patterns relevant to all people in a group” known as worldview themes (Bailey 2002:30).

Delimitations

Christianity in Thailand: This study focuses on a cultural means of communication and a cultural response to the gospel of the God of the Bible by the northeastern Thai

believers included in the survey research population. It is not descriptive of all Christians in Isaan or the entire country of Thailand but has implications for both.

Ritual in the Bible: There is much more information on the topic of biblical ritual than can adequately be covered in this study. Many other biblical and anthropological studies are available.⁴ This research will concern itself with deep-level meaning as it relates to worldview rather than the anthropological details of ritual practice found in the Bible.

String tying ceremonies: This study will not explore the variety of rituals that exist within Isaan,⁵ nor will it attempt to review the role of ritual as it impacts Isaan society in general,⁶ but it will focus only on Isaan ceremonies that specifically employ string tying as practiced within the Isaan Christian community. This study focuses upon the meaning of string tying as used by Isaan followers of Christ in a way that communicates the gospel and expresses an Isaan response to the gospel from their worldview perspective as much as possible.

Limitations

A personal bias towards promoting the increased use and further improvement of God-honoring string tying ritual is a personal limitation, and as an outsider my lenses are colored a certain way. Furthermore, I have been working with a movement of believers that has deliberately stood for most of its existence, and for a variety of reasons, apart from the majority of Thai Christian thinking and practice.

I am also limited in this study by the fact that my findings do not and cannot represent the perspective of all followers of Christ in the Isaan region. This study is merely a study on worldview themes that are present within my survey population.

⁴ For more information on OT ritual refer to *Old Testament Survey* by La Sor, Hubbard and Bush; *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* by Childs, and Bright's *A History of Israel*.

⁵ Refer to Boonkerd (2544), Domrong (2546), and Tambiah (1970).

⁶ These topics are covered elsewhere by Heinze (1982), Seri and Hewison (2001), and also in Tambiah (1970).

Therefore, the results of the survey data do not claim to represent the opinions of the total Isaan Christian population of the Khorat Plateau and the numerous other locations to which Isaan people have migrated in Thailand.

Interviews and survey in this study were from a selected sample of Isaan Christians. An attempt was made to include in this sample representation from rural and urban populations in Isaan, members of all ages and genders with varying social and educational experience, and endeavored to include those with a divergent range of opinion and practice (or non-practice) on the subject under consideration including Catholics, mainline Protestants, independent Evangelicals, conservative and liberal Isaan followers of Christ. In selecting the study population an attempt was made to include a variety of Isaan Christian religious perspectives with varying degrees of string tying practice ranging from those who practiced the ritual regularly to those who were adamantly opposed to such practices. Those finally included all came from churches or institutions whose leadership expressed a verbal willingness to complete and have a select number of their members also complete the written survey form.

Assumptions

The first assumption is that the culture of Isaan people is not stagnant but is constantly changing. Certainly recent globalizing influences have greatly sped up this process so that it is now faster than used to be in the past. A review of the history of the region, however, indicates that radical cultural changes have been occurring for hundreds of years on the Khorat Plateau, and the resilient people living there have been able to adapt their beliefs, worldview expressions, and lifestyles to the numerous climactic, religious, and political changes very successfully. It is assumed that Isaan culture will continue to change and that suggestions made in this research at this point in history will need to be reviewed in light of current trends, beliefs, values, and worldview expressions.

In contrast to the changing nature of all human cultures it is also firmly assumed that the core message of the gospel of grace found in Jesus Christ does not change and that the message of transformation in Christ is intended for the people of all cultures in all parts of the world at all times. It is assumed that God been calling a people from every culture throughout human history to hear this one gospel message and has he been going about this task of communication in ways that go beyond the narrow confines of the few methodologies presently employed by his followers around the world.

A final assumption is that a study of this nature, although controversial, is critically strategic for mission. It is assumed to be the requirement of all who claim to participate in God's worldwide task to go beyond what we think we know and seek to discover more of him for ourselves and for the benefit of those whom he desires to reach. As Jacob Loewen wrote, "We may never see the full richness of God's revelation until we are able to participate in the multitude of different perspectives brought to it by the multitude of languages and cultures in the world" (1974:86).

Significance of the Study

This dissertation is written in anticipation that it will hold significance for three particular groups. The first group includes my mentor, my doctoral committee, the faculty of the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, and all future students who may find this work a stepping stone to further research and more effective kingdom practice particularly within the context of popular Buddhism.

The second group includes all Bible school and/or seminary-trained Isaan Christian workers as well as Isaan lay leaders informally trained, and their counterparts from all other regions of Thailand, who have become oriented towards a communication approach that tends toward a corrective approach. It is hoped that through the application of insights from this study consideration might be given to moving towards a more

culturally interpretive approach in the presentation of (and eliciting a response to) the gospel message throughout Isaan and all of Thailand.

Thirdly, this study will be significant for expatriate missionaries planning to serve or presently serving in Isaan or perhaps elsewhere in Thailand who may be seeking to discover a culturally interpretive missiology with sensitivity towards worldview themes through which God may be speaking to reach Isaan in ways yet to be discovered.

Chronology of the Research Process

Initial studies were conducted at Fuller Theological Seminary and later continued during field studies in Thailand. The research process began by looking at communication issues involved with the use of ritual in the northeastern Thai context. From this research questions were formulated that were to be further addressed later in the studies through literature review and field research. Two main issues arose from this initial study. One was the critical importance of understanding Isaan worldview to ascertain why they certain Isaan believers felt it would be appropriate for them to respond to the gospel using string tying ritual of Brahman and animist origin, when other popular Buddhist practices were rejected. The second issue related to Christian church structures that either facilitated this type of response to the gospel or forbid it. From this beginning possible responses to cultural worldview began to surface among Isaan believers.

Following this a study on the biblical perspective of ritual as communication was completed. At this time life story interviews were conducted along with visits to resources within Isaan and other places in Thailand including libraries, temples, museums, cultural centers, homes, and archeological sites. Initial exploratory interview data at this stage provided further definitions of worldview themes and more questions specific to the use of ritual within the Isaan Christian community. A survey

questionnaire in the Thai language was developed and is attached as Appendix B with an English language translation found in Appendix C.

An additional area of study translated and analyzed the earlier research of an Isaan Christian who had begun a project on the topic of the impact of string tying ritual among Isaan Christians. After the final survey data was collected and investigated it was apparent that a descriptive picture of the use of ritual by Isaan followers of Christ was developing to be described in the dissertation.

The following flow chart indicates the stages of progress in the research study.

FIGURE 1
METHODOLOGICAL FLOW CHART

Field Research Methodology

Since arriving in Thailand in 1987, the number of Isaan Christian string tying ceremonies observed or participated in by the author is estimated to be well over one hundred. From August 2003 to August 2004 the author observed and participated in ten string tying ceremonies listed in Appendix D that contributed to this study. Working and living among Isaan people for seventeen years afforded the privilege of learning the Lao

language as spoken by the Isaan along with many cultural non-verbal clues that allowed direct conversation on a deeper level with Isaan people in their own mother tongue. Details regarding the interview process used in this study are described in Chapter 9.

Upon completion of the majority of the interviews, the researcher felt the need to gain a broader perspective from a larger number of Isaan Christians than was possible through personal interviews. A questionnaire was developed that was personally distributed to eight different churches and Christian institutions in seven provinces throughout Isaan whose selection was based upon expressed willingness to participate in the research study. In selecting the survey population an attempt was made to include a variety of Isaan Christian religious perspectives with varying degrees of string tying practice ranging from those who practiced the ritual regularly to those who were adamantly opposed to such practices. While the survey cannot be called a purely random sample it is believed that the results from this selective sample can provide insight into communication strategies for presentation of the gospel within the larger Isaan context. The process of developing, distributing, and collating the results of the survey are described in Chapter 10.

Reliability and Validity

A major concern for the personal interview section of the study was whether it would be possible to get Isaan people to say what was true and reliable and not merely what they thought the researcher wanted to hear? When conducting research in a face-saving culture of people that in the words of Niels Mulder “shy away from the critical analysis of things Thai” (1997:25), the issues of reliability and validity were critical in being able to collect viable data relevant to the research.

Speaking the local Lao language proved to be the first step. Isaan people understand the central Thai language but, according to William Smalley it is not what

they use to communicate at home when speaking from the heart.⁷ According to observations made by the author over the years and confirmed during the research period, when relations between Isaan people became strained (often almost imperceptibly to an outsider) Isaan people would switch to speaking central Thai with one another because it intentionally indicated relational distancing. Isaan people also recognize that their language is not used with outsiders in formal settings and an interview could possibly be considered a formal setting. Smalley refers to this when describing the use of the Lao language in Isaan:

Most government officials from outside the northeast . . . do not understand much Lao, and make no effort to learn it, considering it rustic and inferior. . . If officials of goodwill from outside the region tried to understand Lao and to gain facility in using it, the effort would pay off enormously in rapport and communication. But such learning is contrary to powerful assumptions built into the language hierarchy, so that many people are embarrassed to speak a language below their own. To speak Lao would carry some of the feelings which an educated American would have in using working-class English with its “ain’t” and “he don’t,” a dialect which is not nearly as different from Standard English as Lao is from Standard Thai. Speakers of higher-level languages sometimes feel that they are protecting themselves from social pollution by not learning lower ones (1994:94).

Certainly it would be just as possible to stretch the truth in Lao as in the central Thai language but the expressed willingness of the researcher (in the perception of those being interviewed but not in that of the author), to come down to their level and to converse in their native tongue placed the author on a level of integrity that spoke of a desire to move beyond formality and speak honestly from the heart.

⁷ Here the author wishes to clarify the statement made in the 2004 *Atlas of Thailand* edited by Doryane Kermel-Torrès that calls Thailand “a fairly homogenous state in terms of its ethnocultural mix . . . [where] more than 90 percent have a Thai language as their mother tongue” (2004:38). This could easily be misinterpreted to mean ninety percent have central Thai as their mother tongue when what is actually the truth is that more than ninety percent speak something that originated from within the Tai group of languages. As is frequently noted in literature written by expatriates, regional differences in language are consistently minimized. The statement above should be balanced with that of Smalley who says that “only a minority of people in Thailand, perhaps 20 percent is born to Standard Thai as its sole mother tongue” (1994:2).

Secondly, the methodology used in the interviews did not demand or dictate a particular response.⁸ Using the modified life-story format (defined earlier) allowed the interviewee to choose what was said following the loose set of guideline questions provided. The stories chosen by the interviewee frequently touched on the deepest issues of worldview even though the term was never mentioned. As Atkinson described, the process of the life story interview went deep.

Stories can bring us face to face with an ultimate mystery. Stories awaken feelings of awe, wonder, humility, respect, and gratitude in recognition of those mysteries around us. These feelings help us participate in the mystery of being. Stories take us beyond the here and now, beyond our everyday existence, and allow us to enter the realm of the spirit, the domain of the sacred. It is through stories that we come into contact with the eternal. Stories connect us to the depths as well as the heights of life (1998:10).

Rarely was the author alone with the one being interviewed. Isaan is a group culture and the sight of two people deep in conversation (especially when one was a Lao-speaking *farang*⁹) is highly attractive to most of them. Inevitably someone would join us eager to contribute their unsolicited opinions and make corrections of the one being interviewed. When after ten interviews the same kinds of responses to the interview questions were being given it was felt that a particular topic had been adequately addressed and that the data received was reliable for use. Survey data was used to confirm this later.

Third, the author was able to compare the oral data received from the interviews with the seminal literature on the subject in order to confirm the reliability of the sources. Authors useful in this task were Amara Pongsapich, Banpote Wetchgama, Stephen Bailey, Chai Podhisita, Ruth-Inge Heinze, Doryane Kermel-Torrès, Nantachai Mejudhon, William Smalley, Suntaree Komin, Stanley Tambiah, and other authors listed under

⁸ “The life story interview allows for—indeed, insists on—highly contextualized individual judgments on the part of the researcher. It is a style of research that looks and allows for the unanticipated turn in a conversation” (Atkinson 1998:v).

⁹ *Farang* is the word for white Caucasian.

References Cited. The author was also able to compare information verbally with Isaan experts met during the research period without revealing sources to prejudice opinion. These people were eager to either confirm or correct the research findings.

Reliability and validity were equal concerns for the survey data as well. What were the controls that prevented as much as possible the falsification of information from this source? Firstly, the selection of churches and locations to include in the survey were based upon relationships established by the author with either the pastors or leaders in those locations. It was explained in each case that what was needed was not what the respondents expected the author to want to hear, in fact in most cases it was explained that it might be better if the survey was not described as the author's personal project in order to avoid bias in the answering of the questionnaire. It was explained that what was needed were honest answers from people willing to consider the issues carefully from their own context. This was especially emphasized in groups that were not practicing string tying ritual in their Christian communities, groups from which, the author explained, he had much to learn.

The questionnaire focused on three aspects of response towards string tying ritual: affective, behavioral, and cognitive. Between these categories was a great deal of overlap and each question was asked at least twice in a variety of ways. This was done in order to allow the respondents to answer the questions looking at different perspectives on the issues. The respondents were asked to mark the first response that came to mind rather than attempt to look for hidden or expected responses. No particular age or gender guidelines were specified; it was merely asked that the respondents be Isaan followers of Christ. It was assumed that those chosen would be able to read and write well enough to understand the questionnaire. It appeared to be a sign of a favorable response that 118 survey questionnaires were returned out of the 130 that were distributed.

Theoretical Foundations of the Research

The multi-faceted nature of the missiological topic under consideration required a multidisciplinary approach in researching it. In this study of the meaning and impact of string tying ritual used by northeastern Thai believers, many fields of study were investigated including Buddhist studies, folk religious studies, the political and cultural history of the region of the Khorat Plateau, linguistics, survey and interview methodologies, statistics, globalization studies, communication theory, anthropology, missiology, and historic and biblical theology. In multiple ways these fields and topics are interwoven and nearly inseparable. Although each of these disciplines were referred to during the research process and each contributed from various angles and in various degrees, the fields of study that contributed most significantly towards building a theoretical foundation to the topic under consideration were communication theory, anthropology, missiology, and historic biblical theology as described below.

Contributions from Communication Theory

In communication theory foundational principles useful in this study were the concepts of receptor-orientation in communication as described by Charles Kraft (1981) and Roberta King (1999, 2002), and the concept of eliciting a response for transformation as the goal of God's communication by Kraft (1981).

Receptor-Orientation in Communication

Many authors writing from within the field of communication theory stress the importance of receptor-orientation in communicating messages in order to stimulate meaning in the receptor. Different worldviews require different forms of communication. Viggo Søgaaard comments, "We should not assume that models can be used freely in cross-cultural situations. Somebody else, with a different world view, may understand it differently and a certain model may therefore be inadequate in explaining reality in such

situations” (1993:40). In describing the incarnational model of Christ to facilitate communication of the gospel message to humankind Kraft writes, “to love communicatively is to put oneself to whatever inconvenience necessary to assure that the receptors understand” (1981:15).

The paradigm of receptor-orientation needs expansion in two other directions. Within the context of string tying ritual that honors God there are many more potential receptors than those few sitting in the central position receiving verbal blessings while being tied. Even the members of the curious crowd who peer through the windows are also potential recipients of communication of blessing and God’s message of the gospel. Each of these will be effected to one degree or another and develop a particular personal and corporate meaning. Another factor in this type of communication that appears to have been ignored is that when the presence of God himself moves through an event there is a deeper internal communication that reaches many who are involved, including the leaders, and this presence may also redirect the entire direction of the ritual from simply being a traditional ceremony with a human focus to a transformed tradition with God as its focus that also transforms people in the process of creating meaning.

Effecting Change as a Goal of Communication

Kraft mentions that God’s communication seeks to elicit a response (1981:12). This response is to be in the form of a growing relationship with him. When communication theory is applied to the missiological task the desired outcome is more than mere cognitive transfer of information but is a holistic response that effects change in the whole person’s outlook and worldview by progressively moving that individual in every facet of their being in God’s direction. Contextual theologian Robert Schreiter commented on this as part of the task of theologizing in order to communicate:

Any theory used, then, must be able to take up these three concerns as part of its attempt to understand a given culture. These three—holism,

identity, and social change—are of key importance to local theology because of the very tasks that local theology has most often to undertake in its service to the local community: integration, maintenance of stability, and transformation (1986:45).

Contributions from Anthropology

Under the larger rubric of anthropology, worldview studies and ritual studies contribute significantly concepts to the topic under consideration.

Culture

One cultural commentator whose opinion is highly respected among the Thai is that of the late Thai Buddhist writer and social critic Anuman Rajadhon. In his comments he reflects the attitudes of symbolic anthropologists suggesting that culture (specifically Thai culture) is something that has a life of its own and controls the people under it. An example of this can be seen in his comments about the impact of Christianity in Thailand:

There are too in modern times native Christian communities, but they are only minorities. Christianity has never made appreciable progress with Thai people. Its converts are confined mostly to natives of alien ancestry and paradoxically most of them, instead of being converted have, converted their Christian belief in terms of their indigenous one. Living outside his community, the converted native, and even his children born in the fold of Christianity, will in time revert to their former belief within a few years. Such is the potent force that underlies naturally the culture of Thailand (2517:9)

In this study the author would identify with Kraft who views culture not as distinct from people but as residing within the people themselves. It is from this internal cultural perspective that values are developed and where deep level meaning resides.

Worldview

The study of worldview (from *weltanschauung*) originated in German philosophy of the eighteenth century as a way to refer to systems of thought or ideology (McElhanon 2000b:1032). The concept of worldview was later adopted by evangelical theologians to describe an approach to systematic theology that sought to correct what was wrong with a culture from a biblical perspective (:1032). Missionaries such as Vincent Donovan (1985), Bruce Olson (1973), Don Richardson (1974, 1984), and Gyalsang Tamang (2003), document examples of worldview themes as means that God has used and continues to use to communicate from within existing cultural forms and values.

Definition of Isaan Worldview

For the northeast region of Thailand the author submits the following definition: Isaan cultural worldview can be defined as that which makes a person think, feel, speak, act, relate, live, believe, and view the world as Isaan.

Functions of Worldview

Little exists in the literature specific to Isaan worldview. Some writings on Thai worldview can be helpful as there is a growing amount of overlap between what is Thai and what is considered Isaan worldview. Certainly no Isaan would want to disassociate completely from being Thai although the opposite would not necessarily be true.

William Klausner describes the Thai worldview as that which “keeps personal and societal conflict at a subdued level, reduces tension and frustration, and preserves an equitable serenity that marks the traditional Thai persona” (2002:30). Thai worldview, however, does not exist in isolation but supports and is in turn reinforced by social and religious structures that allow the so-called serenity to exist for any length of time. Niels Mulder’s perspective on Thai worldview comes from thirty years of living and working within the Thai cultural context. He cites examples of self-reliance from Thailand’s

northeast as distinctly different from those of the central Thai, as seen through Isaan cultural expressions of ideals, values, and supportive social relations (1999:161).

After searching through the libraries and literary sources of Thailand this researcher became convinced that Isaan worldview themes was not merely a difficult subject to find, for all intents and purposes it does not exist outside of ancient literature. Much of what is labeled as Isaan worldview is actually symbolic anthropology viewing the behavioral aspects of various cultural practices. One example of this would be the collection of articles by Somchai Ninatti edited by Jarawan Thamwattra in entitled *World Views and Life Style of Isan Farmers*. This work describes agricultural and religious traditions found among rural Isaan but does not specifically draw out their worldview values from the cognitive, affective, or evaluative levels. Pursuit of the inner levels of Isaan worldview values therefore, became an important part of this research.

Lacking in much of the literature are references to the allegiance of people to their worldview. This seems to reflect the impact of symbolic anthropology that would hold that worldview, in the same way as culture, exists somewhere apart from the practitioners. Kraft writes about allegiance to worldview in this way:

Our worldview not only guides us in our commitments we make but *we are committed to our worldview* as well. . .

When we are confronted with data that does not fit neatly into our picture of reality, we either ignore it or face the challenge to change. When some part of our present model is challenged, our first action is usually to defend it, especially if our commitment to it is high. A challenge to any part of our model of reality that we consider crucial is in many ways similar to a threat to our lives. We will, therefore, defend those parts tenaciously (2001:1-7-8 Original author's italics).

Discovery of how Isaan people defended their worldview values became an additional quest in this research.

Two Diagrams of Worldview

David Polleck and Ruth Van Reken have adapted Kohl's image of culture iceberg to express the deeper complexities found among third culture kids. Their adaptation is shown in Figure 2 below. The iceberg image has been a helpful concept in recognizing that string tying ritual, as an external behavior and custom is merely the visible tip of the unseen worldview values and thought processes and the author has incorporated this imagery in the research study.

FIGURE 2

KOHL'S' CULTURE ICEBERG (Pollock and Van Reken 1999:41)

Paul Hiebert's diagram of worldview shown as Figure 3 includes not merely the outward visible expressions on the behavioral level but also the inner-most levels of feeling and attachment. In the largest outer circle he includes categories such as religion, law, politics, social organizations, economics and technology that visibly demonstrate explicit beliefs and values. These are all on the external level. Inside the white line is the internal level, invisible and largely implicit including the cognitive, the affective and the evaluative dimensions. Even though these inner levels may be difficult for a person in

that particular culture to recognize or define they are “reinforced by the deepest of feelings, and anyone who challenges them becomes the object of vehement attack” (1985:45). As Kraft wrote, “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). Hiebert’s diagram of worldview contributed to this researcher’s understanding that a study of ritual must describe not merely the external behavioral symbols but also attempt to include the deepest inner values expressed by those symbols whether they can be clearly articulated or not.

FIGURE 3

HIEBERT’S MODEL OF WORLD VIEW

(Hiebert 1985:46)

Identity

A study of Isaan identity became problematic as so much of what it once meant to be a resident of the Khorat Plateau has been effectively Siamized over the last sixty years. Looking at Suntaree Komin's work on the psychology of the Thai people (1991) and her work on worldview through Thai value systems (1998) provided certain insights helpful as frameworks for this study on Isaan identity. The work of Banpote Wetchgama, Charles Keyes, and Seri Phongphit and Kevin Hewison contributed more to an understanding of Isaan worldview values and identity than did any other writers.

Ritual

The study of ritual began as an outgrowth of the field of religious studies within anthropology less than thirty years ago.¹⁰ While definitions remain problematic and even contradictory, one distinctive of ritual studies is its highly interdisciplinary nature. According to Ronald Grimes it encompasses the areas of liturgical theology, symbolic and linguistic anthropology, art criticism, communication theory, history of religions, psychology of religions, and more (1985:1). For this research project the anthropological field of ritual studies provided a number of insights useful in the analysis and description of the meaning of and impact of Isaan string tying ritual upon the followers of Christ who use it in northeast Thailand.

Definitions of Ritual

The task of defining the term ritual presents major difficulties. The lack of agreement within ritual studies on terminology has resulted in a wide variance in definition. In the words of Edward Muir, "One is tempted to take refuge in the famous quip of the United States Supreme Court justice who, when asked to define pornography,

¹⁰ "Ritual studies" was initially used to describe a new field of discipline in 1977, at the first Ritual Studies Consultation in 1977 held during the American Academy of Religion's (AAR) annual meeting (Grimes 1995:xxv).

replied he could not define it but he knew it when he saw it. The same could be said for ritual” (2000:3). The lack of coherency within the discipline of ritual studies may be one reason why new theoretical contributions have been slow in coming as editor of the *Journal of Ritual Studies* Grimes¹¹ noted:

Theoretical and taxonomic coherence in the study of ritual has been slower in coming than I had hoped. . . I imagined that stimulating new theories were just around the corner. Not so. . . . We remained plagued by the absence of a common vocabulary, and we continue to lack theoretical knowledge and methodological skills in disciplines beyond our own. . . . Nevertheless, students of ritual, staggered by the complexity of the phenomenon they would study, have had little choice but to continue to taking the first clumsy steps toward collaboration with peers (1995:299).

For this study the author would define ritual as the intentional repetition of culturally understood practices demonstrative of mutually intelligible worldview themes of a particular society in a predictable social context performed in order to address important social and cosmic functions.

Functions of Ritual

An in-depth analysis of the functions of ritual is beyond the scope of this project. From a review of literature sources on the subject, the author would suggest that the major function of successful ritual is to insure social order, address social crises, and promote social transformation to a satisfying degree to all participants on a personal and on a corporate level.

¹¹ In spite of the obstacles, Grimes is not without hope. “An obvious difference between the “then” of the first edition [1982] and the ‘now’ of this second edition [1995] is that there is less isolation: we have begun studying ritual together. Theologians are reading anthropologist Roy Rappaport’s *Ecology, Meaning and Ritual*; anthropologists are reading theologian Tom Driver’s *The Magic of Ritual*; communications theorists are reading Victor Turner’s essays on pilgrimage” (Grimes 1995:xiii).

The Quest for and Loci of Meaning in Ritual

Anthropology began its basic approach to ritual analysis around classifications first theorized by Emile Durkheim:

All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred* (1947:37 Original author's italics).

Later, Mircea Eliade expanded upon these two concepts in his work entitled *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* combining psychology, phenomenology and philosophical anthropology. Anthropological studies in the area of ritual, following the major schools of the discipline, focused primarily on the external symbolic and/or linguistic features involved (Geertz, Turner, and Van Gennep). Fascinating cultural facts about rituals from every continent and people group have been, and continue to be, collected and published in anthropological ethnographies by the thousands. Two major critiques can be given of the symbolic anthropological approach to ritual studies.

First, few analyses address the issue of the deep-level meaning associated with the ritual performances that occur within the individuals and the community of participants and observers. This is the perennial dilemma of the anthropologist and all emic observers. Describing the pathetically successful quest of Claude Lévi-Strauss in discovering the anthropologists' ideal, the unstudied Brazilian tribe of the Tupi-Kawahib, with whom he could not communicate, Clifford Geertz cries:

Must the anthropologist therefore despair? Are we never to know savages at all? No, because there is another avenue of approach to their world than personal involvement in it—namely, the construction out of the particles and fragments of debris it is still possible to collect (or which have already been collected) of a theoretical model of society, which though it corresponds to none which can be observed in reality will nonetheless help us towards an understanding of the basic foundations of human existence (1973:350).

The preceding quote by Geertz clearly illustrates the second major dilemma of symbolic anthropology's study of ritual, namely, that the meaning can be constructed out of the ritual itself. This represents the perspective that interpretations of human existence, we may even use the term worldview, can be deductively obtained from the externals, or, in his terms, the "fragments of remaining cultural debris." He would tend to view the symbolic external actions of ritual as a meaning unto itself, rather than expressions of deeper internal and often ineffable truth held in the hearts of the participants. While it is impossible to get inside the heart and mind of the insider to get a truly emic perspective, real meaning lies not in the form but in the people who practice and observe the forms. Symbolic anthropologists insist that the form itself holds meaning even if it does not correspond with anything "which can be observed in reality." This concept of the loci of meaning is debated by anthropologists such as Kraft who writes, "*Meaning* is the structuring of information in the minds of persons" (1981:135 Original author's italics). Also, "*a cultural form does not have inherent meaning, only perceived meaning—and this is context-specific*" (1981:137 Original author's italics). According to Kraft therefore, ritual would be one example of a cultural form expressed in specific contextual ways that does not inherently contain a meaning but is merely perceived by people to be meaningful in different ways.

To return to Geertz' statement, in order to obtain from ritual studies the "understanding of the basic foundations of human existence," symbolic and linguistic anthropologists attempt to view the pieces and categorize them taxonomically as per James P. Spradley's *Participant Observation* methodology (1980) or using other similar grids. "In religious studies interpreting a ritual often begins with an invocation of terms suggesting that ritual is made up of components . . . The categories are anything but systematic or mutually consistent, but they are the slots in which many works on ritual can be filed" (Grimes 1985:3). Whether the methodology is specifically Spradlian or another, the primary focus within anthropological ritual study is on categorization of

symbols, with the goal being to contribute to new theoretical understandings of local concepts of meaning and ultimately find some thread of commonality which would weave the broader family of humanity closer together.

Symbolic anthropology provides one point of entry into the study of ritual. Serious limitations based upon the understanding of the origin and location of meaning may require further interpretation and re-definition before being applicable in missiological research. However, when considered in the light of missiology and biblical theology can contribute significantly to an understanding and analysis of ritual as used by Isaan followers of Christ in northeast Thailand.

Liminality

The term liminality, from the Latin word *limen* for threshold, is generally used by anthropologists to describe “an ambiguous phase that is uncharacteristic of the past and future states; it is a state of “in-betweenness,” a transitional stage of life in which, according to Young Lee Hertig, one is torn away from familiarity (2000:579). Arnold Van Gennep used the term in relation to life’s significant rites of passage found in three major phases: “preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)” (1975:11). Victor Turner further developed the concept of liminal phenomena as a blend of “lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship . . . a moment in and out of time” (1969:96). Examples of liminal *personae* would be neophytes in initiation or puberty rites (:95), those in the betrothal period between adolescence and marriage (Van Gennep 1974: 116-117), even immigrant families who suffer from voluntary or involuntary liminality (Hertig 2000:579). Liminality has also been used by theologians and missiologists to discuss the needs of transition in various Christian ministry settings. Carl Roxburgh has written on the role of liminality on the church’s mission to the world (1997). Susan Plumb Takamoto used the

model of a transforming liminal stage to examine the adjustment process of missionaries in Japan (2003). In regards to string tying ritual liminality refers to ritual's behavioral function to cognitively carve out a special place in time from out of the secular routine and infuse it with deeper meaning at the affective and evaluative levels.

Contributions from Missiology

Missiology is a multi-disciplined field of study that cannot be divorced from any one of its component parts. Multiple authors have contributed to a variety of aspects of missiological theory but concepts that were of particular importance to this study include the concept of the two perspectives on worldview by McElhanon (2000b), Kraft's concept of a multi-dimensional approach to contextualization (1999), Hiebert's concept of the hidden middle (1999), and the issue of total separation by the first generation of converts as described by Andrew Walls (1996) and others.

Missiological Perspectives on Worldview

Viewing the anthropological concept of worldview through missiological lenses provides a helpful paradigm for use in this study. McElhanon's describes the two perspectives of worldview found within the evangelical Christian community in this way:

Evangelical theologians generally present the Christian worldview as a systematic theology for the defense of the Christian faith or as an instrument to confront and dismantle opposing worldviews. In so doing they use philosophical and logical argumentation, and their approach is more corrective than interpretive. Those who adopt such an approach regard the contextualization of the gospel as a method for discovering the weaknesses of opposing worldviews and convincing their proponents of the superiority of the Christian faith.

On the other hand, many evangelical Christian missionaries who adopt cultural approaches begin with both the Bible and the language and culture of the people they wish to reach. Because a command of the language is the key to understanding a worldview, they learn the language, how the people use the language to categorize the things they regard as important, and how they use it to interpret their life experiences. Thus

their approach is more interpretive than corrective. They 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).

This paradigm of the two perspectives on worldview describes very closely the paradigm within the context of Thai evangelical Christianity. McElhanon's two perspective model contributed to the development of categories of inquiry followed in the interview and survey portions of the research. Data collected from within the Isaan Christian community gave these two different, and seemingly opposite, perspectives of culture with each side fully committed to defending, preserving, and promoting its own worldview perspective. This would indicate that within the Isaan Christian community there exist two different sub-cultures or societies on this particular issue, perhaps not a pleasant admission but certainly an undeniable reality for the northeast of Thailand and perhaps for other parts of the country and the world as well.¹²

Multi-Dimensional Approach to Contextualization

Kraft, in *Contextualizing in Three Dimensions*, summarizes that most missionary effort at contextualization has been one-sided, concentrating primarily on the contextualization of theological knowledge in the cognitive realm:

As I look at the literature concerning contextualization, I note a tendency to focus exclusively on what I will call a *knowledge about* approach to Christianity, rather than a *practicing of* approach. We have focused on contextualizing *theology*, not behavior. We have shown a major concern for truth, but truth defined theoretically and academically, rather than truth as something that is lived (1999:4 Original author's italics).

The problem with this is that “the peoples of the world don't seem to be much interested in contextualized theology” (:3). The many dimensions of life that are not addressed within the realm of knowledge leave people with needs unmet and

¹² Certainly many other divisions exist within the church. Not all of them are significant enough to produce radical loyalists creating polar extremes yet division of opinion is rife everywhere. The quest to live in spiritual unity in the midst of our differences is the continual quest of the church.

disillusioned with what Christianity has to offer. Kraft calls for a multi-dimensional approach to doing contextualization that would integrate knowledge with practice through the contextualization of truth, with the contextualization of relationship, and the contextualization of power. By contextualization of relationship, Kraft is referring to transforming allegiances primarily to God and then the resulting expression of love to others. In contextualizing power, he is concerned primarily with God's spiritual power which is seeking to free people from bondage to Satan, both cognitively and experientially. Contextualization of knowledge must also continue in tandem with the other two, but it must be redefined to become practical and not merely theoretical:

There are three kinds of knowledge in human experience: observational knowledge, intellectual knowledge, and experiential knowledge. And it is this third kind, experiential knowledge that is usually in view in the Scriptures. Furthermore, when knowledge is in view in the Scriptures, it is strongly implied that there is a moral obligation to live up to that knowledge (1999:12).

All three of these dimensions must work together to change allegiances, transform understanding, and bring freedom in a holistic contextualization that will powerfully bring the reality of Christ to the culture:

In each area there will be encounter. The object is never to avoid change but to help those new in the faith to base their changes on things that are both meaningful in their lives and appropriate to Scripture. But, as in Scripture, God is willing to start where people are and to patiently bring them towards His ideals. He will, however, want to confront their primary relationships (usually to family) with the need to relate primarily to Him – as He did with the Jews. He will also want to confront their powers with His power and their concept of appeasing evil powers with His desire that they come to Him to let Him deal with the evil powers. And He will, of course, want to confront their truths with His Truth (1999:14).

Kraft's multi-dimensional model has been used as a model to evaluate missionary work in northeast Thailand (DeNeui 2002). In this study the concerns of this model are incorporated into the discussions about the cognitive, affective, and evaluative levels of the inner core of Isaan worldview with which they closely align.

Concept of the Excluded Middle

Paul Hiebert's missiological understanding of worldview within religious systems can be used to describe popular Buddhism as practiced in Isaan. In Figure 4 the various levels of this diagram defines folk or low religion which corresponds closely to the religious practices found among most Isaan people living in northeast Thailand.

FIGURE 4

RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS MODEL OF WORLDVIEW

(Hiebert 1994:194)

Hiebert's analysis of the western view of reality, shown in Figure 5, depicts the largely ignored middle zone in western thinking as compared to the religious systems model in Figure 4. In the middle zone of Isaan popular or folk religion lie the major concerns and ways of dealing with the inexplicable crises of life described in this study.

FIGURE 5
WESTERN TWO-TIERED VIEW OF REALITY
(Hiebert 1999:418)

String tying ritual fits perfectly into the middle zone of popular Buddhism as practiced in Isaan which is precisely why so many Isaan and Thai Christians have questions about it. Further discussion of this issue is found in part four.

Multidisciplinary Theoretical Foundation

Bringing together several areas of study upon this research topic would diagram as the image below. In the center will be the description of Isaan string tying ritual as represented by the followers of Christ in northeast Thailand:

FIGURE 6
MULTIDISCIPLINARY THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

CHAPTER 2

HISTORIC INFLUENCES UPON ISAAN WORLDVIEW DEVELOPMENT

The region of northeast Thailand, now commonly referred to as Isaan occupies the entire length and breadth of the arid Khorat Plateau. This is home to over twenty-one million people, one-third of Thailand's total population. Isaan is known for its lack of rainfall, poor soil quality, regional poverty, and large migrant population. Lacking in natural resources, infrastructure, and tourist appeal it is a large empty wasteland in the mental maps of most Thai people from outside the region. Empty spaces, however, "were not going to be major importers of religious ideas or builders of important religious monuments, the ruins of which dot the entire region" (Wyatt 2002:8). The remains of civilizations going back five thousand years indicate that in spite of environmental difficulties, political abuse, and increasing marginalization the residents of the Khorat Plateau have been able to develop a culture that is not static but dynamic insuring its own survival. This chapter will briefly present the major cultural developments of the Khorat Plateau in order to provide what Stanley Tambiah calls an historical backdrop (1970:31) that corrects the misconception of the area as a cultural wasteland and can provide some illumination as to sources of worldview themes and religious sensibilities of today's Isaan people. A timeline is provided in Appendix I as an overview of major events of the region's history.

Environmental Influences

Paitoon Mikusol wrote that “northeasterners have adapted themselves to the unstable natural environment of flood and drought since prehistoric times” (1984:72-73). What is little recognized, however, is the significant role that the physical geography of the Khorat Plateau has played in stimulating the culturally creative and technologically advanced civilizations of people who have chosen to make this less than ideal environment their home. Before reviewing political influences it is important to understand the geographical context of Isaan and the impact this has had on the people.

Physical Description of the Khorat Plateau

The Khorat Plateau can be described as roughly square in shape with the northeastern-most corner pushed inward. According to Charles Keyes, it lies between fourteen and eighteen degrees north latitude and 101 and 105 degrees east longitude (1967:1). In size it covers 170,000 square kilometers (Suchid 2546:302), roughly equivalent to the state of Washington (Times 1994:xii). N. Vorasoot et al estimated its average elevation to be approximately 200 meters above sea level (1985:3). On its northern and eastern sides it is bordered by the Mekong River and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). To the west are the Petchabun, Dong Phrayayen, and Samkampaeng mountains ranging in height up to 1300 meters. To the south the Phanom Dong Rek Mountains, rising to 671 meters, define the border with Kampuchea (Cambodia). The Phu Phan mountain range, which peaks at 666 meters, cuts east and west through the provinces of Mukdahan, Sakhon Nakhon, Kalasin and Udon Thani provinces dividing the Khorat Plateau into two major drainage basins of undulating plains one north and one south of the Phu Phan mountains.

North of the Phu Phan mountains run-off from the monsoon rain drains primarily into the Songkram River that flows east and drains into the Mekong River in Nakhon Phanom province. This northern drainage basin of the Khorat Plateau is known as the

Sakhon Nakhon Basin. The area that feeds into the Sakhon Nakhon basin in the north of the Khorat Plateau receives annual rainfall ranging from 1500 to 1800 millimeters per year (Vorasoot et al 1985:17). South of the Phu Phan mountains four-fifths of the Khorat Plateau drain primarily into two major rivers, the Chi (from the ancient Khmer “the river of god”) and the Mun (from the Khmer “river of the forest”) (Aymonier 1999:163-164) into what is known as the Khorat Basin (Vorasoot et al 1985:9). The Chi River flows southeast through the central portion of the Plateau and connects with the Mun River in the province of Ubon Ratchathani. The Mun River flows east through the southern third of the Plateau and connects with the lower Mekong in Kampuchea. The area that feeds into the Khorat basin in the south of the Khorat Plateau receives annual rainfall ranging from 1100 to 1400 millimeters per year (1985:17). Centered in the Khorat Basin is an area known as the *Tung Kula Rong Hai* (The Kula Weeping Fields), a flat salt plain of 4000 square kilometers extending across five provinces, larger than the state of Rhode Island (Times 1994:xii). The mountain ranges on the western and southern borders create a rain shadow from the annual gentle southwesterly monsoons that feed the Chao Phraya River Valley making the plateau Thailand’s driest region (Keyes 1967:2). For rainfall it is dependent upon cyclones originating over the South China Sea often resulting in seasonal storms that are devastating in both force and flooding. The climate of the region is known as tropical savanna (Vorasoot et al 1985:15). Over ninety percent of the region lacks access to irrigation, and this, in combination with inconsistent rainfall, is the primary constraint on crop production. This is a major factor contributing to residents of the northeast having the lowest per capita income in all of Thailand’s regions as seen in the table given below¹:

¹ Figures are listed in Thai baht.

TABLE 1

THAILAND'S 2002 PER CAPITA INCOME AVERAGES
(Thailand National Statistics Office 2002)

	Per capita income	
Nationwide	46,956	
Bangkok area	102,108	
Central (excl. Bangkok)	49,296	
North	28,896	
South	33,984	
Northeast (Isan)	24,300	

Geographic Influences on Cultural Development

The physical geography of the Khorat Plateau influenced, if not dictated, the early development of the region in terms of economics, politics and culture primarily as people began to settle along the rivers and creeks of the Sakhon Nakhon Basin in the north and the Khorat Basin in the south. It should be understood, however, that the residents of these challenging regions were not passively waiting for the climate to tell them what to do. Serious consideration went into the cultural developments that have been discovered.

Early Survival Skills

Water resources to sustain life were, and still are, of major concern to the residents of the Khorat Plateau. According to Armand Labbé the earliest settlements found in the Khorat Plateau date back to 3,600 B.C. at Ban Chiang near the Songkram River in what is today Udon Thani province in the northern Sakon Nakhon basin (1985:51). This civilization did not occur in isolation. More recent discoveries indicate

the presence of civilizations in the southern Khorat Basin of equal age throughout the lower part of the Khorat Plateau along the Mun and Chi Rivers and its tributaries.

Srisakara divides the earliest cultural discoveries of the Khorat Plateau into regional areas along the Chi, the Mun, and the Mekong Rivers. While significant differences exist between each of these three, Srisakara Vallibhotama theorizes from his archeological discoveries that there was a unifying religious culture for all of them:

In my opinion, the earliest civilizations found in the three areas of northeast Thailand² were actually united in one culture. The culture that is most important and most highly visible [archeologically] is that of the sema stone, or the standing stone culture. Originally, this was a belief system based upon the appeasement of local spirits or ancestors. However in the course of succeeding years and with the increasing influence of Indian culture throughout the region, the sema stone culture became part of the practices of local Buddhism (2546c:18 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

How the reverence of the sema stone affected daily life is unknown yet this sacred shape can be seen in various forms in Thai Buddhism throughout the entire country.

It was the discovery of the technique of utilizing the natural abundance of salt that led to a period of rapid expansion of civilization in what has been considered for generations one of the poorest regions of the entire Khorat Plateau, the *Tung Kula Rong Hai* (the Kula Weeping Fields). Srisakara theorized that the trade of rock salt probably first began with the fishermen of the Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia in order to produce preserved fermented fish still favored throughout the region.

Having a source of rock salt and having established an on-going process of producing it, most likely brought new impact to the civilizations on the Khmer lake that were engaged in the ancient occupation of fishing. There must have been trade going on between the two, trading salt for fish from the lower Khmer area [of the Khorat Plateau] in order to use salt in the process of preserving the fish, either as salted fish or as *plah rah* or various other products (2546b:75 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

² In theorizing the development of the earliest cultures of what was later known as the Khorat Plateau, Srisakara divides the region into three parts surrounding the major rivers, the Mun River, the Chee River, and the Khong River, (more commonly mislabeled in English as the Mekong river).

Fermentation of fish provided for the first time a way that food could be preserved over the driest months of the year before the monsoon rains fell, and when the effects of food shortage were most severe. *Plah rah* continues to be a staple of the diet of the residents of Kampuchea, Lao PDR and the *Isaan* residents of the Khorat Plateau. It was the discovery of salt that provided food, income, and a sustainable existence for the earliest residents of at least the southern portions of the region. There is evidence that rock salt from the Khorat basin was exported all the way to China and according to Martin Stuart-Fox, at one time was worth its weight in gold in the distant mountain areas (1998:89). Before long this resulted in a thriving regional network of economic trade. Stuart-Fox gives one possible description of early life on the Khorat Plateau:

By as early as 500 BCE, the Khōrāt communities were using domesticated buffalo and iron-tipped ploughs to increase the area under wet-rice cultivation. As population density increased, larger fortified settlements began to appear.

The culture of the Khōrāt Plateau may have extended north up the Mekong valley as far as Luang Phrabāng where bronze artifacts (sp) have been discovered . . . This would suggest either an extensive trade in prestige products the length of the middle Mekong, or a process of cultural diffusion between communities sharing cultural attributes, which may have included ethnic and linguistic affinities (1998 9-10).

Cooperation

The culture that developed in the semi-arid Khorat Plateau had to deal with infrequent rainfall, soil with high salinity, swamps full of disease and virus-laden mosquitoes, and jungles of animals now long extinct from the region including lions, tigers, elephants, and rhinoceros. As late as 1911, British explorer and author Walter Graham proclaimed the area one of the most inhospitable regions in the world (1911:2). The people who chose to live in this region, able to survive in the face of these outstanding odds were some of the most persistent and technologically resourceful people of their time. Juree Vichit-Vadakan describes the absolute necessity of working together

in community as one of the modern residual values still evident within the cultures of the people of the Khorat Plateau:

Social cooperation and mutual assistance has traditionally been a key element in survival [in *Isaan*] . . . Cooperative effort among families ensures the survival of the household and leaves a deep impression on every growing child. Hence, conformity to behavioral norms is high, as evidenced by strong ties between Northeastern [Thai] migrants and their home villages (1989:430-431).

Khmer Influences

Trade routes linking the fishing industry of Tonle Sap near Angkor with the salt sources of the Khorat Basin in the lower Plateau had been established from ancient times (Srisakara 2546b:124). Sometime in the ninth century A.D. the northward expansion of the Khmer people began to follow this route. According to Smalley:

Khmer-speaking peoples and Khmer culture extended into much of what is now Thailand in the ninth and tenth centuries [A.D.], before Tai-speaking peoples gained dominance. They have therefore probably lived where they are now for over a thousand years, although the populations may have been sparse. (1994:137).

While most findings from this period in the region are in Sanskrit, D.H. Hall writes that archeological discoveries in the Mun River valley in Buriram suggest that the earliest presence of the Khmer language in the region date back to 609 A.D. (1970:98).

Beginning of the Angkor Kingdom

What were the factors that allowed the Khmer kingdom to develop and expand? Stuart-Fox suggests that the expansion of the Khmer into the Khorat Plateau was not immediate but progressed gradually as former powers declined. This involved a degree of cultural integration and adaptation as the former cultures met the encroaching Khmer.

This Khmer expansion was at the expense of regional *mandala* extending over not only most of the Khōrāt Plateau, but also the east bank of the Mekong. . . It seems likely that much of the sparse population of

the central and northern Khōrāt Plateau was Mon, if not in language, then predominantly in culture. Already in the sixth century, the [Mahayana Buddhist] Mon kingdom of Dvāravatī was a flourishing *mandala* centered on the lower Chao Phraya valley. . . . On the Khōrāt Plateau the religious and cultural picture seems to have been more complex. There, one by one, the ruling elites of the small semi-Indianized regional *mandalas* adopted a combination of Mon Theravāda Buddhism, with some early admixture of Mahāyāna elements, and Khmer Saivite Hinduism. The Khōrāt Plateau should thus be seen as an “interface” where languages, religions and art styles were eclectically borrowed and mixed (1998:18).

There is sufficient archeological evidence remaining in the Khorat Plateau to support the theory that Khmer influence grew as the Chinese, Mon, Hindu Indian, and other earlier culturally influential powers in the region decreased (:18).³

Spread of Khmer Influence

Khmer villages and cities differed from those of the previous Mon and other occupants in two distinct ways. The first was in location. Whereas the Mon depended upon the flooding of fertile depressions for their rice cultivation the Khmer carved out the forested areas surrounding the depressions and created square fields as catchment basins. Not all of the forests were removed but, according to W. Van Liere, in every case there is evidence of the designation of a sacred forest near the village or city (1989:153-154). The Khmer moved their homes closer to the fields and provided themselves with water for use by digging shallow wells. As the rice paddies were laid out in squares, so were the cities unlike the Mon which were round or irregular in shape. Most cities developed in a north-south, east-west orientation.

Existing archeological evidence in the Khorat Plateau suggests a more sophisticated pattern of settlement resulting from the use of more advanced technology in exploiting and regulating the natural environment than in any other region of the country (Srisakara 1989:366).

³ For an informative visual overview of the spread of the Khmer Empire over the Khorat Plateau visit the Animated Time Map of the Khmer Empire 100 CE - 1550 CE at <www.timemap.net/epublications/2003_khmer_animation/>.

The second distinction of Khmer civilization that differed from the Mon is that their cities were organized around Hindu religious edifices. Usually these temples were connected with a *barai* or sacred water reservoir marked by sema stones which served both communal and religious purposes. Many of these *barai* still exist on the Khorat Plateau and the water from many of these ponds is considered to have special powers for healing, cleansing, or cursing.⁴ The Khmer expanded their cities throughout the northern part of the Khorat Plateau extending into the Songkram River basin and establishing Nong Han, Sakhon Nakhon and other cities on the northern slopes of the Phu Phan mountain range (Van Liere 1989:157). According to Manich Jumsai they established a city on the north side of the Mekong River named Saifong that would later be taken over by the Tai-Lao and renamed Vientiane (2000:86). In the region south of the Phu Phan mountains they expanded water catchment to include not only the *barai* but also moats, sometimes two or even three rings around a city (:147). Moats served the dual purpose of defense and community water supply (Suchid 2546:63).

Khmer civilization on the Khorat Plateau also had its own unique forms of religious cultural development integrating Hindu traditions with earlier animistic, Indian, and Chinese Buddhist influences as discovered in pottery and archeological evidence by Roxanna Brown, Vance Childress, and Michael Gluckman (1974:242).

The Height of the Angkor Kingdom

The height of Khmer influence over the Khorat Plateau was during the reign of Jayavarman VII who converted the empire to Buddhism as Peter Rogers wrote:

Jayavarman VII was a very complex and fascinating personality and at different times history has judged him differently. Chiefly remember for his megalomania, he nonetheless brought a new era of glory to his country, restoring its pride and prestige. Many inscriptions have

⁴ In Nong Bua Lamphu a sacred *barai* pond is legendary for its ability to cause a curse on anyone who either drinks of it or somehow causes the name of another to be connected with its water. It is kept permanently fenced off from the public from this fear (Personal interview with Sangwien Phromsoppa).

been found in various parts of his kingdom, even as far afield as Vientiane, and they give us at least a partial picture of a man who almost certainly regarded himself as a living Buddha. It is, after all, only human to find that they laud his achievements but are silent on his failures and the misfortunes they would ultimately bring. He created a network of roads equipped with resthouses at intervals of approximately 15 kilometres, a day's journey on foot. No less than 102 hospitals were set up, scattered throughout the country, as part of a drive he initiated to bring medical care to his subjects. These meritorious works demonstrated both his concern for the population and his desire to improve their lives, as well as his adherence to Buddhist principles (1996:99).

During this reign not only were hospitals and small Hindu style Buddhist temples built where travelers could stop, rest, and pray (Srisakara 2546c:180), but Jayavarman also established a network of highways still visible across the Khorat Plateau.

Judging by the number of Khmer edifices along the present Thai-Khmer border and northwards to the Mun River, lower Northeast Thailand once supported a sizeable Khmer population that was linked to the Angkor metropolis by two main arteries. Visible in aerial photographs on the Cambodian side of the border, the roads led from Angkor in fairly direct lines towards the Mun River. Portions of the primary road to Pimay are still extant in dense jungle on the Thai side of the border just to the west of Prasat Ta Muang in Surin province; from there it ran closest to Ban Sawai, extending from Angkor to Phra Viehean, and then north past Ban Phluang and on to Surin (Brown, Childress and Gluckman 1974:240).

Decline of the Angkor Kingdom

Some have theorized that the impoverishment of the soil after centuries of use was one of the reasons that led to the decline of the Khmer civilization on the Khorat Plateau. Van Liere disagrees. "Wet rice gives, under traditional conditions, satisfactory yields on poor soil. Its productivity is more closely related to the surface hydrology than to the nature of the soil" (1989:151). Political dominance became its own greatest enemy. Internal competition over the control of the numerous Khmer holdings began to break down the structure of the Angkor Empire from within. Then, at its point of weakness, Angkor was attacked by Vietnamese, Tai-Siamese, and later the Tai-Lao.

After Jayavarman VII, Khmer cultural influence in the Northeast declined and gradually came to an end. It seemed to give way to a new wave of civilization from the kingdoms of Lan Na and Sukhothai in the north and northwest which spread into the kingdom of Lan Chang in the basins of the Mekong and the Chi Rivers (Srisakara 2546c:180).

Evidence of Khmer Cultural Influence Today

The impact of the Khmer period on the region is most clearly evident in the areas of agricultural development, social organization, transportation, and religious practice as seen in the residual culture of today's residents of the Khorat Plateau.

Agricultural Development

An airplane ride over the Khorat Plateau gives ample evidence of the continuation of Khmer style agricultural land planning still practiced in our present time. Much to the frustration of modern developers, the patchwork of millions of tiny banded rice fields is a cultural inheritance from the time of Khmer control over the region. The destruction of an ancient bund is still a crime punishable by law. The impact of all these mini-reservoirs of banded rice paddies on the flow of rivers and streams is inestimable. The increasingly popular trend of selling topsoil in Isaan,⁵ resulting in further lowering of paddy levels, is actually a modern improvement on the ancient Khmer technology of bunding. Lowering the soil level actually raises the bunds and thereby increases the capabilities of rain catchment with the hope of improved rice production.

Perhaps even more important is the organization of the owners of these fields into communities known as *baan* (villages) a social structure which can also be traced back to the time of Khmer organization of the land. In the days when wildlife was life-

⁵ A backhoe is brought in and the top layer of the paddy is removed and trucked away leaving the surrounding bunds untouched. The removed soil is primarily used for the raising of roads and land for new housing developments in urban centers to prevent flooding during the rainy season. Usually the farmer receives no payment for the soil itself but the digging with the backhoe is free with the positive result of the lowered paddy as described above. If enough soil is removed the farmer can actually dig a fishpond and raise freshwater fish all year.

threatening the close proximity of people to each other provided a measure of protection. The concept of the *baan* continues to be extremely significant to residents of the Khorat Plateau as it defines not merely a social organization but also identity. The first question a resident of the Khorat Plateau will ask another is, “What *baan* are you from?” The answer to this question will dictate subsequent interactions and attitudes.

Brahman Ritual

Indian influence on the Khorat Plateau began much earlier than the Khmer regime but it took the Angkor Empire to give Brahmanic ritual the respected cultic status that it retains today. Even though Buddhism has integrated Brahmanic tradition into its practices to such an extent that one cannot be distinguished from the other, there are certain events that still require the role of the Brahman priest as part of Buddhist life in the region. Heinze writes:

Since the thirteenth century, Thai kings have availed themselves of the services of Khmer Brahmins, since they [the Thai] entered Khmer territory when moving south. More Khmer Brahmins were added to the court after the fall of Angkor Wat in 1431. Later Tamil Brahmins came from southern India to fill the growing demand for brahmanical services, mainly among the rich. Brahmins are still indispensable for the *abhiseka* of Thai kings, i.e., during coronation and for other state ceremonies, e.g., the First Ploughing (1982:75).

According to Isaan historian Tdem Wiphakphochanakit rituals practiced among the people of the Khorat Plateau came from three different sources:

When we study our Thai ceremonies in the larger context of our culture, it is understood that three main categories, namely 1) Those that came from phenomenology of magic arts, 2) Those that came from Brahmanism and Buddhism, and 3) those that are a mixture of the above (2546:548).

An example of this can be seen in the epic poem known as Phadaeng Nang Ai, repeated annually at rain-making festivals throughout the Khorat Plateau. This poem, translated into English by Wajuppa Tossa, dates back to the thirteenth century and refers to the

important Brahmanic string-tying ritual known as *pha khwan* still practiced at nearly every wedding in Laos and Isaan throughout the Khorat Plateau:

The grand rich man did have a daughter;
 Like an angel, his only daughter was graciously beautiful.
 “I will present my daughter the gem of my heart,
 To tie him in my home, as my own son-in-law.”
 After a careful consideration, the rich man arranged a *pha khwan*;
 He summoned in his silent son-in-law to be.
 “Now I’ll you make you man and wife, my children:
 My son-in-law you will be, to expand our family” (1990:60-61)

During his exploratory trip of the Khorat Plateau between 1883 to 1884, Étienne Aymonier mentions fifteen different usages of string-tying which he and his team of explorers experienced or personally observed.⁶ String-tying ritual continues to thrive as an important part of the northeastern Thai culture today.

While less than one million speakers of the Khmer language live on the Khorat Plateau today, there is clear evidence that the Khmer culture has shown and continues to show its distinctive mark on the social, technological, and religious aspects of the culture and worldview of those living on the Khorat Plateau.

Lao Cultural Influences

Of all influences that have left their marks upon the culture of the Khorat Plateau, it is that of Tai people groups that continues to carry the most ethnic and political impact upon the residents of the region today. The term “Tai” refers to an ethnic group of races which includes Siamese, Lao, Phu Thai, and others. It has long been theorized that the Tai came from southern China where a people group of this name still exists. Some evidence of Tai migration south into the region of the Chao Phraya River valley and the

⁶ 1. Officials taking a new government position (:49), 2. Adopting visitors as sons (:61), 3. Rite of passage upon reaching puberty for a girl (:67-68), 4. Preventing the spread of illness (:94), 5. Veneration of That Phanom (:96), 6. Weddings (: 100, 110, 204, 246), 7. General Welcome (:109.), 8. Inaugurate new officials (:112.), 9. Exorcism (:121), 10. Allegiance to the king (:138), 11. Threshing ceremony (:139), 12. To Protect from spells of others (:164), 13. Blessing (:165), 14. Tonsure ceremony (:204, 261), and 15. Protection for a journey (:269) (Aymonier 2000).

Khorat Plateau can, according to Bernard-Philippe Groslier, be traced to people displaced by the armies of Kublai Khan in the twelfth century (2545:83). Tatsuo Hoshino has presented a new theory suggesting an entry date of the Tai into Southeast Asia as early as the eighth century based on linguistic toponyms,⁷ recent findings in Nakhon Ratchasima, and records from the Chinese and Vietnamese courts of the time (2002:38).

The Mon and Khmer residents of the Khorat Plateau and the Tai (including both Lao and Siamese) were of distinctly different origins yet at some time between the eighth and the twelfth century were forced to integrate together. Not only did the people come from different cultural backgrounds, their languages were not even closely related.⁸ Contrary to what is often heard in Thailand, Tai languages did not come from the Khmer nor did the two groups of languages originate together.

Tai languages were spoken long before words borrowed from Khmer and Indian languages were incorporated into them, and long before any Tai language was written. Thai [and Lao], Khmer and Sanskrit/Pali, in fact, belong to three different language families descended from different ancestor languages. Sanskrit and Pali are distantly related to English rather than to Thai (Smalley 1994:297).

Transition from Khmer to Lao

The Khmer were closely linked ethnically and linguistically with the previous Mon residents in language and culture. However, as was mentioned, the Tai came from a completely different background. Their languages were mutually unintelligible. In addition to this, conflict resulted from the fact that these new immigrants did not establish new villages and cities but settled in former areas of Khmer habitation.

⁷ “The various [Chinese] renderings of the name for the mountain (*wu*, *mou*, and *vu*) correspond closely to the Tai term *phu* meaning ‘mountain’ (Hoshino 2002:71).

⁸ A prime example of this difference can be seen in the interpretation of the names of the two major rivers in the southern part of Isaan. According to Aymonier one was named by the ancient Khmer *Sdin Brai Mul* (the river of the forest of the roots’, or ‘of the complete forest’ (1999:163). The Lao meaning of Mun is excrement. The other river also named by ancient Cambodians is *Sdin Brah Ji*, ‘the river of the god’ (:164). The Lao pronunciation of Chee is a slang term meaning to urinate. The author has not met an Isaan person who knew of the Khmer origin or meaning of these rivers’ names.

When the expansion was still in its early stages, the [Tai] immigrant groups chose to settle on the abandoned sites of earlier pre-13th century settlements marked by either menhirs [sema stones] or ancient monuments . . . It was only as late as the Fourth Reign of the Ratanakosin period, i.e. the mid-nineteenth century that large villages and small market towns first began to be built on sites that had never previously been occupied by civilized communities (Srisakara 2546:291).

Archeological data provides evidence that Tai-Lao immigrants moved into abandoned or declining Khmer cities but oral tradition may provide some insight into the cultural conflict that ensued.⁹ The well-known Isaan folk epic mentioned earlier, Phadaeng Nang Ai, was passed down only among the people of the Khorat Plateau. It describes the love-triangle struggles over the beautiful princess Ai and her competing lovers the human prince, Phadaeng, and his rival, Phangkhi, a prince from the underground world of the nagas. One interpretation of the legend is that it is an allegorical description of the transition from Khmer to Tai domination as they confronted one another on the Khorat Plateau. Isaan Folklorist Wajuppa Tossa describes it thus:

The story takes place in ancient times when the Khmer dominated the Isaan region. . . The *naga* depicted in the story are the Tai-speaking people. Thus, *Phādāēng Nāng Ai* becomes the story of the rise and fall of the Khmer empire.

[This] interpretation is plausible, for it is consistent with the traditional theory concerning the history of Southeast Asia and Isaan. At its peak, the Khmer Empire covered most of mainland Southeast Asia including Isaan. The Khmer maintained their civilization for nearly nine centuries before the Tai people took over and destroyed most of it in A.D. 1431.

[This interpretation] likens the *naga* to the Tai-speaking peoples, for they, as well as other Southeast Asians, practiced the *naga*-worshipping cult. As the poem relates, Phya Khom, Phādāēng, Nāng Ai, and their people represent the whole Khmer Empire (1990:21-22).

⁹ Another source of ancient oral tradition, now recorded can be found in Kermit Krueger's *The Serpent Prince: Folk Tales from Northeastern Thailand*.

Beginning of the Lan Sang Kingdom

From the Tai came the Siamese and the Lao. It was the development of the Lan Sang kingdom that gave the Lao their own cultural identity and eventually led to the rise of political and cultural dominance over the Khorat Plateau and surrounding regions.

Lan Sang sprang not from a simple act of conquest . . . by one man whose individual merit was questionable enough for him to be actually deposed, but from pre-existing conditions created by the advantage taken by powerful regional Lao rulers of the decline of Khmer power to construct their own independent localized *müang*. Fa Ngum was the catalyst who forced these regional *müang* into a powerful *mandala*. From this derives his historical claim to hero status as the founder of the Lao kingdom (Stuart-Fox 2002:3).

Reintroduction of Buddhism

Lan Sang added yet another layer on the religious cultural traditions of the residents of the Khorat Plateau. Ancestral spirit worship continued to flourish as it had since earliest civilizations. Lao historian Sila Viravong wrote, “The Lao people of the ancient times worshipped the spirits of heaven or practiced the cult of their ancestors as did the Chinese” (1964:36a). Fa Ngum ritualized spirit belief and worship even further:

A principal requirement was for each *chau meuang* to participate in blood sacrifices to the powerful guardian deities of Xiang Dong Xiang Thong [Vientiane], in accordance with rules laid down by Fā Ngum’s forebears. Their presence at these ceremonies presided over by the king symbolically recognized the superiority of the *Phī Thaen* [the Creator Spirit], the ancestral spirits worshipped in the capital over the *phī seuā* of the regional *meuang*. Such rituals not only established a symbolic unity; they were believed to be essential for the preservation of the power and prosperity of the *mandala*, for only such powerful spirits could prevent malign *phī* [spirits] from destroying Meuang Lao (Stuart-Fox 1998:45).

When Fa Ngum’s Buddhist Khmer queen came to Vientiane she was distressed, according to historian Sila Viravong at the blatant animistic practices she observed around her performed by the Lao people.

Queen Nang Keo-Keng-Ya noticed to her dislike that her people, mandarins as well as common citizens, practiced the cult of spirits, killing,

now and then, elephants and buffaloes for sacrifice to the spirits. Since the Queen was a fervent Buddhist from the time she had lived in her native Khmer kingdom, she could not, as Queen of the Lao kingdom, allow this practice of sacrifice by her subjects to go on. . . She gracefully requested her husband to introduce Buddhism into the Lao kingdom, otherwise, she would ask to return to her father's land of the Khmer (1964:36a).

According to Sila's account, upon receiving this request by his beloved wife, Fa Ngum sent a request to his Khmer father-in-law for Buddhist monks to be sent to the Lao kingdom to teach Buddhism. Twenty monks were sent along with copies of the Buddhist scriptures, five thousand attendants, and a five hundred year old solid gold Buddha statue known as the *Phrabang* which would become the second most powerful symbol of Buddhism for the Lao people. These arrived in Vientiane in 1359 A.D. and were brought to a monastery built for them there (Sila 1964:37).

Lao Migration into the Khorat Plateau

Based on his archeological discoveries Srisakara believes it was during the reign of Fa Ngum's son, Phraya Sam Saen Thai (1373-1416) that Lao migration into the Khorat Plateau began in earnest.¹⁰ This can be confirmed by records found during the reign of the Siamese monarch of Ayutthaya, Somdet Phra Boromaracha Thirat I (1370-1382) as well as archeological evidence from this period found in the Khorat Plateau itself (Srisakara 2546c:269). The migration of the Lao into the Khorat Plateau during this period followed the existing waterways and established cities on former settlements some of which were abandoned and others that were conquered.

Where there were older settlements (the Lao) inter-married, where there were none they founded new settlements. In many cases the new settlements were chosen on sites where an ancient pre-13th century civilization had once flourished—towns and settlements that had long since been abandoned leaving only the ruins of brick sanctuaries and

¹⁰ The author knows of a community in Yasothon that has a collective oral history that traces its origin to the days of resettlement from the Mekong River to the Chi River under Fa Ngum.

extensive waterworks to mark where once they had been¹¹ (Srisakara 2546c:288).

According to Yoshiyuko Masuhara, the primary evidence of the spread of the Lan Sang influence throughout the Khorat Plateau comes from the evidence of Lao writing in the region:

At the end of the fifteenth century A.D., evidence of the history of the Lan Chang kingdom started to spread in great detail due primarily to rapid and increased use of the written Lao language. . .

The first evidence of the spreading influence of the Lan Chang kingdom was through two written scripts. These were the Lao *Thaam* [Sacred] scripts and the older Lao script (which Thai people prefer to call “Smaller Thai script”). . . The oldest evidence of the older Lao script that has been found to the present time is that found on a carved stone in the area of the Nursery School in the village of Ban Reh, the sub-district of Reh, in the district of Pang Khon, in the province of Sakon Nakhon (1350 A.D.) (2546:75 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

The Height of Lan Sang

Lan Sang reached its peak in the 1600s when, according to Gerald Fry, it controlled much of what is now northern and northeastern Thailand (2002:27). One reason for its rise to power was the prime position Vientiane held in the commercial trade of the region. A second reason was apparently because of a great deal of freedom among its people to follow a variety of religious and animistic practices that from time to time were repressed in attempts to return to some form of orthodoxy and unified religion.

Decline of Lan Sang

Naturally the wealth and attention focused on Lan Sang did not escape the notice of her political neighbors. With increasing exploration by Europeans in the seventeenth

¹¹ Srisakara writes in further detail, “I have seen for myself Khmer sanctuaries that have been converted into Buddhist monuments at Ban That, Tambon Ta Nen, Bo Phan Khan, Suwannaphum district, Roi Et Province; Phra That Takhu at Muang Fa Daet Sung Yang, Kamalasai district, Kalasin Province; and the Phra That (sp) at Wat Samakkhi Bamphen Phon at Muang Nong Han Noi, Nong Han district, Udon Thani Province, among others” (2546c:289 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

century, the necessity for obtaining and holding important harbor ports became obvious.

This was something Lan Sang was never able to do.

The Lan Chang kingdom did not possess direct access to the sea but was entirely dependent upon neighboring countries to export its goods to ports abroad [particularly India and Europe]. Therefore the dissolution of good relations between Lan Chang and Ayutthaya and Cambodia directly and immediately impacted Lan Chang's ability to export overseas. From this it can be theorized that by the end of the seventeenth century A.D. Lan Chang's international trade had come to a halt at all levels thus ending its golden age and its commercial supremacy in the region (Masuhara 2546:194-5 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

Attempts at expansion by Lan Sang only resulted in building distrust and damaging old alliances. Within a matter of years Vientiane found itself land-locked and suddenly irrelevant. After the end of the Dutch trader Van Wuysthoff's visit in 1642 and the return of the Italian priest Maria Leria in 1647 there began a period of over 200 years when there are no records of any European returning to explore and interact with the Lan Sang Kingdom (Masuhara 2546:167). This indicates both the isolation from the outside world and the rising dependency that Lan Sang experienced upon its neighbors from that point forward. In 1695 the Lan Sang *mandala* was split three ways between Luang Phrabang, Vientiane and Champasak (Stuart-Fox 1998:103). The net result of these fractured kingdoms was to open the way for stronger outside powers to exert their influences over the region in years to come.

Lao Attempt to Control the Khorat Plateau

One's political viewpoint will entirely dictate the interpretation of the events of Chao Anouwong in 1826-1827 as either an heroic fight for freedom and liberty (as it is taught in the Lao PDR), or as a traitorous rebellion and betrayal (as it is taught in Thailand). Both sides continue to present evidence supporting its own particular political interests in the event.

According to the military strategy of the day, the goal in battle was not for territorial conquest but for population control. In 1779, ten thousand Lao families from the three Lao kingdoms were resettled into Siamese territory, most in Saraburi. Lao royalty were taken from Vientiane to the court of Bangkok. Included in this group were several sons and daughters of the deposed king of Vientiane including one fourteen year old prince known as Chao Anouwong. At that time the three Lao kingdoms of Luang Phrabang, Vientiane and Champasak become vassal states of Siam.

Anouwong was educated in the court and became a highly respected military leader fighting for the Siamese. In 1795, Anouwong became the vice-king of Vientiane under his brother, and on the suggestion of Rama III, upon the death of his brother in 1804 ascended the throne of Vientiane under the power of Siam.

At the funeral of Rama II Anouwong presented himself and his retinue to Bangkok to pledge his loyalty to the new king, the former Prince Chesadabodin who had been so highly approving of him in the past. In preparation for the funeral the crown prince of the Lao, Anou's son, was recruited to supervise his own men in heavy construction projects for the new Siamese monarch that resulted not only in the loss of Lao lives but more critically to a public remonstrance of the Lao prince and a severe loss of face for Anouwong (1998:138-144). In addition to this, during a period of transition in leadership such as at a funeral when requests to the new monarch were traditionally made, Anouwong saw the requests of others fulfilled while all of his were ignored or denied (Manich 2000:185). Rama III also instigated a process of tattooing all males twenty years and older on the Khorat Plateau, mostly Lao, in order to recruit them as labor for his royal construction projects (Mayoury and Pheuiphanh 1998:145-148).

Determined once and for all to be freed from the status of a vassal state and to restore the glory of Lan Sang, Anouwong chose his moment carefully. Just as it appeared that British forces would attack Bangkok from the south, Anou divided his forces into three and swept down from the north to Khorat with an army of 80,000. In a stunning

surprise attack he managed to overthrow the forces of this Siamese colony, a major obstacle on the Plateau and moved to Saraburi which, according to Walter Vella's account, appeared as a threat to Bangkok only three days march away¹² (1957:81). Anou was able to persuade (with his army) the 10,000 Lao who had been forcibly located to Saraburi forty years previous (Manich 2000:185) to follow him and he began a sweeping return to Vientiane removing the population of the Khorat Plateau with him in his wake.

The Siamese response was swift and brutal. In March of 1827, the Siamese were closing in on Saraburi and Anou fled to the north. He destroyed the city of Khorat and abandoned it. His last outpost, a great fort in Nong Bua Lam Phu, was abandoned in May and he fled to Assamese territory as the Siamese occupied Vientiane. After a brief recovery of the city in August, Siam again attacked, this time chasing Anou until he was betrayed by a son-in-law and captured. He and his family were brought to Bangkok on January 15, 1829. A number of foreigners in Bangkok at the time recorded the capture and subsequent torture of Anou and his family which included blinding by searing irons, starvation, exposure, cutting, spearing, boiling with oil, and crushing in mortar and pestle (Mayoury and Pheuiphanh 1998:23-24). Anou died after eight days of this treatment.

The effect of these actions would be felt by Lao people for generations. Because many thousands living on the Khorat Plateau willingly followed Anou, the loyalty of the people in the eastern region would be held suspect for the next 160 years (Manich 2000:205). Lao speaking people from the northeast region have had to try harder than any other to prove their loyalty to the controlling Siamese, later renamed Thai, central powers. As late as 1973 Robert Mole wrote that "Northeasterners feel that they have to prove they are one hundred percent Thai" (:95).

¹² Was Anou's objective to overthrow Bangkok? Vella states, "Chao Anu's aim was to take Bangkok and all of Siam" (1956:81), whereas Mayoury and Pheuiphanh write, "Chao Ratsavong (Anou's captain of the southwestern army) did not remain in Saraburi, where he could have amassed the Lao exiles there and attempted a coup in Bangkok. But that was not a goal" (1998:157). The question remains unresolved.

Evidence of Lao Cultural Influence Today

Several generations have passed on the Khorat Plateau since the time of Chao Anouwong. What remains of this event has been highly politicized. Only after some probing will a few of the older people of Thailand's northeast admit, "Lan Sang was once great. Did you know that at one time it controlled all of Isaan?" And a smile deep with insider meaning comes to the surface. Other impacts from the Lao period remain.

Language

Perhaps the most obvious cultural heritage that the Lao has given those of the Khorat Plateau is the Lao language itself. This is not surprising given the fact that eighty percent of all ethnic Lao live in Thailand (Smalley 1994:89). According to the Atlas of Thailand edited by Kermel-Torrès, the 2000 census indicates that there are slightly over twenty-one million residents on the Khorat Plateau¹³ (2004:168). As a percentage of the total population of Thailand, Smalley gives the figure (1994) of 22.8 percent as northeastern Thai who are native Lao speakers and 26.9 percent who are native central Thai speakers (1994:67). Considering that the northeastern region of Thailand has maintained a steady percentage of approximately thirty-three percent of the total population of the country another way of viewing these figures is that slightly more than seventy-six percent of Isaan people are still native Lao speakers or a total of nearly sixteen million people. Certainly a large percentage of those who are not included in that number but live in the Khorat Plateau would consider themselves functionally bi-lingual in Isaan, even as most northeasterners are now functionally bi-lingual in central Thai. The language people speak at home together for the majority of the people in the Khorat Plateau firmly remains the Lao language with its local variations.

¹³ As of 2004, the North-East has 20,759,899 inhabitants (Kermel-Torrès 2004:168).

Cultural Identity

When Anouwong came sweeping through the Khorat Plateau, he had his soldiers ask the residents one question, “Lao or Thai?” The answer would determine who would live and who would die. All Thai commoners were executed immediately while forty-one Thai officials were taken as prisoners and executed on Don Chan Island opposite Vientiane (Mayoury and Pheuiphanh 1998:157). Later, the Thai soldiers came through asking the same question but demanding an entirely different answer. Today the question remains although the stakes for the answer are not nearly as high. In the recent past it was common for poor northeasterners moving to Bangkok to hide their ethnic identity unlike those from Thailand’s north.

The stigma of being rustic and backward is attached to Lao much more than to Kammüang [Northern Thai] by the respective native speakers as well as by people from the outside. The people of the northeast do not have a simple-level term for themselves with the same positive connotations that northerners have, either (Smalley 1994:97).

For the Lao living in Lao PDR this history is kept very much alive. For those in Thailand it is downplayed. Mayoury and Pheuiphanh writing from almost a passionate anti-Siamese perspective suggest:

The violent conflict between these two kingdoms left lasting marks on the Thai as well as on the Lao. For example, the Thai military expeditions against the Lao and subsequent annexation of Lao territory deeply imprinted a Lao cultural identity on the population of Thailand’s northeast, Isan, and ironically transferred some traditions into the region that were originally generated by a passionate Lao resistance and the memory of that resistance (1998:21).

A Thai resident of the Khorat Plateau today might not state his or her views in quite the same way. There is an increasing acceptance of an ethnic identity that uses the term Isaan freely now. “It seems that in recent years embarrassment over Lao identity is sometimes changing to pride, at least among intellectuals” (Smalley 1994:98). Personal observation would add, however, that few intellectuals or community leaders will willingly speak the Lao language in a public meeting outside of a local village setting.

It is true that the Khorat Plateau is the poorest region of Thailand but nothing in the Lao PDR draws the Thai citizens of Isaan in that direction. “What improvements may come to the northeast will come through Bangkok” (Smalley 1994:99). The population of the Lao PDR view this quite differently. Traveling in the northern border province of Nong Khai where radio broadcasts from the Lao PDR can be received, the author was listening to Lao program on local ritual. The broadcaster made the inclusive statement that, “The Lao people who live in the Isaan region of Thailand still practice this ritual.” Upon hearing this, a young Isaan traveling companion in the car laughed aloud, “We’re not Lao!” For those who live in the Lao PDR, however, it is impossible to forget that eighty percent of all ethnic Lao live in Thailand, and that the majority are located across the Mekong River on the Khorat Plateau (:89).

Siamese Influences

With the death of Anouwong in 1829 the influence of the Lao in Siam came to an end. Monarchs sending tribute to Bangkok continued to live in Luang Phrabang and Champasak until the region was removed from Siamese control in 1893. By 1829 the majority of the Vientiane population had been removed to regions in the Khorat Plateau and surrounding Bangkok. This forcible relocation continued in earnest through 1835 under the policy of Rama III. According to Sila, the number of relocated Lao was in the hundreds of thousands, “which today forms the bulk of the inhabitants of Thailand” (1964:135) although these figures are not substantiated elsewhere.¹⁴ “The decisive defeat of Wiangchan during the Third Reign was followed by the most extensive expansion into Eastern Laos [the Khorat Plateau and places farther north and east] that Siam had ever effected” (Vella 1957:93). The goal of this removal of people to the northeast was to

¹⁴ In his 1833 account of three years in Bangkok Charles Gutzlaff wrote, “Bangkok, at which place this Journal commences, is the chief commercial city of Siam. Its population, in 1828, was 401,300, of whom 300,000 were Chinese” (1833:19). It should also be recognized that Gutzlaff was writing to supporters who expected him to be on his way to China thus the number of Chinese may be exaggerated.

both place a buffer between Siam and the Vietnamese monarch who was outraged at the treatment of Anou, a fellow monarch and former ally, and to depopulate the territory in order to lesson Annamese interest in it (:88).

Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1893

R.S. 112 (1893 A.D.) is still known as a year of tragedy in Siamese history. Appendix J explains the variations in Siamese chronological systems. 1893 was the year that the French, with gunboats pointed at Bangkok's Royal Palace, demanded the relinquishment of Siamese sovereignty over territories north and west of the Mekong River. "The Franco-Siamese treaty of 1893 resulted in the loss of 143,000 square kilometers of Siamese territory on the left bank of the Mekong River to French Indochina" (Paitoon 1984:158). With one signature the former lifeline of the Lao people, the Mekong River, suddenly became an international border dividing them down the middle between Siam and France. Families were split apart and Siam lost nearly one-third of her territory.¹⁵ The Siamese monarch at the time, Rama V, suffered an emotional breakdown from which he would not fully recover for three years (Keyes 1987:55). Walter Tips writes that the king was especially concerned for his Lao subjects fearing that "the French would impose more and more taxes to pay for the administration of a territory and subjects which gained them hardly anything" (1996:223).

Signing the treaty did not mean that the threat from the French was now over. Article VIII of the treaty (described as "poorly written" by Henry Gibbons) stated, "The French Government reserves to itself the right to establish Consuls at such places as they shall judge suitable to the interests of their subjects (*ressortissants*), and particularly at Khorat and Muang Nan" (Gibbons 1921:78-79, Tips 1996:220). A large percentage of

¹⁵ The circumstances leading up to this situation are well covered in Walter E.J. Tips' book *Siam's Struggle for Survival: The 1893 Gunboat Incident at Paknam* and a recent Thai publication by Phiraphon Songnoi (2545) entitled *Koranee Phiphat Thai-Farangset R.S. 112*.

these so-called subjects of Lao extraction were living in the remaining Siamese territory, and because of this the French were demanding that they, the French, “as the protectors of the Lao,” had a right to those people and their territories. Not only did this include the entire region of the Khorat Plateau but also regions surrounding Bangkok which were now populated by well established communities of hundreds of thousands of relocated Lao. It was expedient that Siam find a way to justify its sovereignty over these people.

All Are Now Thai on the Khorat Plateau

In 1894 a royal edict was quickly relayed through the government in Bangkok to all the provinces and *monthon* (regions) announcing that all citizens of Siam were now Thai. As the crisis was particularly critical in the northeast bordering the French, the newly established Siamese minister of that region had the following proclamation announced and implemented throughout the area under his control:¹⁶

From this time forward all officials from every level and every department, whether they are heads of large *muang* or small, whenever there is a survey of families or whenever a citizen comes requesting some official documentation from the government representative, be informed that you are to perform your duties in a new way. In the column for nationality you are to write only *Thai Siamese* in all cases. It is now absolutely forbidden to use or write in the column for nationality *Lao*, *Khmer*, *Suay*, *Phu Tai*, or the name of any other nationalities formerly employed. His majesty has proclaimed that all are *Thai* nationals and in fact have been since the beginning of recorded time and has thus made this decision through the Ministry of the Interior (Tdem 2546:408 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

In addition to renaming all the people *Thai*, all the regions of Siam that had any titles referring to *Lao* were now under suspicion of loyalty or ties with the French. Previous to this the usage of the term *Lao* referred to everything north and northeast outside of Bangkok:

¹⁶ This also included Champasak which would shortly become part of French Indochina.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the term ‘Lao’ was used by the rulers, and even ordinary people in Bangkok, in a rather vague way to refer to peoples living to the North and Northeast of what had constituted the core of old Siam (Ayudhya), who followed cultural traditions and spoke languages related to but clearly different from those of Siam. . . . In addition, most people living on the Khorat Plateau in what is today Northeastern Thailand were also considered Lao, although in the southern part of the region there were substantial numbers of peoples who were recognized as being related to the Khmer (Keyes:120).

On February 1, 119 R.S. (1900 AD), it was announced that what had previously been known as the *Monthon Lao Phuan* was renamed *Monthon Udon*, the Pali word for north as shown in Figure 7 by Oliver Raendchen.

N
uudoon

S
thakhôsin

FIGURE 7

PALI ORIGIN OF THE TERM ISAAN
(Raendchen 2002:5)

The *monthon* formerly called the *Monthon Lao Kao* (Old Lao *Monthon*) was re-named using the Pali word for the northeast direction, *Monthon Isaan*.¹⁷ This is the first time the word *Isaan* appeared in official usage and its intended meaning at the time was not to describe a particular group of people, (since all were now considered *Thai*) but rather a geographic region.¹⁸ According to Somchai Phatharathananunth, in 1922 the entire region of the Khorat Plateau was renamed *Phaak Isaan* (Isaan region) a name by which it has been known in Thailand ever since (2002:107).¹⁹ Following this renaming of the larger *monthon* regions, the government began an intensive renaming of cities and large market towns throughout the Khorat Plateau to bring them more in line with Siamese culture and history. In his book on Isaan history, Tdem lists one hundred and fifty cities in the Khorat Plateau and in the other areas formerly known as Lao whose names were changed to become more Thai (2546:302-314).

Implementing Centralization

The renaming of people and their villages was merely the earliest of centralization policies. Other changes were not accepted so passively.

A number of measures were implemented to assure Siamese control over, in the king's words, the *Lao provinces*'. One of these measures was the co-opting of the local elite under Bangkok hegemony. In fact, among outer provinces, only in Isan were almost all of the provincial noblemen excluded from high office. This contrasted sharply with Bangkok's policy towards the South and the North. . . Those regions were permitted for the time being to retain their ruling families, local customs and traditional

¹⁷ Later part of this *monthon* was split off to become the *Monthon Roi Et* (Somchai 2002:107).

¹⁸ “[Figure 1] is to show that *iisaan* is a direction, no name of a people. The designation of this region became only actual, after Siam took over these territories in its northeast direction which formerly were part of the Lao *Laan Saang* kingdom, later (from about 1700 AD) part of the 3 smaller Lao kingdoms of Luang Phrabang, Vientiane, and Champasak” (Raendchen 2002:5).

¹⁹ Ben Davies states that the region was “named after *Ishana*, the Hindu god of death” (1996:9). It is true that *Isaan* is also the name for Siva, the Hindu God of destruction (Preecha 2532:978, Tawisak 2531:612), but nothing in the Thai or Lao historical literature would support this meaning as having ever been applied to the region of the Khorat Plateau.

powers²⁰. The policy reflected the strong prejudice of the minister of interior...with regard to 'Lao' nationalism' and the resentment of Bangkok of the 'uncertain loyalty' of Isan (Somchai 2002:112).

With the replacement of traditional leaders serious rebellions began to develop. Fueled by Buddhist prophecies of a savior to come (*Phra See Ahn*) millennial movements grew up from within the local village level. All of these rebellions have met with a swift military repression by Bangkok forces (Keyes 1987:55-56). The limitations of this study do not allow for the inclusion of personal examples told to the author of modern-day repression of the Lao leadership or Lao identity due to Thailand's forced centralization policies that have occurred within recent memory over the last forty years.²¹

Evidence of Thai Siamese Cultural Influence Today

For the residents of the Khorat Plateau, the impact of the Thai upon their lives is considered primarily in a favorable way today. Travel within the region has greatly improved. Nearly every village has access to electricity. Huge shopping centers and branches of major chain stores are opening in every provincial capital. What is the effect of this upon the culture of the people?

Improved Infrastructure for Travel

In the time of the Angkor Empire a network of roads was established across the Khorat Plateau. Today the Thai government has gone several better by expanding those old roads, paving many of them, adding rail lines, and building airports in most provinces. The first railroad line to Khorat was completed in 1900 (Wyatt 1984:210, Tdem 2546:416). An eastern line connecting the southern provinces of the Khorat Plateau to Bangkok began running to Ubol in 1930 (Tdem 2546:419). Construction of

²⁰ However, most of these also were eventually replaced with Bangkok sympathizers or royalty related to the reigning dynasty.

²¹ The best review on Isaan rebellions is found in Seri and Hewison's book *Village Life: Culture and Transition in Thailand's Northeast* (2001).

the northern line began in 1929 and the first train from Bangkok to Nong Khai ran on July 31, 1958 (:420).

The result of all these major infrastructures for improved travel has been that the residents of the Khorat Plateau now travel by train, by plane, by bus, and by truck faster than ever before, not only within Isaan but also leaving Isaan seeking better-paying employment opportunities elsewhere. With the disparate wage rates ranging one-third higher or better in Bangkok compared to what is available locally nearly every family in Isaan today has someone who is working outside of the region and sending (some) money home. This has serious implications for the demographics of the area where more and more villages are composed of elderly raising grandchildren as the working class has left.

Bangkok: Isaan's Hope for the Future

It is said that paving the road to an Isaan village will ensure votes for that politician for life. Recent improvements have primarily come from outside investment through the guidance of Bangkok politicians. Bangkok officials recognize the importance today of securing the votes of this area which represent one-third of the potential voting constituency of the country. While politicians are busy currying favors on the Khorat Plateau by tying a *pakama* cloth around their waist and attempting to speak some words in the local language, the village residents are savvy enough to recognize Bangkok as the highest power for their future now. A gradual change in cultural perspective is in process that will eventually allow villagers to see that they are not simply powerless voters but actually can have a voice in their future. As educational opportunities increase at the provincial level more and more adults are going beyond the typical fourth grade education and seeking ways to improve themselves and their status as members of a significant portion of Thai society.

Thai Identity

In the not so distant past, unskilled laborers seeking employment in Bangkok would hide their northeastern identity. They would try to speak clear central Thai and remain vague about their place of origin somewhere “in the provinces.” People from Isaan were considered the backward hillbillies of the country and the region was largely ignored (Smalley 1994:94).

One of the cultural impacts of Bangkok as a source of hope for the future is the growing desire, or perhaps necessity, among many to identify more closely with the majority culture that is most progressive. Intellectuals from the Khorat Plateau will rarely speak their native tongue outside of close-knit groups of friends.

Before the 1960s ‘the [Isaan] region was of no particular interest’ to either Bangkok or to foreign investors; as a result ‘its position in the country changed little in the period following the death of King Chulalongkorn [1910]. The region ‘suffered from neglect and became the forgotten region of the country’. . . Although Isan people were well known ‘for their outstanding ability to endure physical hardship and turn out a heavy day’s work’, the people in the capital city held a different opinion. For them, the Isan were lazy, dirty, lying, ignorant, uncultivated, and stupid. They call Isan people by the pejorative term ‘*siao*’ to look down upon them. While in Isan the word means close friend, Bangkok dwellers used it as a scornful word to mean ‘fool’. Even in the 1990s they still called the people from Isan ‘Lao’ (Somchai 2002:124-125).

What remains of the Lao heritage is that which can be sold or somehow capitalized upon. Movies about Isaan continue to be popular but the language must be presented with proper Isaan accents as reported by Krittiya Wongtavavimarn, or complaints will be heard (2004:1). Marketable products such as customs and rituals are the remnants of Lao culture, renamed Isaan, that are now praised at the national level. The Lao people of the Khorat Plateau and elsewhere in Thailand have now, for the most part, become completely part of Thai society. While they speak Lao, eat the food of the Lao, and have the worldview of the Lao, they are now proud to call themselves Thai.

Historical Impact on Isaan Worldview

The history of the Khorat Plateau is the history of a people in between greater powers. A strong residual worldview value that comes from this history of repression is the ability to accommodate to the whims and wishes of others very quickly and quietly. Loyalties can be fragile depending upon perceived or actual changes in circumstance, communication (or miscommunication), economic status, physical health, death, or even religious conversion. Some may accuse Isaan people of having no commitment; however, they are completely committed to those whom they know are within their own *boonkhun* support network. For a culture that has gone through repeated persecutions, changes, disruptions, and on-going marginalization, Isaan people are remarkable resilient and able to smile even in the face of disaster.

George Coedès wrote, “The Thai have always been remarkable assimilators: they have never hesitated to appropriate for themselves whatever in the civilization of their neighbors and masters might place them in a position to fight victoriously against them” (1968:191). Could this be said of the people of the Khorat Plateau? Certainly they would align themselves politically as Thai citizens today but as has been shown this is only a recent adoption of nomenclature. The people of the Khorat Plateau have a different cultural worldview than that of the central Thai, one that has developed from the perspective of those in a culture between greater powers. Never having been in a favored position to initiate aggressive action on others, they never attempted it. This does not mean that they lived in peace among themselves for there are plenty of historical records of local incursions when one small kingdom on the Khorat Plateau fought another. But on the larger scale of Southeast Asian history these small feudal fiefdoms on their dry desolate plain never developed into powerful expansive civilizations that sought political control of strategic locations or access to important economic resources outside of their own region. Yet it is clear that they did indeed adopt many elements from others and continue to be remarkable assimilators.

In reviewing the impact that the succeeding civilizations on the Khorat Plateau have had on the cultural development of its people one term comes to mind. This author's adaptation of Coedès' quote would be the following: "The people of the Khorat Plateau have always been remarkable assimilators: they have never hesitated to appropriate for themselves whatever in the civilization of their neighbors and masters might place them in a position to survive."

Because survival was more of a challenge for people of the Khorat Plateau than for those living in other surrounding regions, they adapted any and all ways that they perceived would help them to that end. This dynamic process continues to the present with increased urban migration out of the region as a modern example. However, because so many of the traditional survival methods depended upon community and community was closely tied to the land, there remains a deep devotion to the village back home even amongst the Isaan people in Bangkok. Adaptation for survival included the development of social roles and structures, technological methodologies and equipment, and religious beliefs and practices. All of these things could be changed as long as it was of benefit towards the survival of the whole community and not merely for individual advance. For this reason it appears that change has been slow in coming to Isaan, but this also contributes to the culturally acceptable concept of survival.

The people of the Khorat Plateau do not represent a singular culture. Even amongst those who would consider themselves ethnic Lao or Thai-Isaan, there is a wide diversity in cultural expression. Some of these expressions, such as language and diet, continue to thrive, many others are changing, and perhaps even more have disappeared entirely. This would appear even more dramatically among the various ethnic groups in the region that are not of Lao origin. Those desirous of facilitating change in the lives of the people of the Khorat Plateau, whether in the areas of community development, social transformation, or religious conversion, would benefit by first attempting to understand the impact that five thousand years of history has imprinted upon them.

CHAPTER 3

ISAAN WORLDVIEW EXPRESSION THROUGH STRING TYING RITUAL

Tambiah remarks, “Precisely because of its frontier location, the north-eastern region appears to have had a colourful and chequered political and religious experience” (1970:25). Numerous cultural threads from the multilayered history of the Khorat Plateau remain visible within present day practices expressing Isaan worldview. Some are distinct from those of the central Thai and others are similar. The Siamese centralization policy has been so successful over the last one hundred years that it remains extremely challenging for the researcher to engage Isaan people in meaningful discussions on the topic of regional worldview distinctives.¹ Patrick Jory describes the reversal or loosening of centralization policy by the central Thai government. It appears to have recognized that regionalism is now beneficial to the country as a whole by encouraging tourism, and to politicians in particular since Isaan has the largest proportion of seats in the National Assembly (1999:340-341). One prominent demonstration of the uniquely Isaan worldview from its cultural history and promoted by the central Thai government is the continued practice of local customs and traditions. This chapter will explore the role of one particular cultural tradition that continues to externally express some of the internal values of Isaan worldview: Isaan string tying ritual.

¹ This should be coupled with Niel Mulder’s observation on Thai population as a whole that there is a “tendency to shy away from the critical analysis of things Thai” (1999:25). It is not culturally acceptable in Thailand to directly probe and discuss issues that might cause someone somewhere, whether a national or religious leader, teacher, elder, parent or respected figure, either dead or alive, to be placed in a less than favorable light. In March 1996, 25,000 people gathered to protest researchers and publishers who dared to question the historicity of the story of Khorat’s revered Grandmother Mo who reportedly fought off Anouwong for the Siamese in 1827 (Keyes 2002:114ff).

Origin of Isaan Ritual

It has been nearly forty years since Coedès, expert on the influence of Indianization on the civilizations of Southeast Asia, wrote:

The importance of studying the Indianized countries of Southeast Asia—which, let us repeat, were never political dependencies of India, but rather cultural colonies—lies above all in the observation of the impact of India civilization on the primitive civilizations. . . We can measure the power of penetration of this culture by the importance of that which remains of it in these countries. . . The Indian cults in their old form—Sivaism, Vishnuism, the Theravada Buddhism that used the Sanskrit language, and Mahayana Buddhism—have disappeared, but not without leaving traces. In Phnom Penh and Bangkok, Brahmans of very mixed blood, Brahmans who follow Buddhism but wear chignons and the Brahman thread, officiate at all the great royal ceremonies, the ritual of which is an inheritance from the Indian epoch. But these ceremonies are holdovers that interest only the court and do not affect the general population (1968:252-253).

This author would suggest that had Coedès had the opportunity to investigate the ritual practices of the Lao speaking population of Southeast Asia he may have written his final paragraph with a completely different ending. The author's research and observation have shown that string tying ceremonies that have Brahman origin remain of extensive interest to the general population to the Lao and Isaan people, both rural and urban. It is a misunderstanding to think that globalization or recent historical events have changed this. In fact, there is a resurgence of interest in ceremony that seems to have been a response to cultural globalization's so-called unifying direction.

According to Heinze the custom of tying protective strings around the wrist is ancient. "In the *Ayodhyankanda Canto* of the *Rāmāyana* [c. 500 B.C.], Kausalyā is tying a few blades of *raksoghni* grass around the right wrist of her son Rāma to give him her blessings at the moment of his departure" (1982:77). B.J. Terwiel connects northeastern Thai string tying with the Hindu instructions written in the *Grihya-Sūtras: Rules of Vedic*

*Domestic Ceremonies*² (1979:49). According to Srimati Krishnakumar, these instructions, written by the Hindu priest Gobhila, son of Vahnimukha between 500-400 B.C., these instructions list uses of the string as blessing for dedication of babies, for mothers after childbirth (Part I:51) for initiation (Benét 1965:888), and for ordination (Part I:374ff, 1997 Part II:16)(Krishnakumar 2004).³

Pali Buddhism in its Theravada forms traveled from India to Ceylon to Siam (Tambiah 1970:252). Brahmanism, however, traveled a different direction. From India it came to Cambodia (Angkor) and from there, as has been previously described, spread throughout the region of the Khorat Plateau on its way to Siam where it made its deepest impact upon the royalty in Ayutthaya. It could, therefore, be theorized that Brahman rituals of this type were practiced within the Isaan region before they arrived to the Siamese. Tambiah states that even though Isaan leaders of string tying ceremonies are not pure-blooded Brahman anymore, internal evidence within the ceremony itself suggests its brahmanical connections (:254).⁴

Importance of Isaan Ritual

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 throughout at Isaan weddings and many other social events.⁵ One theory as to why STR rituals has persisted

² Sutra comes from the Sanskrit word “suture,” which means to sew or string together (Roshi 2003). In the Hindu context it means to string together the flowers of Vedanta passages (Divyajivan 2004). The term *maw suud* (sutra expert), the leader of the Isaan string tying ceremony, comes from this word.

³ The *Grihya-Sūtras* were first translated into English by Hermann Oldenberg in 1892 as part of a fifty volume series edited by F. Max Müller entitled *The Sacred Books of the East*. According to Jim Reapsom, several of the volumes, including the *Grihya-Sūtras* (1892) were published in time for the first World’s Parliament on Religion held in Chicago in 1893 (2000).

⁴ “Consider these features: the offerings are vegetarian and are called *kryang bucha*, which derives from the classical Indian word *puja*” (Tambiah 1970:254). See footnote two.

⁵ Some researchers have failed to find string-tying ceremonies used in the Khorat Plateau today, and feel it is no longer used as it is in the Lao PDR. Fry writes, “Even though I did much work in Northeast Thailand, I never experienced a *baasii* ceremony in over ten years of visiting there, while I participated in countless such ceremonies in 15 months in the Lao PDR” (2002:31). Peter Rogers never mentions it in his book *Northeast Thailand: From Prehistoric to Modern Times* (1996). This author’s

when so many other traditions have disappeared is posed by Mulder who suggests a linkage to earlier primal religious beliefs found within the worldview:

Other original ritual expressions that still persist since the times that the Thai were full-fledged animists are the *khwan* ('life essence') ceremonies to insure the incorporation into the community of outsiders, of those who have been outside and in contact with danger, and of those who are transitional in their life cycle, for instance at marriage or ordination into the monkhood. It is no wonder that these original ritual expressions to ensure continuity and auspiciousness have found Brahmanic elaboration (1979:122).

Tongpan Phrommedda is an Isaan leader who frequently conducts string tying ceremonies. He describes the function within Isaan worldview that is met by ceremony, including string tying, 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 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

Isaan *Khwan* Ritual

In the Lao PDR and throughout Isaan string tying ritual is often referred to as *sukhwan* (for the *khwan*). *Khwan* is a difficult term to define 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 touching their head (Anuman 1962:128).

response is that these researchers need to get an invitation to an Isaan wedding ceremony. Each new student in nearly every college and university in Thailand goes through a string-tying ceremony as well.

When a baby is born healthy in Thailand, the doctor will announce that the child is “*Kroh p samsip song*” (complete with all thirty-two) which indicates a healthy, non-handicapped individual. According to Anuman each person is composed of thirty-two parts and each of these parts has its own *khwan* (1962:124). Few Thai can actually define what each of the thirty-two members are that possess *khwan*⁶ but individually and collectively these are known as that person’s *khwan* or life-essence. Although the word *khwan* is used less today than in the past it is still evident in common speech in Thai and Isaan 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 in the description of a good movie (*nang khwan jai* “movie that touches deeply to the *khwan*”). Heinze lists thirty-six occurrences of the word “*khwan*” used in daily Thai language during the time of her research (1982:35).

Although there remains a great deal of confusion today as to what *khwan* actually is, it remains distinctly different from *winyan*, or 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.⁷ Banpote Wetchgama attempts to clarify this difference thus, “according to Isaan beliefs, *khwan* is distinct from the soul because the soul is something that must be reborn in the next life” (2004:70). 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 abandon the individual making the person vulnerable to tragedy. According to

⁶ Thirty-two parts are mentioned in the *Khuddakapāṭha* (a prayer book for daily use in the *Pāli* Canon): *kesā* (hair of the head), *lomā* (hair of the body), *nakkā* (nails), *dantā* (teeth), *taco* (skin), *mamsam* (flesh/muscles), *nahāru* (sinews), *atthi* (bones), *atthiminjām*, (marrow), *yakkam* (kidneys), *hadayam* (heart), *yakanam* (liver), *kilomakam* (membranes), *pihaham* (spleen), *papphāsam* (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), *vasā* (lymph), *khela* (saliva), *singhanika* (snot, mucus), *lasikā* (synovial fluid of the joints), *muttam* (urine), and *matthaka* or *matthalungam* (head or brains) (Heinze 1982:128).

⁷ The descriptions of the soul here predate Buddhism and are further evidence of the popular or folk elements present with popular Buddhism as practiced in Isaan. In pure elite philosophical Buddhism there would be no concept of the personal soul.

Isaan thinking *khwan* must be recalled and reconnected 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* 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.

During interviews the author heard accounts from the past when the *khwan* was physically returned to the person at the point where it left. For example, when a child had nearly drowned in a river, a net was brought back to the spot and symbolically drawn through the water several times calling out, “Khwan, Come back!” When it had been successfully recaptured the net was tied shut and brought to the house where the *sukhwan* ceremony was being held in order to tie it back to the child. In another case the *khwan* was caught in a cloth at the side of a road where an accident had occurred. In both cases the *khwan* had to be physically returned to its resident owner. This will be discussed in more detail under interview data.

Elements and Order in Isaan *Khwan* Ritual

Many authors have described the various elements involved in Isaan *khwan* ritual including Boonkerd Phimworametakun (2544), Domrong Ratchanuphap (2546), Heinze (1982), Pierre Morin (1904), Pradit Takerngrangsarit and David Wells (1987), Seri and Hewison (2001), Tambiah (1970), and Terwiel (1979). Bailey describes *sukhwan* ritual from the Lao perspective (2002). This author will not expand in great detail on the elements involved but will draw from the work of Banpote in describing the two major categories of elements involved in *khwan* ritual namely the participants involved and the implements used in the ritual (1986:72-86).

Participants

Three types of participants are required for each string tying ritual: the leader, the sponsor, and the recipient. To Banpote's list must be added those who will be invited to the ceremony as guests. The leader of the ceremony is known in Isaan as the *Phram* from the word for Brahman; he is the officiate, the master of the chant. He is not officially a Brahman priest as known in Hinduism or in central Thai Buddhism. This man will usually have been a Buddhist monk in the past but the important qualification is that he have memorized the specific chants to use to make the ceremony effective. Not any words will do, nor is every person qualified. This ceremony is not done *ad lib* but must follow a carefully guarded text that is understood to be powerful when used correctly.

A good *phram* is one who has a strong voice because when he leads the ceremony he must sing the ceremony in the Isaan style known as *leh*.⁸ If he has a good voice, the listeners will feel very pleased and much more apt to believe that the *khwan* is really coming back. A good *phram* is able to do the job of recalling the *khwan* better than another who does not have the same kind of strong voice. In the past the Brahman master of ceremonies wore ordinary clothing just like any other villager with the exception of a white cloth over one shoulder. These days there is more of a tendency for the *phram* to wear only white clothing (Banpote 1986:73).

The *phram* has a publicly recognized ability to lead ceremonies and as such is compensated financially, or with food, alcohol and gifts or all of the above.

The second important figure in the ceremony is the sponsor. People generally do not call a ceremony for themselves, someone else sponsors the ceremony. The sponsor is usually a mature woman of fifty or more who is familiar with the arrangements and can prepare the *pha khwan* floral arrangement that is necessary for every *pha khwan* event. Each of the elements in the *pha khwan* had to have a very positive meaning so much care was taken to include only those things that had auspicious connotations in order to contribute to the success of the event. Along with making sure that all preparations are in

⁸ Within Buddhism a monk must not listen to music or sing himself. However, if he were to preach in regular speech it would be boring for people who listen so the Isaan type of chanting known as *leh* was developed.

order it is her job to make sure that all happens according to proper procedure and traditional rules.

Ancient Isaan people felt that the preparation of the flower arrangement for the ceremony was extremely significant, therefore there was much teaching needed in preparing a proper hostess for the role of arranging what was needed. It was her role to perpetuate the stages of the ritual; if it had not been considered important the role of this ceremony would have disappeared generations ago (Banpote 1986:74-75).

The third and perhaps most important figure for a string tying ritual is the recipient or recipients. In the case of a wedding this, of course, is the bride and groom. In other ceremonies it may be an infant and mother and father, a Buddhist ordinand, a person experience healing, transition, two parties going through reconciliation, or a group of visitors coming or going.

The person who is the recipient of the ceremony is a very special individual, a person who receives the outward expression of affection from others. That person will receive words of encouragement from friends and relatives. Usually the person who is the recipient is in the position of transition from one station in life to another.⁹ For example, one who is sick, a newly born baby, one who is getting married, or one who will be ordained. These individuals are the recipients of a psychological transformation that will allow them to face their new situation with a new boldness and assurance. This ceremony is comparable to a special auspicious honoring, a generous reception of special blessing. For the newborn infant, the ceremony symbolizes the joy of a new life, the desire to bless this new life, and to protect it from any future dangers. Regarding a Buddhist ordination, this is an opportunity to remind the recipient of his duty to understand and practice the teachings that he is about to follow in order to show respect to his parents. A wedding ceremony symbolizes unification between a man and a woman. The two have now become one and will not separate from one another. The ceremony is a time to celebrate this, and bless the couple, as well as gifting them with the necessary things for their life together. There is also a blessing that the children of this union will honor their family's name. . . In all cases whoever receives the ceremony will be changed from one position to another. The ritual is a symbol of the love that is inside the hearts of the givers to encourage the stability of the heart of the recipient. Relationships will be deepened through the process of the ceremony in the hearts of all those involved. If the recipient is struggling with some

⁹ They are in a liminal phase.

serious disappointment then the ceremony is an attempt to express a certain degree of encouragement to that individual (Banpote 1986:75-76).

Implements Used

Numerous studies have described the elements involved in the string tying ceremony so it is unnecessary to detail each of these in detail at this point. The major elements center in and around the floral *pha khwan* arrangement from which hang the cotton threads on thin stems. All of the items in the arrangement including the rolled banana leaves, the flowers, the rice, the silver bowl, and the egg and other offerings have a positive meaning carefully selected for the blessing they can contribute to the recipient.

All of the implements used in the ceremony have only very positive meanings even though most participants could not tell you what they are. If we were to ask why do you use these things whose meanings you do not understand they would say, “My father and mother told me to do it this way.” Each of the elements can be explained and give nothing but very positive instructions (Banpote 1986:76).

Figure 8 diagrams the central item required for a *sukhwan* ceremony, the *phakhwan* floral arrangement. The author has provided a description of the different elements involved. The tall peaks named as the *paeng* are made of fresh, clean, rolled banana leaves. The entire arrangement stands in a silver bowl and is held in place by dry rice stabilizing it. This is also symbolic for the abundance of food, and the blessing needed to sustain life. This drawing was done by Isaan artist Wassan Bunyen in Udon Thani.

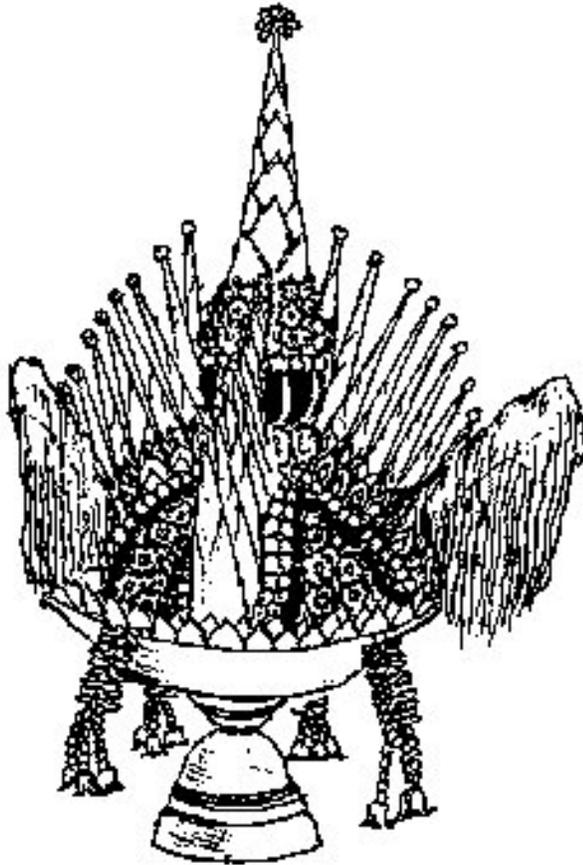


FIGURE 8

DIAGRAM OF ISAAN PHA KHWAN
(Wassan 1986)

Sequence of Events

Sukhwan ceremonies generally have five sequences of events in the ritual ceremony. The first is the devotional section which calls upon the sacred powers to invoke their blessing on the event and to make it auspicious and effective. The second is a prefatory section describing how the date, the time, the location, the direction, and the combination of all these makes this an especially powerful ceremony. Usually there must

be opening words saying how good and auspicious the event has become because of all of these fortuitous elements coming together. Following this will be a descriptive section in which will the elements will be pointed out, the hostess will be introduced, and something of the condition of the recipient explained as to the reason for the ceremony although it is usually known beforehand by everyone invited. At this point there will be a segment of invitation calling the *khwan* to come and remain with the recipients and to bless them. The *phram* will then take strings and tie the recipients with the first blessing and upon completion invite all those present to come and give their own blessings to the recipients. Sometimes money is also tied on with the string, particularly at weddings. In the case of ordinations and weddings there will also be a time of moral teaching and instruction by the *phram* and other elders. Following the ceremony the *phram* may partake of some of the gifts given to him, alcohol, boiled chicken, rice, other food, or may simply receive the money provided for his services (Banpote 1986:89-91).

Types of Isaan String Tying Rituals

Tambiah has noted in his research on northeastern Thai spirit-cults six major categories of *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 (1970:224-226). A study by 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” (1982:45). Banpote views *sukhwan* ceremonies primary as rites of passage when encouragement is needed most and lists the

following ceremonies found in northeastern Thai culture: 1) preparation for delivery of babies, 2) new born babies, 3) ordination, 4) monkhood 5), healing, 6) success, and 7) weddings. In addition he mentions two other uses as important to Isaan people: the ceremony for welcoming someone and the send-off ceremony (2004:104,114). The friendship ceremony known as *phuk siew* also uses the cotton strings but is generally a smaller gathering between two people and their families.

The Meaning and Use of Strings

The essence of *sukhwan* ceremonies revolves around the use and tying of cotton strings onto the upturned wrist of the recipient. Banpote clarifies that the strings used in these ceremonies are simply ordinary cotton threads

In ordinary conversation Isaan people do not call the threads, “sacred strings” but instead refer to them as “strings tied on the wrist.” This string is simply raw cotton thread, as yet unprocessed for weaving by boiling in rice water. This is known in Isaan as thread that has not yet been processed (*yang mai dai kha*). The procedure for processing cotton thread to prepare it for weaving is called *kha*¹⁰ (1986:63).

Anuman further explains the origin of the use of cotton strings in this way:

Why are raw cotton threads used? Other threads are even more readily available, aren't they? I believe it is because, in the past nearly every home had to weave its own fabric so each household would always have some of the raw threads somewhere around in the house. Whenever it was needed for a ceremony, this was the most convenient material readily at hand, more than any other type of string or rope. Because of this raw cotton thread has continued to be the media of choice in this ancient ritual. It is not only used for sacred ceremonies. It is also used in other ways for example, the ceremony to initiate friendships, ceremonies to call the *khwan*, and others (n.d.:147 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

Usually these cotton strings are gathered in strands of three and knotted together to represent the coming together of the Buddha, the Dhamma (the teachings), and the

¹⁰According to Banpote, the reason that Isaan people do not use the strings that have been processed is because of the word *kha* which has a second negative meaning “to kill.” This would make such strings a negative force and unsuitable for use in blessing ceremonies. Only words with positive meanings are used in the string tying ceremony.

Sangha (the monkhood). These knotted strands are then wrapped around a stem of the coconut frond 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* as shown in Figure 8. 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 outstretched and upturned 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 left wrist was to let the *khwan* come and tying the right wrist was to let the *khwan* stay (Anuman 1962:131).¹¹ This, according to the author’s observations in northeast Thailand, is not followed strictly; what is significant, however, is that the wrist be tied because this is where life through the beating of the pulse can best be observed” (Heinze 1982:77). According to Preecha Phinthong, it is possible to tie either the right or the left wrist, but the reason the right is usually tied is because it is the arm that is most often used in doing hard work (2532:284). Before tying, some people lightly brush the strings lengthwise down from the wrist outward three times with a call to remove evil and then brushed upward three times to insure a verbal blessing. “The brushing process is no doubt the taking away from the candidate of all impurities and undesirable things” (Anuman 1962:150). After the rubbing and the blessing, the strings must be tied in a knot at the pulse of the one receiving the blessing.

¹¹ The author would note that this is the opposite of that reported by Ruth-Inge Heinze (1982:77). The Thai phrase as heard by the author on numerous occasions would support the version of Anuman over Heinze.

Functions of String Tying Ritual

Heinze posits that *khwan* ceremonies hold several important functions within the 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 (1982:83-84).

Banpote describes the deepest function of string tying ritual in the way that it visualizes the deepest internal feelings and convictions of the heart of Isaan people.

String tying is an external symbol of an inner meaning within the heart. The external symbol concretely visualizes the binding reality of the relationship using cotton thread to represent what is in the heart. If no external symbolic action is involved and there is merely speech; it is not as deeply experienced as a reality. Therefore, the strings are used externally to visualize the internal attachment of those parties involved. String tying visualizes the speech, the blessing, and the securing of the life essence so that the recipient is encouraged through the reminder of the kindness of friendship. The love of the person tying is expressed in a deeper way so that the relationship is also deepened and secured on a new level. This is the deepest result of the symbolism in the string tying ceremony (1986:64).

It is interesting to note that unlike Buddhist ceremonies that are chanted in Pali (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).

Other names heard for Isaan *sukhwan* include *bai sri* or *phittii bai sri sukhwan* sometimes shorted to *baasri*. The meaning of the words *bai sri* can be translated in many ways including that of Anuman who wrote that “*Bai* is a Khmer word meaning cooked rice; the word *sri* comes from the Sanskrit the same as the Palinese word *siri* which means life essence” (Sathien 2506:51). Banpote clarified that central Thai and northeastern Thai (Isaan people) translate the first word in *bai sri* differently.

The Khmer word *bai* meaning rice is not used anywhere else in Isaan culture outside of this ceremony which has been inherited from Brahmanism through the pre-Angkor Khmer (*Khom*) culture in the past generations. *Bai* in Isaan means to grab, to touch, to feel. But for both central and northeastern Thai the second word *sri* is defined in the same way. The word *sri* refers to that which is good and beautiful. . .

Most Isaan people will not use *bai* in regards to *phakhwan*; instead they will use *johm*¹² which has a different and even deeper meaning than the word *bai* (to touch). To touch the flower arrangement is fine, to extend the arms is good, and to touch those in the inner circle is comforting; however the meaning here is not merely to touch but to *johm* which means to lift up. The person who does the action of *johm*, places themselves in a position to support the arm of the recipient from underneath the elbow. Their hand is positioned supportively underneath; they are insuring that the recipient’s arm does not fall down. It is not merely touching. If the meaning was merely *bai* (to touch) then the hand would be above the arm which is completely different from *johm* (supporting). For Isaan people this is the deeper meaning of *bai sri* (1986:71-72).

What is expressed through string tying ceremony in Isaan can be summarized as personal empowerment. Banpote views *sukhwan* as providing personal empowerment through encouragement, as a way to enable people in Isaan society to continue on particularly during a difficult period of life.

The purpose of all the *sukhwan* ceremonies can be summarized as a way of encouraging the recipient(s). It is also a culturally acceptable way of acknowledging a rite of passage. These ceremonies provide support to those who must face some obstacle in their life. In the process

¹² *Johm* (โหม) is to lift or give support to using both hands (Preecha 2532:258).

of these ceremonies, Isaan worldview and cultural values are clearly communicated and socially reinforced (2004:91).

Mulder sees empowerment as coming primarily through traditional rituals. He views ritual these power sources, as used by Isaan people, not from a personal psychological perspective but as a tool necessary for survival (2000:108). He sees ritual neither as religious nor as intellectually enriching but as a means to an end found that has its origin in primal religious practices and beliefs.

Power is the most spectacular, beguiling, and central manifestation of Thai life; its cognitive elaborations and the way power is accommodated reveal the essentially animistic substratum of Thai mentality (2000:25).

The importance of the pursuit of power would become clearer as it relates to Christian communication from within the perspective of Isaan worldview.

CHAPTER 4

STRING TYING RITUAL AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNICATION ON THE KHORAT PLATEAU

It is beyond the scope of this research to give a full history of Christian missions on the Khorat Plateau but a brief overview of Christian communication of the gospel will provide a basis for understanding present day perspectives among Isaan Christians towards string tying ritual.¹ According to existing historical records, the first Christian missionary in the region was the Italian Jesuit priest, Father Maria Leria, who traveled up the Mekong River with the early rains of 1642. Other than a few contacts along the river's edge, it is not apparent that he traveled to any extent into the interior of the Khorat Plateau. He arrived in Vientiane in July 1642 and stayed until December 1647 (Masuhara 2546:219). According to Luigi Bressan, Leria learned the language perfectly (1998:xli) but Stuart-Fox mentions that he never gained permission to proselytize (1998:87). Sixteen years later Father Giovanni Filippo de Marini used Leria's accounts to describe the difficulty in spreading Christianity within the Lan Chang kingdom² (Mayoury and Breazeale 2002:96-97,137). There appears to be no record of any further foreign Christian missionary endeavors into the region of the Khorat Plateau for the next two hundred years.

¹ For further detailed studies on the topic of Christian missions in the Khorat Plateau refer to the articles, books and resources listed under references cited.

² The first version of de Marini's book appeared in 1663 in Italian entitled *Delle missioni de' Petri della Compagnia di Giesu nella provincial del Biappone e particolarmenta de quella di Tumkino*. Roma: Nocolo Angelo Tinassi. In 1666 it was published in French with the title *Histoire nouvelle et curieuse de royaumes de Tunquin et de Lao* (Mayoury and Breazeale 2002:351).

Catholic Mission

In 1880 Father Jean Louis Vey, Roman Catholic bishop in Bangkok overseeing the work in Siam and Laos, made a decision to begin reaching out beyond the central region of Siam where Catholic mission work had been done up until that time into the northeastern area between Vientiane and Bangkok. On January 2, 1881 the French Jesuit, Constant Jean Baptiste Prodhomme, a veteran missionary in Thailand of seven years, was chosen to head this work. With him was sent Father Francisco Marie Xavier Quego who had come to Siam in 1879. Ten days later, accompanied by a teacher and two household helpers, the group began their travels. Upon arrival at the foot of the Khorat Plateau in Kaeng Khoi (Saraburi province), a team of oxen was purchased to carry the baggage, and horses were procured for riding throughout the region. Thus began a four month evangelistic trip through the lower part of what would be later known as Isaan with arrival in the provincial city of Ubon Ratchathani on April 24th. According to the account given by Khamnungnit Chanthabut they were welcomed by officials there:

High level officials [in Ubon] gave the priests permission to build a residence in one corner of the old provincial headquarters building (today this building is the Ubon National Mission). The priests built a shelter attached to this corner of the building as directed and immediately began to study the local language welcoming any and all local people who wished to visit with them. The local people did not have any particular interest in questioning about the [foreigner's] religion but were fascinated by conversing with the priests about all kinds of various topics that they would discuss together with them because it was obvious that they were people from a foreign country³ (2542:3613 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

In June of the same year the priests were made aware of a situation where according to Surat Worangraht, fourteen people from northern Laos had been captured as slaves by Burmese or Kula traders,⁴ and forcibly brought in chains to the southern region of Ubon where they were to be sold (2542:3587). The educated priests, aware of the

³ The Isaan fascination with the foreigner, particularly those who attempt to speak the local language, is still a source of curiosity.

⁴ For whom the lower Isaan salt basin, *Tung Kula Rong Hai*, is named. Also known as *Thai Yai*.

reigning Siamese monarch's desire to gradually eradicate slavery "step by step" as announced in his edict of 1874, were motivated to do something.⁵ They took the case to court charging the Burmese with thievery and, much to the displeasure of local slave owners, won (Surat 2542:3587). Not only did the fathers now have their first fourteen candidates for Christian conversion who moved in with them, they were suddenly inundated with requests from other slaves that they act on their behalf as well. The two father's acts of beneficence towards slaves supported official government policy but was resented by local aristocracy who felt the loss of power. Soon the city center was full of freed slaves and their families living with the priests. In October local officials agreed (without any apparent hesitation) to answer the father's request for property of their own and offered an abandoned village west of the city where they built a compound for their converts, the present location of the Catholic church in Ubon Ratchathani (Khamnungnit 2542:3613). The two fathers began to travel throughout Isaan starting Catholic centers in Khorat, Udon, Nakorn Phanom, Sakon Nakorn and Mukdahan. In many locations there were freed slaves that became part of the congregation. According to Pidi Saenkhodon, the church in Mukdahan was named, "The Mother of God Who Frees the Slaves" (2542:3597 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

However, more significant in addressing the worldview needs of the larger population of the Lao residents on the Khorat Plateau was the Catholic priests' ability to exorcise evil spirits. Starting from the center in Ubon, built upon the grounds of a formerly haunted village, the fathers fearlessly pressed forward casting out spirits and

⁵ According to Prachoom Chomchai, Rama V viewed slavery from an entirely different perspective than that of western reformers. He felt that slavery perpetuated aristocratic power and promoting an unproductive dependent lifestyle for the uneducated. "Slaves do not have to pay high State dues and do not have to engage in any regular occupation, since they are maintained by their masters. They work when work comes to them; otherwise they are unoccupied. When there is nothing to do and they happen to come by a bit of money, they gamble, since there is no risk of losing their means of subsistence" (1967:170). It was not uncommon for an indebted peasant to indenture himself and his family to a local wealthy nobleman in order to survive economically. "[The king's] decrees announcing the gradual abolition of slavery and placing more stringent conditions on the status of debt-bondsman and making easier their redemption undermined the manpower and hence the economic status of the bureaucratic elite" (Wyatt 1984:192).

welcoming into their fellowship those who were considered *phii bawp*.⁶ According to Thawat Punnotok this is one of the main reasons why Catholic mission work spread throughout the region of northeast Thailand (2542:1605-6). Requests came from all areas to come and heal those inflicted with evil spirits. Many of the Catholic villages in Isaan today can trace their history to a time when some of the converted founders of their village were either persecuted for their conversion or chased from their homes as being considered demonic themselves. These outcasts were later established into Christian communities on formerly abandoned sites that were considered haunted by others.⁷

The Catholic mission approach in Isaan addressed two important aspects of Isaan worldview. The first had to do with the role of ritual. Ritual practices, as mentioned earlier, have always been an important part of Catholic life which fits in very well with Isaan worldview. According to interviews with Isaan Catholics, the use of string tying blessed by the church has been incorporated as part of the Isaan Catholic religious practice for years. In the Catholic version of string tying, the local priest will bless the strings with holy water beforehand and use the strings in ceremonies of blessing, healing, or exorcism or allow them to be taken elsewhere for ceremonial use. It is not considered a new holy sacrament but when blessed by the priest is welcomed within the Catholic community. This use of string tying ritual, according to an interview with IN13, a member of the St. Joseph church in Ban Thin, Udon Thani, addresses a deep level need

⁶ “*Phii bhawb* is someone who themselves have become a spirit. A *phii bhawb* is able to invade another person and this is called *phii bhawb*. The purpose of this entry is to eat the liver and the intestines of the living victim. Some of these victims actually die if an exorcism is not done in time. There are two main reasons that a person becomes a *phii bhawb*: 1) People who study spiritual magic and the performance of curses and spells who use their knowledge incorrectly or in a self-centered way or who somehow disobey any of the numerous sacred taboos and restrictions placed upon them, will become a *phii bhawb*. 2) People who have ancestors who were *phii bhawb* can also become a *phii bhawb*. If, for example a father or mother is a *phii bhawb*, when he dies the spirit will then leave the body of the dead and find a nearby person to possess and then person will instantly become a *phii bhawb*” (Banpote 1986:29-30).

⁷ The Catholic community of Ban Song Khon in Mukdahan province and the village of Ban Thin in Udon Thani province are two examples.

within the worldview of Isaan people who live with a strong belief in the vagaries of the spirit world even after their Christian conversion.

Another aspect of Isaan worldview that is apparent in a review of the Catholic work in northeast Thailand has to do with the patron-client relationship. When the fourteen slaves were freed they immediately understood their new masters to be the Catholic fathers. They would have felt an eternal indebtedness to them that would be impossible for them to repay. Rather than feeling empowered now to return to their homes in northern Laos, they would also have felt a desire, or an internal freewill obligation, to stay with these priests for the rest of their lives if possible. They would feel *boonkhun*⁸ towards them. The priests were their new benefactors and the freed Lao knew that they were safe in their company. Others who were freed from physical bondage in slavery, spiritual enslavement, or social ostracism, also found a new place of dependence with the Catholic leadership and its community. The Catholics were intentional about building a new community recognizing that it would continue to be within the cultural context of the people of the Khorat Plateau but some of the old dependences (spirits, former owners) would now be changed. In this way the worldview of the Isaan Catholics was transformed by addressing two important Isaan worldview values namely, relationship and spiritual powers, and perhaps many other worldview values as well.

Protestant Mission

At the beginning of the twentieth century all Siamese provinces north of the central region were referred to as the Lao provinces (Somchai 2002:112). Rama V's 1894 declaration that all citizens of Siam were now Thai could not change five hundred years of worldview perception overnight (Tdem 2546:408). According to Alex Smith's review, the dominant Protestant mission of the time in the so-called Lao provinces was

⁸ *Boonkhun* is a sense of obligation towards someone whose goodness is of such superior quality that it can never be repaid, usually referring to parents and teachers (Mulder 1999:35).

the Presbyterian Lao Mission located primarily in Chiang Mai established by Don McGilvary in 1867 (1999:65-67). This work reached northward past Luang Phrabang and into southern China but as far as any existing records indicate did not attempt to go eastward into the Khorat Plateau. McGilvary was not a trained medical doctor yet he admitted to a fondness for medicine as one of the “most effective modes of reaching the hearts of the people” (Smith 1999:66). Over the years the work of the Lao Mission expanded into clinics, hospitals, schools, and seminaries as well as planting dozens of churches throughout northern Thailand. In 1934 the name of the Presbyterian Lao Mission was changed to the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) (Smith 1999:82).

While McGilvary’s mission did not reach into the region of the Khorat Plateau during his lifetime much of the approach of this large mission presence typified and influenced the strategic thinking of other Protestant missionaries in the north and in other regions of Thailand as well. One of the main strategies of the Lao Mission appears to have been to follow the unification policies of the Siamese government in Bangkok.⁹ The missionaries perceived that learning to read and write in Siamese would soon overtake that of the local northern Lao language (*kham muang*) and therefore they encouraged Siamese literacy as a way to enhance the spread of the gospel (Smith 1999:84). The use of scripture in the vernacular was continued for a time, however, to avoid shutting out completely the elderly and the uneducated.

It was another aspect of the Lao Mission’s strategy, however, that did even more to affect the perspective of Thai Christians towards local worldview. McGilvary himself seemed quite eager to accept the use of medicine, the use of literacy, in fact the use of many modern conveniences in order to reach the northern Thai. All of this appears to have come from his own personal perspective on cultural worldview, one popular in his day, that technology was the answer to many of humanity’s problems. This included a

⁹ Refer to Footnote 16 in Chapter 12 for further details on Thai unification policies.

scientific outlook on the world in which the spiritual realm, as understood by the Lao of the north, did not easily fit:

It seemed that McGilvary tended to be torn between the secularized concept of the scientific world of his day and the biblical world view of the Scriptures, between the rejection of the validity of actual spirits, a viewpoint common to the late eighteenth century,¹⁰ and the reality of these powers of darkness.

Had McGilvary accepted as valid the animistic worldview in relation to spirits causing sickness and such like, and used a stronger power encounter approach, one wonders if a greater ingathering may have resulted (Smith 1999:89-90).

From these descriptions it would appear that McGilvary accepted the existing scientific explanations of the world and taught these explanations as part of the understanding of Christianity. Medicine defined and addressed the problem of diseases and thereby removed the need for a spirit realm. As Lillian Curtis, one of the missionaries wrote:

It is impossible to estimate the power for good of the medical work, for there is no way of reckoning the conversions resulting there from. Certain it is that it is one of the most efficient agencies in planting the gospel in the Laos country, for it breaks down the universal belief in the spirits (1903:300).

The world of evil spirits was rejected categorically according to western terms used in science and technology. Unlike the Catholic approach that directly encountered local spirits, Protestants usually chose to explain away the existence of such beings with the result of a cultural vacuum, or, to use Hiebert's term an excluded middle zone, that either led to a dual allegiance wherein Christians secretly sought out animistic ceremonies to find power, or the opposite extreme of complete cultural separation. Philip Hughes notes that prior to World War I missionaries went to considerable lengths to take their converts out of Thai culture. "Members of the churches were not allowed to have anything to do with Buddhist or animistic institutions, ceremonies or rituals on pain of

¹⁰ Perhaps Smith intends this to refer to thinking present into the late nineteenth century during the time of McGilvary's ministry in Siam.

excommunication” (1984a:325). Smith lists three such cases within the Lao Mission, all people that had worked closely with McGilvary but had to be dismissed for falling back into spiritism.¹¹ Eventually, however, a small group of culturally separate northern Thai believers began to grow under extreme social persecution and even death. These people were rejected from their families, their villages, and their societies, and had to find new places to live. Today the descendants of these martyrs proudly stand in their isolated Christian communities throughout northern Thailand and unlike most Thai who do not know the full names of their grandparents, many of these Thai Christians can trace their families’ pilgrimage to faith back several generations.¹² The 2004 *Atlas of Thailand* lists 15.7 percent of the province of Chiang Mai’s population as Christian (Kermel-Torrès 2004:42-43). Without acknowledging it, McGilvary had also created new places of dependence, as had the Catholics, and removed people from their original societies and brought them together elsewhere.

The Christian communities of the north were not simply self-serving, however. In 1925 Arthur J. Brown of the Society of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the USA issued the following challenge:

A region in eastern Siam as large as the State of Minnesota and with two and a half million people has not one resident missionary.¹³ There are literally thousands of villages within the nominal area of existing stations which the scanty force of missionaries is unable to reach (1925:188).

The eastern region mentioned by Brown was, of course, the Khorat Plateau which the Siamese government by this time had officially renamed Isaan. Some Presbyterian

¹¹ Loong Dang lived for two years with McGilvary on the mission compound and wasted a fortune on spirit doctors. Nan Tai made offerings to spirits before he died. Noi Chai was suspended for participating in spirit rites on the mission compound (Smith 199970).

¹² The author has met Thai who claim to descend from the early Christian martyrs in Chiang Mai.

¹³ Nearly twenty years before this statement was made, the 1907 Catholic’s twenty-fifth anniversary of mission in Isaan reported twenty-four districts with parish churches and seventy-three sub districts where mass was held regularly. Thirty foreign missionaries were on the field with four local Thai priests. Membership was at 11,362 with 1003 confirmands. There was also a fully operational printing establishment producing material in the local Lao language (Thai Noi) including poetry, scripture, music lyrics (*lom klon*), and topical studies (Thawat 2542:3607). By the time of Brown’s challenge these numbers had increased but apparently none of this was within the realm of Protestant consideration.

missionaries responded to Brown's challenge and, according to E. F. Irwin, a work was begun in the city of Nakorn Ratchasima in 1929 (1937:139). Two years later a Thai couple from the north joined them. "In 1931 Khru Seng Saa with his family was sent as the first Siamese home missionary to Korat in the North East Thailand. He was a graduate of a Christian school, had taught at Pitsanuloke, and had been a city evangelist. The Siamese churches supported him" (Smith 1999:186).

Meanwhile in 1928, Paul Gunther and his wife, after having served in Cambodia with the Christian and Mission Alliance for two years, felt called to the northern Khmer living across the border in the southern Isaan region of Siam. After witnessing his Siamese translator's descent into drunkenness upon receiving his first salary, Gunther determined not to continue until the man had a change of heart. After several months of prayer, his request was answered. This Thai man whose name is unrecorded went on to assist Gunther in planting churches throughout the province of Ubon Ratchathani (DeNeui 1995:10).

After corresponding back and forth with the Presbyterians, the C&MA were encouraged to accept full responsibility for the Isaan territory (Irwin 1937:139-140). Other couples came to join the first. Although travel was extremely difficult, they spent the dry months of the year traveling to make new contacts (:141). Miracles of healing were reported that caused the church to grow (:140). But the C&MA eventually found its greatest growth was among the leper population of Isaan. As Norman Ford reported:

In the first year of work among [lepers] (1951) 200 turned to Christ. In 1952 hundreds more believed and a hundred were baptized. Leprous churches were formed. It was evident that at this rate the leprous Christians and churches would soon outnumber the non-leprous (1982:9).

In 1955 the Thai government began a ten-year nationwide program to eradicate leprosy which affected the mission outreach (:12), however there are still some churches started by the C&MA in Isaan that have members who suffer from leprosy.¹⁴

Walls writes, “Perhaps no conversion is complete without the conversion of the past” (1996:53). C&MA missionaries working among Isaan lepers may never have recognized their part in the deeper cultural significance in converting the past of the people of the Khorat Plateau. According to Isaan evangelist Tongpan Phrommedda, who in his youth assisted early C&MA missionaries in his home province of Chayaphum in the distribution of leprosy medicine, Christian work with social outcasts confirmed an ancient promise to Isaan people pointing to God that can be traced back to their earliest oral traditions.

We have a history about this. You have to understand that Isaan people have two sacred scriptures. The first one is the *Phratrividok*. The *Phratrividok* is kept within the Buddhist religion.¹⁵ The second one is called *Khamphi Baak* [the oral scripture]; it is only spoken, no one has ever written it down. . . . When I was young the elders would repeat the *khamphii baak* during the easy months,¹⁶ when the weather was cool and people would sleep in their hammocks and talk together, repeating it for the children. They would tell us what was what, how religion worked, the story of *Phra Sri Aahn*, the story about when a forgiver would arrive to take away debts. They would repeat it over and over until we could remember it. No one ever wrote it down.

One example of this was about the forgiver of the world. He was to come and be born in a small village that had mountains surrounding it. Do you get it? The ones who ate fish bones and field crabs would see him before anyone else. Do you understand about the fish bones and the field crabs? These are the poorest people that are chased out of villages. They are the sick, the lepers. They would see him first. Society would say that these are the sinful people and would chase them away. They would have to find whatever they could to eat, including the fish bones left over from

¹⁴ The author knows personally of churches in Khon Kaen and Roi Et provinces that fit this description. The presence of lepers within the church is a well known fact within the surrounding community and has been something of a stigma in certain communities.

¹⁵ The *Phratrividok* refers to the written Buddhist scriptures.

¹⁶ Easy months refer to the dry season in Isaan after the rice harvest and before the arrival of rains for the plowing. This would be during the months of December to March.

other people's meals thrown in the trash out of the village. These were the ones who were going to see the forgiver first.

The *khamphii baak* taught that when these outcasts were healed then the others, the good people, would also meet the forgiver themselves. Here's how it goes:

พวกกินปลาก้าง ปูหิน พวกนั้นแหละ
 พวกเป็นคนบาปจึงชีพอพระอริญาเมตตาไฉโร
 (Eater of fish bones and finders of field crabs
 Sinners like these will find the prosperous one¹⁷ first)
 (2003 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

According to Tongpan, this is exactly what happened in Isaan. The missionaries taught the gospel but the outcasts of society were the first to respond. Whether or not any missionaries were aware of the role they played in fulfilling this prophecy is uncertain.¹⁸

Ford evaluates his denomination's efforts in Isaan by quoting several missionaries familiar with the C&MA Isaan strategy. One that Ford quotes is Alan Harwood who saw three major hindrances to the growth of the church in Isaan: syncretism within the church ("animistic practices continued inside the church"), cultural barriers ("the Thai feeling that they must leave their people to become Christian"), and missionary barriers (creation of a church that has a "foreign smell about it") (1982:21-22). Other Isaan Christian leaders can attest to each of these three items. In 1967 IN3, later a leader of a church planting movement in Isaan in the 1980s, was expelled from the C&MA Bible Training School in Khon Kaen for going with several students to watch the movie *Ben Hur*. IN24, who grew up within the C&MA church as a child and served in it for many years in Isaan, shared in an interview from his experiences:

¹⁷ The author's translation of the Prosperous One refers Phra Arriya to "อริญา (*arriya*) means prosperous, ไฉโร (*yao*) means without form or shape, just like the wind. People will know by the sound" (Tongpan, 2004).

¹⁸ The use of oral tradition as a way to share the gospel with Isaan people has not been adequately researched. Smith mentions that some missionaries have used it with Thai people as a point of contact, an interest awakener (1999:114ff). A specific application of Isaan oral tradition used to present Christ to elderly people is explored in some detail in the author's interview with Khampan Sudcha and is translated and included for the reader's benefit as Appendix V.

As far as beliefs are concerned, the C&MA was the strictest of all denominations. They taught that watching movies in a theatre was a terrible sin. They told us that if we were inside the theatre when Jesus returned we would not meet him but we would be stuck on the ceiling of the movie theatre. Smoking was sin, lying was sin, drinking was sin. Looking at women was sin—very strict.

The C&MA said that all cultural forms were wrong. They did not divide between what was cultural and what was religious. They strongly felt as a theological position that such [former] practices were sinning against God. I myself never got a satisfactory answer on some of these things. For example, they told people how sinful it was to be addicted to smoking yet I knew, since I worked with them for many years, that the missionaries were addicted to coffee. . . . The missionaries taught that it was not possible to participate in string tying ceremonies and still go to heaven (2004 Paul DeNeui, trans.).

From reports given through interviews and written reports back home, it would appear that the C&MA mission, similar to the work of the Presbyterians in the north of Thailand, struggled with issues related to perception and expression of cultural worldview. Christians who used Isaan forms such as string tying were considered unfaithful to the gospel yet the animistic mindset of the Thai Isaan had not changed upon conversion. The approach appeared to be one of separation from the ways of the Thai and adoption of Christian forms represented by those brought by missionaries. Failure to consider the animistic worldview of the Isaan people also left a cultural vacuum leading to either dual allegiance in practices or complete separation from local cultural forms.

Christian String Tying Ritual

By the 1960s other groups had come to work within the Isaan region including a return to the area by the CCT and eventually others. One of these was the Evangelical Covenant Church of America (ECC).¹⁹ In 1979 a missionary family working with the ECC 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

¹⁹ The development of this work in Isaan from that of the CCT and the C&MA is described in *The Development of a Multi-Dimensional Approach to Contextualization in Northeast Thailand* (DeNeui 2002).

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 an interview with one of these leaders, Banpote Wetchgama, 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). For this group of believers it was the beginning of openly using the string tying ritual to express something of deep meaning for them.

Elements in the Christian String Tying Ritual

Isaan string tying as used by followers of Christ was simply called *phuk khaen*. As mentioned earlier the focus was changed from that of the life essence (*khwan*) to a celebration of what God had done. People were tied, not objects such as posts or vehicles. Just as the usual string tying ceremony has participants and implements involved so also will the Christian application of this ritual. Banpote explains that the meaning behind these elements is more important than the physical elements involved.

When we, as followers of Jesus, talk of using our cultural forms in a [strong 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 (1986:161).

Participants

As has been discussed earlier, there are three major parties that must be involved in order to have a string tying ceremony and this is the same for the followers of Christ.

The meaning and explanation of these roles is radically different. The first important figure is the officiate of the event as explained by Banpote.

Isaan people call the leader of the [*sukhwan*] ceremony the *phram*, however, the leader of the Christian Isaan ceremony is not called the *phram* because this would lead to an understanding that this person follows the Hindu religion and it will lead everyone to understand that this ceremony must be led by someone who had studied Brahmanism and will teach all the practitioners in this religion. In order to give a clear new meaning, the name for the leader of the ceremony should be changed from the *phram* to the *maw sud*. Here we use the term *maw* not in the central Thai meaning of a medical doctor but with the Isaan meaning referring to someone who is experienced, educated, and or talented in a certain area of expertise. . . The word *sud* refers to studying or special education in a certain area of study. Those who have finished a time of focused study are called in Isaan, *sud hien* (special studies) (Preecha 2532:810). Therefore the combination of these two terms *maw sud* can be used to refer to someone who has had special training in the word of God. Before a person can be called by this title he or she will need to have a focused time of training in the Bible. . .

When Isaan followers of Jesus hold a ceremony they are not holding a ceremony that mixes Buddhism, Brahmanism and animism as is commonly done in Isaan. Those who follow Jesus have made this religious differentiation already. There is no mixing in the deeper substance of meaning because the leader is not a *phram* but is one who clearly expounds what the word of God says to us as Isaan believers today. He or she has the responsibility of sharing God's word in a way that helps the followers to grow in their faith and understand of God's way. If only external forms are measured then it would be easy to misunderstand that everything is the same for these physical expressions represent those areas that are familiar to Isaan people. However, there are significant differences in meaning because the leader is teaching the word of God; he or she is someone whom God has ordained to perform God's sacred ceremonies (1986:162-163).

Banpote goes on to explain that the sponsor in the case of the string tying ceremonies used by followers of Jesus need not be a specific woman of impeccable reputation in order to empower the *pha khwan*. In the following description he refers to the preparation for a Christian Isaan string ceremony as used in a wedding:

In the ceremony for the Isaan followers of Christ it is not necessary to limit the participants in preparation to elderly women from good marriages because no one is able to be a pure person in and of themselves or through

working their own good deeds. The only way a person can be pure is to accept the work of what Christ has done and is doing in their lives. Everyone who follows God is in this process of becoming a pure person in Jesus Christ through the power of God. Therefore it makes no difference whether a person has ever divorced or not if they are going to help in the preparation of the wedding arrangements. The important point is that every participant be one who is in the process of becoming pure through the work of Jesus Christ in their own lives. All who are in this pilgrimage towards Christ's purity are appropriate members to be involved in the preparation of an Isaan wedding ceremony. There is no difference in the status of people involved (1986:163).

The recipients themselves will be no different than those in the usual ceremonies; they will be going through some phase of transition, in a liminal position of life, and for whatever reason in need of a special blessing from the community (Banpote 1986:164). In this case it is the community that is most different. They are not merely the friends, relatives, and acquaintances that have some personal interest in becoming more closely linked with the recipient. They may also include strangers who are part of the body of Christ who desire to express their unity to a new member of the family of God.

Implements Used

Banpote has described the use of the implements used in CSTR in detail. The majority of elements are retained particularly the distinctive *pha khwan* and the strings that it holds.

As believers we continue to use the name *phakhwan* because it has a positive meaning. The first word *pha* merely refers to a container or a receptacle. In the morning Isaan people use the word in reference to the tray that carries all the breakfast food as the *pha khao ngai*, that used for lunch is called the *pha khao suay*, and that used for the evening meal they call the *pha khao leng* (Preecha 2532:563).

The word *khwan* refers to that which is good, best, and lovely. . . Things that are special gifts and endearing expressions of friendship are called *khong khwan*. Therefore *phakhwan* refers to that which is best or only used for the most special occasions as special expressions for those who are loved (1986:165).

Among items not retained in the Christian ritual are the candle, banana, betel nut and tobacco, boiled egg, boiled rice, alcohol and presents for the spirits. Banpote reasons for each of these elements but to illustrate the principles behind them the author includes the following explanation why candles are not used at string tying ceremonies for Isaan Christian weddings:

In the Isaan Christian wedding there is no rotation of candles around the couple because lighting candles symbolizes the worship of spirits. We, as believers, do not worship these forces but give our worship to Jesus Christ alone. Christ is the light of our lives and enlightens the darkness of our hearts.²⁰ Jesus does not desire candles as an offering to him but desires our lives as living, pure sacrifices for him. This is acceptable worship for our Lord²¹. Therefore, Isaan Christian *phakhwan* has no rotation of candles, and when the *maw sud* shares from the word of God there is no lighting of candles (1986:169).

The most important ingredient that was kept was the strings themselves. When used by followers of Christ the strings were not referred to as sacred strings (*sai sin*) but each time they were used it was explained that they were simply ordinary cotton thread used to represent God's deeper meaning with no magical power or enchantment attached.

Sequence of Events

The order of ceremony for Isaan CSTR looks very similar to those of the popular Isaan Buddhist tradition. Again, Banpote explains the basis for this similarity:

The ceremony will look the same in form but will be different in meaning. This can be compared to the fact that we are still Isaan people when we become followers of Christ (with a dependence upon Christ) but our internal values and attitudes are being changed by him. Therefore we are not the same as all other Isaan people but we are real Isaan people with a new life and new set of values. Our lives are being changed each day through the power of the Holy Spirit. The ceremonies that we follow use forms that are old and traditional but have new meanings. These new meanings express the fact that Jesus Christ is the foundation of our new life (1986:176).

²⁰ John 8:12.

²¹ Romans 12:1-2.

The opening of each ceremony focuses not on the auspiciousness of the event due to the time, location or persons involved but because of who God is in the lives of the participants. It is a reminder of what he has done and will do for all gathered together in his name. For an Isaan Christian wedding the opening invocation is chanted in Isaan style with words such as these:

Satukan and Praise to God whose name is Jehovah
 And to the son whose name is *Phra Yesu Chao*
 And to the Spirit who reflects them we exalt you All Three.
 We praise you today on this special occasion of joy (1986:178).

Banpote further explains that the new lyrics used in the ceremonies are based upon a study of scripture. These scriptural messages are presented in Isaan forms that speak to the deep heart perspectives of Isaan people.

The words in the lyrics of the *sud khwan* for followers of Christ will come from two primary sources. First, they will come from an in-depth study of God's word and an understanding of the word as Isaan people. Secondly, study the meaning behind the forms used in the traditional Isaan wedding ceremony. After these two steps are taken the ceremony can then be applied for use in the church for Isaan believers that stands upon the foundation of the word of God and led by Jesus Christ as Paul wrote in Colossians 3:17, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (NIV) (1986:177).

The moment for using the strings is highlighted when the *maw sud* raises a strand of strings and explains in words such as these for the Isaan Christian string tying wedding:

At this time, brothers and sisters, I will explain the string.
 This string has not been enchanted or empowered in any way,
 It is simply string that God has given for our use.
 Let me explain this to you carefully.
 The real meaning is internal, God ties himself to us
 But we can't see it so we use the string to represent it.
 It is a symbol of God's love to us,
 Tied to us and tied to each other.
 Since this is the case may you, the bride and groom,
 Always love each other and care for one another.
 Love until your love reaches to the sky and turns to gold.
 Love until your love is as strong as bamboo and full of diamonds.

Love even when you are wrong or when your spouse does wrong.
 May Christ help you through the hard times.
 Don't leave each other; stay together through thick and thin.
 From this day on and forever don't forget what I have said (:175).

Experiencing Christian String Tying Ritual

In 1988, after the author and his wife had moved to Thailand, we were honored with a similar ceremony performed on our behalf. Our newsletter described it this way:

The time came for us and two others to come to the center of the room and sit. A flower arrangement with wands of string was placed before us and Tongpan, a Thai leader, began to explain. String tying, practiced for hundreds of years among Northeastern Thai Buddhists, normally requires special strings which have been endowed with spiritual power by a priest. Typically this would be used to ward off evil forces or to insure success. Tongpan explained, however, that these strings were ordinary strings, used as a physical symbol of the prayers and blessings of these Christians to their brothers and sisters, for in tying on the string they become joined together.

The two with us were Thai men. One had been a fellow worker who was moving away. They would tie him with their love and blessing. The other was a new Christian just out of jail. He would be tied with the prayers and loving support of everyone there. We (Pon and Gay-son) were introduced as students of Thai. What would they say to us?

Tongpan closed with a prayer and music began to play. People sang. Then they started to come. Carefully gathering from the bouquet men and women, young and old, approached us, each with a string, a smile, a wai,²² and a blessing. As they tied our out-stretched wrists strange and beautiful words surrounded us. "Happiness, . . . Love of God, of Christ, . . . Happy New Year, . . . God give you understanding, help you learn, . . . may you come back to Isaan and speak very well, . . . God will do this, . . . I tie this promise to you, . . . In the name of Jesus. . . " Half an hour later our wrists were covered with strings and our hearts were full.

Something had happened. Using the most common of threads a sacred bond was created. Still *farang*²³ but not strangers, our string-covered wrists announced that we were one. Suddenly Ephesians 2:19-20 came alive:

Consequently, you are 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"(DeNeui 1988:1-2).

²² The *wai* is the Thai greeting of palms together raised to respectful height.

²³ *Farang* is the Thai word for Caucasian foreigners.

At that point, unable to speak the local language, the author and his wife had little understanding of the significance of what had happened but in spite of the inability to communicate verbally a deeper form of communication did occur. This has been repeated over the years on several unforgettable occasions for the author's family and many others. One Thai organization that developed from the work of the ECC, the Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD), even published a booklet outlining scriptural references and an order of service for several different types of string tying ceremonies useful in the church including healing, encouragement, restoration, baby dedication, house-warming, welcoming, send-offs, freedom from addiction, weddings, and welcoming new believers (ISD 1993). In fact, the suggestion to the use string tying ceremony arose so frequently that at times it was difficult (as westerners) not to suspect an ulterior motive (such as free food) based on only a partially recognized internal western cultural bias that demanded diversity or what Margaret Mead has described as the common attitude among Americans that "anything done twice has no value" (1973:97).

Americans are conditioned to accept and expect a high degree of irregularity in their lives. We live in so many different types of housing, and move so often, and drive so many kinds of cars, and smoke so many types of cigarettes [certainly no missionaries!], etc., that change, in certain areas, has become part of our lives. This is a very different type of life from that lived by people who have been reared in one house, and have died in the same bed in which they were born (1973: 98).

How much of this western cultural attitude was imported to Isaan? Clearly, westerners hold tightly to their own worldview value of change. How much had Christianity in Thailand bought into this value as well? As language fluency improved there was an increased understanding within the author of the role of ritual in the life of the northeastern Thai that during these occasions something deeper was going on inside. Occasionally some of this would get verbalized. After one such ceremony an Isaan Christian leader remarked, "I have been following Jesus for years and every time we have

string-tying in the family of God I still get goose bumps.” After another particularly emotional ceremony a visiting Thai woman who had been the recipient of the string-tying blessing said between tears, “This is the first time I felt I could be a Christian and still be a Thai.” Tongpan explained the need for Isaan ritual in this way:

When we talk about ceremonies as children of God²⁴ we usually think about the two ordinances that were commanded by Jesus. These are (1) communion and (2) baptism. In our work 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 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).

The recognition of a personal bias against repetition revealed a personal inability to ritualize within the author that exposure to Isaan worldview has begun to change (Mead 1979:97). A review of the biblical and theological perspective on this topic provides insight into God’s perspective towards ritual.

²⁴ “Children of God” is the preferred term used among the Thailand Covenant churches to refer to themselves as Christians.

PART II

**STRING TYING RITUAL FROM BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

CHAPTER 5

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON RITUAL

The purpose of this section is to present the biblical and the historic Christian theological perspectives on the topic of religious ritual in regards to the expression of worldview change and from it to develop a biblical hermeneutic from which to view the communication effects and deep level meaning of Isaan string tying ritual as practiced by followers of Christ in northeast Thailand as they express their worldview changes. This chapter will analyze how God used and commanded ritual in the Old and New Testament periods to convey his message and to allow his people to express what it meant for them to be the people of God from within and out of their changing worldview perspective. Chapter 6 will deal with historic Christian theological positions on the subject.

In Isaiah 1:13-14 and Amos 5:21-22 God mentions three categories of his people's religious ritual practices: their assemblies, their feasts, and their offerings all of which had been instituted by God himself. While there is overlap between the three categories and some rituals have all three components within them,¹ this research will employ these three categories from the biblical record of assemblies, feasts, and offerings as a way of organizing and evaluating the meaning and use of rituals found in the scriptural text. For analysis of both Old and New Testament use of ritual two tables are provided and will be referred to in the following review section. The first table in each of these sections (Tables 2 and 4) is divided into the three categories mentioned above, and

¹ An example of a ritual that has feasting, an assembly, and presentation of offerings combined is the assembly commanded on the eighth and final day of the feast of Tabernacles. After the final feast there was one final assembly at which burnt offerings, grain offerings, drink offerings, fellowship offerings and freewill offerings were to be presented to God (Num. 29:35).

lists the name (or names) of the ritual, a brief description of the ritual with scriptural references, and a summary of the function of the ritual. The second table in each section (Tables 3 and 5) compares worldview themes from the local culture with God's meaning as recorded in the text and includes warnings found in scripture for the abuse of God's commanded ritual.

Ritual in the Old Testament

The study of ritual in the Old Testament cannot be separated from the understanding of God's use of law or *torah* in that period. *Torah* was originally specific oral instruction given by God through his human intermediaries for ritual and other divinely ordained purposes. J. Murray writes that these were later collected and put into writing and were also known as *torah* (1979:718). Table 2 lists the rituals God commanded in the Old Testament including a brief description and explanation of the function of each. In the author's study it became apparent that many of the rituals God commanded incorporated civil, social, and religious elements together into one event. This can be seen in a review of the column of function of rituals commanded by God in the Old Testament in Table 2. Apparently, to the people of Old Testament worldview, this combination of function was considered ordinary.

To the modern mind this unity of ethical values, religious ritual, and judicial prescriptions makes a baffling impression . . . For the biblical mind, however, the separation of religion from morals and of morals from law which we see today would be proof of a most unhealthy condition of society (:720).

Ritual in the Old Testament period, originated from laws commanded by God and included legal, moral, and religious elements as opposed to political laws commanded by human institutions also evident in contemporary Oriental codes (:720).

TABLE 2
RITUALS GOD COMMANDED IN OLD TESTAMENT

Name	Description	Function
Feasts		
Feast of Unleavened Bread, Passover ²	Each household slay a lamb, eat with bitter herbs, unleavened bread. Share with any foreigners present (Ex. 12:1-14; Lev. 23:5; Num. 9:1-14; 28:16; Deu. 15:1-3a; 4b-7).	Remembrance of God's deliverance from Egypt.
Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) (Harvest)	Mandatory and voluntary offerings, including first fruits of the wheat harvest (Ex. 23:16a, 34:22a, Lev. 23:15-21; Num. 28:26-31; Deu. 16:9-12).	Thankfulness for the Lord's blessing of harvest.
Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) (Ingathering)	A week of celebration of harvest; living in booths, offering sacrifices (Ex. 23:16b; 34:22b; Lev. 23:33-36a, 39-43; Num. 29:12-34; Deu. 16:13-15; Zec. 14:16-19).	Remember journey from Egypt to Canaan; gratitude for productivity of land.
Feast of Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah)	Eaten as an assembly on the day of rest commemorated with trumpet blasts and sacrifices (Lev. 23:23-25; Num. 29:1-6).	Confession, and Spiritual renewal,
The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)	A day of rest, fasting and sacrifices of atonement for priests and people. This is the only fast commanded in the Old Testament. (Barker 1995:1494). (Lev. 16; 23:26-32; Num. 29:7-11).	Cleanse priests and people from their sins and purify the Holy Place. Spiritual identity.
The Feast of Purim	A day of joy and feasting and giving presents (Est. 9:18-22).	Remembrance of national deliverance.
The Feast of the New Moon	"The first day of each month (New Moon) was observed as a feast. The first day of the seventh month was a Greater Feast, and for a long time was the beginning of the new year (Jones 1968:133).	Recognition of God as creator of time ³ . Cosmic identity of God
Hanukkah, Festival of Lights ⁴	Seven days of gift giving with eighth day assembly (Jn. 10:22).	Commemorates the purification of temple. Identity
Assemblies		
Sabbath	God's day, no secular toil (Gen. 2:2, Ex. 20:8-11; Lev. 23:3; Deu. 5:12-15).	Rest, focus on God.
Circumcision ⁵	Removal of foreskin from male genital on the eighth day after birth (Gen. 17).	Identification with covenant community.

² According to Ex. 12, Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were two feasts that were celebrated back to back. Passover was a family event held the first night. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was the entire following week and included assemblies, giving designated offerings, and eating unleavened bread (Baker 1995:174-175). For the sake of simplicity Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread have been listed here together as one event.

³ Illustrated in the formula of Blessing of the New Moon: 'Praised art thou, Lord, that renewest the months' (Ber. 13d)" (Rylaarsdam 1984b:544).

⁴ Hanukkah is an extra-biblical feast but is included as it draws from the important story of Esther in the Old Testament and also because the feast is mentioned in the New Testament (Jn. 10:22).

⁵ While not prescribed as an assembly, circumcision remains an important Jewish religious ceremony still involving a family gathering today. Before the ninth century A.D. the rite was performed at home then later to the synagogue. Circumcision is listed under the category of assemblies because "the ceremonies accompanying the rite include many expressions of joyfulness" (Hyatt 1984:630).

Sacred Assembly	A day of convocation, rest and offering sacrifices (Lev. 23:36b; Num. 29:35-38).	Commemorate closing of the cycle of feasts.
Tabernacle/Temple ⁶	Sacred meeting place with ritualized rules in form and function (Ex. 25-27, 29:42-43) Later formalized religious practices would require a place for sacred assembly in temple (I Kg. 5-6).	Symbol of God's presence with his people (Ex. 25:8), alluded to deeper future reality (He. 8:5).
Priestly rituals ⁷	A divinely ordained set of rules and regulations, these men served to represent God to his people and the people to God (Ex. 28-29).	Assure, maintain, and re-establish holiness of people of God. (Abba 1984a:877).
Offerings		
Burnt Offering (Holocaust)	Bull, ram or male bird without defect, wholly consumed by fire, given voluntarily (Lev. 1, 6:8-13; 8:18-21; 16:24).	Atonement for unintentional sin, surrender to God (Barker 1995:149). .
Grain (Cereal) Offering	Voluntary giving of grain, fine flour, olive oil, incense, unleavened bread, salt; as burnt offering (Lev. 2; 6:14-23).	Recognition of God's provisions and goodness.
Fellowship (Peace) Offering	Any herd or flock animal without defect, variety of breads, meal together (Lev. 3; 7:11-34).	Thanksgiving and fellowship.
Sin Offering	Mandatory specific to status. (Lev. 4:1-5:13; 6:24-30; 8:14-17; 16:3-22).	Confession, forgiveness, cleansing.
Guilt Offering	Ram or lamb (Lev. 5:14-6:7). Mandatory. Make restitution, pay twenty percent fine (Lev. 5:16).	Atonement for unintentional sin requiring restitution.
First fruits	Presenting a sheaf of the first of the barley harvest as a wave offering; making a burnt and grain offering (Lev. 23:9-14).	Gratitude for harvest, recognize the Lord's bounty.

Many of God's commanded Old Testament rituals were inclusive towards those outside of the ethnic community of Israel. According to Murray this is one of the features that made God's law unique among the nations of its day (:720). Certainly it was one of the distinctive points of God's original call to Abram in Genesis Chapter 11 that he was to be a source of blessing beyond the usual understanding of territorial divinities only concerned with the welfare of people in one particular region. God's concern spread beyond the usual cultural understanding of self-protection and self-

⁶ Rituals of the followers of the God of the Old Testament centered around the tabernacle and later the temple so have been included in this category of tabernacle/temple under the heading of Assemblies. This category also includes the buildings, furnishings, equipment and activities associated with both tabernacle and temple practice.

⁷ Assemblies were not held without the leadership of priests so this category is included under Assemblies.

blessing and was to be expressed through the law, the ritual, and the social activities of his people.

It is interesting to notice what is missing from the list in Table 2 of rituals God commanded in the Old Testament. The only mention of fasting is on the Day of Atonement; baptism is not mentioned at all. There are absolutely no God-given commands on ritual relating to weddings, rites of passage, or funerals. These omissions also hold significance in understanding some of the worldview themes of the Israelites and their surrounding cultures. As John Davis writes:

An illustration of unacceptable elements in pagan religion *excluded* from . . . the Hebrew religion would be for instance the Egyptian and Babylonian preoccupation with death and the after-life. *They* had a sophisticated belief system involving Ancestor worship, child sacrifice, preparations for ‘other world’, with numerous rites, rituals and ceremonies enacted to bolster their beliefs. *Moses discriminately and deliberately avoids any mention of the after-life, as do most of the writers of the Old Testament* (1998:214 Original author’s italics).

God’s rituals were given not in a vacuum but in the midst of existent worldview themes, many of which can be discovered to a certain degree by the rituals themselves. Table 3 lists the Old Testament worldview themes addressed by the ritual as well as listing the biblical descriptions of distinctions God gave to the ritual. In nearly every case each ritual came with warnings against its abuse. These warnings also reveal much about the deeper meanings or worldview themes found in the context of the time.

God’s Rituals and Pre-Existing Cultural Forms

The three types of rituals mentioned in the Old Testament, assemblies, feasts, and offerings, were cultural forms familiar to the people who were commanded to practice them. All of these were in practice by God’s people and others before the encounter on Mt. Sinai as recorded throughout the book of Genesis. Religious feasts, assemblies, and offerings were nothing new. There is no indication that the people of God or the priests

who acted on their behalf were ever required to speak a different language than that which they normally spoke at home in the performance of these tasks. No where in the Old Testament are the actual wordings of prayers dictated by God; is this possibly to avoid their use as magical chants or mantras? It appears from the scriptural account that God intentionally incorporated familiar forms found within the culture in order to communicate his meaning in ways to which his people could easily respond and from which he could speak to even deeper worldview themes. In Table 3 the author again lists the feasts, assemblies, and offerings with a comparison of Old Testament Worldview themes and God's apparent distinctions. Each of these also comes with warnings from scripture that indicates there were areas of danger with which God was concerned for his people.

TABLE 3
GOD'S DISTINCTIONS AND OLD TESTAMENT
WORLDVIEW

Name	OT Worldview	God's Distinctions	Warnings
Feasts			
Passover	Originally a nomadic springtime festival for Arab tribes to ward off evil from flock and home (Davis 1998:219).	Replaced spring festival, exodus symbolized passing from sin to grace (Senior and Stuhlmueller 1984:65).	Any one ate anything made with yeast during Passover would be cut off including foreigners (Ex. 12:19).
Pentecost Tabernacles Trumpets Purim Atonement Hanukah Sabbath	Ancient feasts coincide with seasons, associated with gods of pantheon who banquet with men (Freeman 1979:420). [There is a] pattern of a period of joy preceded by rites of mortification and purgation. (Freeman 1979:420).	God assumed to participate symbolically by receiving choice portions burned on altar; or through libations (Rylaarsdam 1984a:261). No line between sorrow for sin and joy of Lord (Freeman 1979:420).	God warned that not keeping the Sabbath would kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that would consume her fortresses (Jer. 17:27).
Assemblies			
Circumcision	Rite of passage at puberty affirming physical and social qualifications for entrance into adult tribal membership. Practiced by all neighboring	Demonstrated God's initiative and grace in seeking and accepting the helpless into the covenant family as symbolized by	Expectation was of inner obedience to God's law with outward action else the sign became no more than a physical mark,

	countries except Philistia (Jud. 14:3; 1 Sa. 17:26, 31:4; 2 Sa. 1:20; I Ch. 10:4; Jer. 9:25). Focus on the social initiation into adulthood.	infancy rather than personal volition at adolescence (Gen. 17; Deu. 10:16). Focused on spiritual nature of family.	spiritually defunct and damning (Jer. 9:25; Rom. 2:27). Foresaw need to circumcise the heart (Deu. 30:6) (Motyer 1979:234).
Tabernacle/ Temple	Among nomadic peoples special red leather tents were used to house local deities (Davies 1984:499). Shrines were built as more permanent places of worship in established cities.	Local materials and architectural styles were used to make a structure that did not house God but served as a sacred place where God met with his people by appointment.	Relying merely upon the temple would prove futile (and ultimately deadly) if inner heart motivations were not right with God and with one another (Jer. 7:1-8).
Priests and priestly rituals	Priests serving gods of surrounding countries were also soothsayers, healers, and spiritual advisors. Male and female ritual prostitution to local deities was considered necessary to promote fertility in agricultural communities. ⁸ Bestiality was associated with magical rituals of pagan cults of the day (Baab 1984a:387). Ritual nudity was found in the cultic practices of deities of the countries and peoples surrounding Israel “lest clothes convey impurity” (Gaster 1984:156)..	Hebrew term for priest is from verb “to stand.” The priest is therefore one who stands before God representing the “kingdom of Priests” (Ex. 19:5, Isa. 61:6). All forms of ritual prostitution for-bidden ⁹ (Deu. 23:17). Bestiality was forbidden (Lev. 18:23, 20:15-16). No layman allowed to ascend altar stairs to avoid indecent exposure (Ex. 20:26). Priests wore special under-garments (Lev. 6:10).	Severe punishments were in store for priests who abused their position and led others away from God (Mal. 2:1-9). Any Israelite visiting a temple prostitute was to be cut off from the covenant people (Lev. 20:6). ¹⁰ Bestiality was punishable by death (Lev. 20: 15-16). The priest’s punishment for indecent exposure at the sacred places, even unintentional, was guilt and death by God (Ex. 28:42-43).
Offering			
Burnt, Grain, Fellowship, Sin Guilt, Tithe ¹¹	Blood and burning was required to appease the local deities and spirits of the dead	The lives of animals temporarily substituted for those of the sinful.	Blood of lambs and goats didn’t pay for sin but covered it (Abba

⁸ “This religion was predicated upon the belief that the processes of nature were controlled by the relations between gods and goddesses. Projecting their understanding of their own sexual activities, the worshipers of these deities, through the use of imitative magic, engaged in sexual intercourse with devotees of the shrine, in the belief that this would encourage the gods and goddesses to do likewise. Only by sexual relations among the deities could man’s desire for increase in herds and fields, as well as in his own family, be realized” (Baab 1984b:932-933).

⁹ Ritual religious prostitution is distinguished in the scriptures from social prostitution not associated with cultic idols. While selling a daughter into prostitution was discouraged (Lev. 19:29), a daughter (of a priest) who became a prostitute had to be burned (Lev. 21:9), and a promiscuous daughter stoned (Deu. 22:20-21), common prostitution, although soundly condemned as a source of wickedness, was not nearly as serious (nor did it bring about the curse of God) as was idolatrous religious shrine prostitution (which included both the hetero-and the homosexual Rev. 22:15). Is this merely a semantic technicality or was God meeting his people at the beginning stages of their transformational process towards his ideal?

¹⁰ “The Bible’s attack which use the language of harlotry is strongly directed toward that inner harlotry of the spirit of Israel which amounts to rejection of her Redeemer and the Lord” (Baab 1984b:933).

¹¹ Unlike most of the other rituals, righteous performance of the tithe is one that brings with it a specific promise, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops,

	(Lev. 19:28; I Kg. 18:42;		1984b:921).
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Debate about Origin of Forms

The debate about the origin of the ancient ritual forms has tended to dominate the entire discussion about the role of sacred ritual and overshadowed the question of meaning of the ritual in Old Testament studies. This debate runs the entire spectrum from those who feel that God brought about sacred ritual for his people in the same way he brought about his creation (*ex nihilo*) to those who would see total non-critical, full-scale adoption of local pagan practices into the life of the people of God.

On one end of the spectrum there are scholars such as D. Freeman would argue that the origin of the biblical feasts is completely different from that of the surrounding nations and countries and that any similarities are merely coincidental:

While some of these feasts coincide with the seasons, it does not follow that they have their origin in the seasonal ritual of the religions of the Ancient Near East. These are associated with the gods of the pantheon who banquet together or feast with men. Biblical feasts differ in origin, purpose, and content (1979:420).

It is difficult in the light of archeological evidence shown in Table 3 to support the position that the Israelite rituals God commanded had absolutely no connection with earlier surrounding practices. To what degree this origin was of the local culture must remain an open question. It appears that scholars from this position are in fact attempting to affirm as a theological principle towards human culture that God's activity in the world originates with himself alone, as did creation, and not with any human elements or expressions involved. The fact that God condescends to employ human language to communicate seems to be one acceptable exception to this position. This position would

and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty" (Mal. 3:10-12 NIV). This passage, however, is routinely lifted from its context, particularly at year-end budget crunches in many Protestant churches, to instill a sense of monetary obligation and religious guilt among the members.

possibly feel that associating God with non-godly cultural forms would somehow demean his divinity or perhaps misconstrue his higher purposes.

In contrast to the position of Freeman, G. Henton Davies posits that God deliberately used forms and materials from the surrounding non-chosen cultures to create his own commanded ritual forms as described in this section on the tabernacle:

There is no need to seek symbolical meaning in the colors [of the Tabernacle tents]. They simply represent what was available, though violet is prominent. Besides, the red of the goatskins finds a parallel in the pre-Islamic *quabbah*, which has been described as a small tent of red leather with a dome housing an idol which could be carried on a camels' back. Since black was the normal color for tents, the mention of red of the *quabbah* and the red of the goatskins shows that the tent of red leather is one of the oldest and most characteristic features of ancient Semitic religion (1984:499)

Davies appears to be saying that the tabernacle, since it used the local forms for such purposes, would communicate to everyone in that context that it was the residence of a local deity. In an effort to discourage the kind of allegorical theologizing of the Old Testament popularized by Augustine and later theologians, Davies counters the imposition of meanings from outside of the context on the forms found in the tabernacle.¹² Davies fails to mention the fact that God does not seem to be concerned that the red color used for the tents of pagan idols could also be used for his own tabernacle and that God indeed commanded it (Ex. 26:14, 36:19). Davies' position is that God intentionally copied local religious forms for his use (:505).

Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller take this one step further by stating that since some Old Testament rituals pre-date the Mosaic Law that local pagan forms were actually the core from out of which rituals for the worship of YHWH developed:

Abraham remained within the Canaanite religious system. Despite this system's proclivity to sexual excess in the Baal worship, Abraham recognized a dignity and genuineness about it, and through its

¹² An important discussion on the dangers of allegorical interpretation of Scripture can be found in Steven Ozment's *The Age of Reform 1250-1550*. This type of allegorization remains extremely popular today in popular Christian literature on eschatological topics.

instrumentality he acquired his own religious language, style of worship, and system of moral values. In fact the “God of the Ancestors” appeared to Abraham at Canaanite holy places. Religious practices and even the perception of God’s special presence evolved *within* the geography and politics of a local area. Only by first accepting the worth and authenticity of preexistent religions were biblical people able to purify, challenge, and develop them. Divine inspiration operated under local conditions (1984:18 Original author’s italics).

These two authors state that Moses borrowed heavily from the surrounding cultures and brought forms from them into the practices of the community of the people of God, a methodology continued throughout the history of Israel, “Moses conformed to wilderness needs and migration practices; Solomon adapted Mosaic regulation to new wealth and city customs” (:20). This position of cultural borrowing lacks one important element found in the scripture. The forms that Moses (and later other Israelite leaders and monarchs) used were not chosen on their own initiative. These were not arbitrary decisions by Moses or Solomon to use or not use as they felt led. These were specific commandments to use these forms from God himself. The origin of the form may have been from a culture that was not God honoring but the authority to incorporate that form into the life of the worshipping community was found in none other than God himself.

Another example of this may be found in the ritual of circumcision, which, as listed in Table 3, was not unique to the people of Israel. J.P. Hyatt suggests (in the human-centric perspective of Senior and Stuhlmueller) that the ritual of Hebrew infant circumcision was a combination of evolution of practices from the surrounding cultures as well as from those of the Hebrew people themselves:

It is probable that in the early period of Hebrew history circumcision was performed at the onset of puberty or at marriage. . . The Hebrew word for “father-in-law” means literally “the circumciser.” Among the other peoples who have practiced circumcision, childhood or puberty, rather than infancy, is the general rule (1984:629).

Circumcision is another example of a ritual where an original form found in the local culture was adopted not on the initiative of the people but by the authority of God’s command. But in this case there is clear evidence of something else happening; the ritual

was not to be repeated in the usual way. Though the final external form would appear exactly the same as that on men of other tribes, for the people of God there was a new meaning involved. It is this issue of the communication of new meaning through the use of ancient forms that is the deeper issue critical to this study. In many cases the external activities portrayed through ritual practices of the Israelites outwardly appeared similar to those practiced by the surrounding nations, some more obviously than others. It could be suggested, contrary to Freeman, that all the forms used in the Old Testament were familiar to some degree with those that the Israelites knew.¹³ This provided an entry-level of cohesion with local culture and a bridge of communication to allow the participants to get involved at an initial phase of understanding and from there to move to a deeper level of meaning beyond the merely physical and external.

Deeper Question of Meaning

As fascinating as this debate about the origin of forms may be for symbolic anthropologists and certain biblical scholars the question of the origin of the form in and of itself does not necessarily dictate the meaning held by the practitioners nor does it, in most cases, even impact it.¹⁴ Symbolic anthropology has heavily influenced biblical studies in this area so much that the study of the forms themselves has overshadowed the much more important and more difficult question namely, once God's people received divinely ordained religious ritual (regardless of its origin) and started to put it into practice what did it mean for them? Very few writers attempt to ascertain how God-given Old Testament ritual impacted the lives of the people of that day either in terms of

¹³Everything was familiar but infused with new meaning except for one food source: manna. When it fell it was so unfamiliar that it was named, "What is it?" God commanded that a jar of manna be included among the items held in the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 16:32-33).

¹⁴ Does the fact that the source of the American National Anthem is a British societal tune (*To Anacreon in Heaven*) celebrating love and drinking (Garg 2004) somehow diminish the depth of meaning that it holds for citizens of that country? The same could be asked about Luther's use of a German beer chorus to create *How Firm a Foundation*.

meeting felt-needs, expressing worldview themes, or conveying deeper spiritual messages that stimulated God's intended meanings in the hearts of the receptors.

Archeological evidence indicates that all the surrounding cultures of Old Testament Israel gathered in sacred assemblies, practiced religious feasts, and regularly presented offerings to their various tribal deities. Most practiced some kind of circumcision¹⁵ (Hyatt 1984:629). In these regards Israel was not unique. Some of the forms used by Israel, as has been mentioned, were identical to that of the surrounding cultures be they animistic, polytheistic, henotheistic, or monotheistic. Israel was all of these at various times in her history as well (Kraft 1981:316). In each case, as listed in Table 3, the scripture record shows that the use of all the rituals that God commanded held deeper spiritual meaning that than of the similar forms used by the local neighboring populace. Circumcision, for example, was no longer merely a male puberty rite preparatory to marriage; it was a statement about entrance into the covenant family based not on personal effort but on God's command. The tabernacle was not a place in which the local deity was to be housed and carried since any god that could be carried was an idol¹⁶ (Jer.10:5); God carried his people (Ex. 19:3-6) and he met them on his terms. The role of the Priest was not shamanistic controlling the deity, but one of intercession and representation. The feasts and offerings were not appeasements to a local deity but were symbolic acknowledgements of the acts of God in the life of the community in its history, its present, and its future. Even God's act of communicating the message of covenantal agreement mentioned in Genesis fifteen with Abram as spectator rather than participant radically transformed the internal meaning when only the smoking firepot passed through the halved carcasses signifying that God alone was making the covenant based upon his

¹⁵ "Of the peoples living adjacent to the ancient Hebrews only the Philistines did not practice it [circumcision]; they were contemptuously referred to by the Hebrews as 'the uncircumcised'" (Hyatt 1984:629).

¹⁶ "To suggest that something that we can carry is carrying us is to have an upside-down perspective of life. Such a style of life would be confusing and destructive. Idolatry is just such a confusion" (Koyama 1980:34).

own authority and power. Kenneth Barker describes Abram's sidelined role as only that of beneficiary (1995:28-29).

The source of authority and power in the rituals commanded by God in the Old Testament was always God, not human effort. In relationship with him, the human could participate with the sacred in times of ritual and worship with the mortal placing itself in a position to be changed and to receive what was being offered by the divine.

Why Does God Reject His Own Rituals?

In two problem passages, mentioned earlier, the God of the Old Testament seems to contradict himself in regards to his commanded ritual. Here it appears that God is complaining about the religious acts of piety performed by his people who are merely practicing what he himself commanded them to do. Not only does he complain about these practices, he rejects them completely:

“The multitude of your sacrifices--what are they to me?” says the LORD. I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them” (Isa. 1:11-14 NIV).

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps” (Amos 5:21-23 NIV).

Were the rituals themselves no longer favorable to the God who had ordained them? Were they no longer able to perform the functions they once could? Had they lost their spiritual efficacy? Or, even worse, had God himself changed so that he needed, to follow today's consumerist worldview, something new? God's displeasure with the

Israelites' practice of his commanded assemblies, feasts, and rituals was not due to lack of piety but because the practitioners had departed from the original spiritual purpose of the rite. God knew that inside their hearts these acts had lost his original intended true meaning for them and had become merely superficial religious performances. Contrary to God's intention, the practitioners had made the sum of religion consist purely in external observance with no heart motivation or deep inner meaning for themselves behind it.

God's Goal in Employing Ritual in the Old Testament

Davis' book *Poles Apart: Contextualizing the Gospel in Asia* includes a chapter entitled, "Biblical Precedents for the Concept of Contextualization." He views Old Testament ritual as a way in which God communicated his deepest messages and directed the stimulation of the true meaning he intended of spiritual truth:

God is validating many important cultural forms which we in a monocultural environment may write off as 'pagan', or even 'demonic'. In conclusion, it is probable that none of the festivals or rituals used by Israel appeared 'out of the blue' – '*ex nihilo*', but that God took what was already in the pagan culture and 'trans-formed', it by giving it both *distinctive* outward form and new inner meaning (1998:218 Original author's italics).

It was obvious to some Old Testament writers that something deeper than merely physical religious activities was required in order to please God. The prophet Micah expressed it this way:

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?¹⁷ He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (6:7-8 NIV).

¹⁷ An obvious reference to child-sacrifice.

The divine function behind the use of the God-ordained ritual included both activities on the spiritual level as well as on the earthly human level. All have social implications and none of them are without a linkage to God. As Hiebert, Shaw, and Tite Tiéno have written, the rituals of the Old Testament rather than being prescriptive for all people everywhere are descriptive. They were given by God to serve specific functions in the lives, societies and cultures of the specific people to whom they were originally given:

In the Old Testament, God dealt with a largely oral society by instituting elaborate rituals to teach his people his ways and to give them a method to store his message. By means of the tabernacle, priestly robes, blood sacrifices, washings, taboos, offerings of bread and incense, marchings, shouting, chanting, singing, and a hundred other ways the people expressed their faith in God. Moreover, God instituted all three types of rites to provide a full range of occasions for the people to meet him and reaffirm their loyalty to him: intensification rites (daily and weekly rites in the tabernacle, Lev. 1-7; Sabbath observances, Ex. 31; festivals of Passover, First Fruits, Weeks, Trumpets, and Booths, Lev. 23; and the annual Day of Atonement, Lev. 16; the Sabbatical Year, Lev. 25; and the Year of Jubilee, Lev. 25), transformation rites (life-cycle rites, Lev. 12; ordination of the priests, Lev. 8-9; and dedication of the tabernacle, Num. 7) and crisis rites (rituals associated with leprosy, Lev. 13-14; body discharges, Lev. 15; and making of vows, Lev. 27) (1999:318-319).

The scriptural record indicates that God's goal in commanding ritual incorporating local cultural expressions was part of the transformation process of the worldview of his people. By taking forms of messages that had one external level of meaning and by infusing those forms with a deeper level of truth, God was impressing upon them the fact that they were now his people on the path to becoming closer to him. This process impacted his people more than the practice but the posture brought about through the repetition of religious ritual was to remind them of the direction in which they were now going.

Ritual in the New Testament

This section on the rituals found in the New Testament will continue to use the preceding three-fold categories to summarize the religious rituals of the followers of the God of the New Testament: assemblies, feasts, and offerings. Together all three of these constitute the religious practices of the people of the New Covenant who were no longer merely defined by their ethnicity. The definition of the people of God was thrown completely open by the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. Tables 4 and 5 review the definitions and functions of the assemblies, feasts, and offerings in the New Testament and compare local cultural worldview themes with God's distinctives, along with some of the warnings of the abuse of God's ritual commandments. Old Testament rituals not mentioned in the New Testament are not included in these tables.

TABLE 4

NEW TESTAMENT USE OF RITUALS GOD COMMANDED IN OLD TESTAMENT

Name	Description	Function
Feasts		
Communion	Eating bread and drinking wine, initially part of Passover but eventually became a separate ritual (1 Co. 11:23-25).	Remembrance of Christ's death until he returns (1 Co. 11:26).
Sabbath	After his resurrection, Jesus' followers day of worship gradually replaced Jewish Sabbath. (Mt. 12:1-14; 28:1; Lk. 4:16; Jn. 5:9; Ac. 13:42; Col. 2:15; He. 4:1-11).	Rest, focus on God, gathering together. Worship
Feast of Unleavened Bread, Passover	Celebrated by some Jewish followers of Christ to this day, among Gentiles was replaced with communion. (Mt. 26:17; Mk. 14:12-26; Jn. 2:13; 11:55; 1 Co. 5:7; He. 11:28; Mk. 14:1; Ac. 12:3; 1 Co. 5:6-8).	Remember Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Identity
Feast of Weeks (Pentecost)	The original Jewish festival was changed by the coming of the Holy Spirit at this assembly. (Ac. 2:1-4; 20:16; 1 Co. 16:8).	New Identity
Feast of Tabernacles (Booths)	A week of celebration for the harvest; living in booths, offering sacrifices (Jn. 7:2, 37). Not practiced by non-Jews.	Identity, gratitude
The Day of Atonement	Not practiced by non-Jews. (Rom. 3:24-26; He. 9:7, 10:3, 19-22).	

Hanukkah, Festival of Lights	Seven days of gift giving (Jn. 10:22). Christmas was later officially celebrated around this date.	Commemorates the purification of temple. Identity
Assemblies		
Baptism	Ceremonial immersion in water usually in a public location but occasionally performed privately. Jewish initiation used this practice as did Greek pagan ritual (Mt. 3:4-11, 28:19; Jn. 4:1-2; Ac. 8:36-38)	John's baptism was a public confession; Jesus' baptism a public confession of belief in forgiveness of sin by him (Ac. 2:38, 8:12; 16:29-33).
Circumcision	No longer required for membership after Ac. 15 but remained an issue for years (Gal. 5:1-12). Christians would use term "circumcision of heart" instead.	
Sacred Assembly	Combined with Sabbath worship. Gathering for teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer, gather to share a word from God (Ac. 2:42-47, 5:12; 1 Co. 11:34, 14:26-35). Sometime after the resurrection and after the destruction of the temple this assembly was moved to Sunday.	To encourage each other (He. 10:25). Worship
Tabernacle/Temple Furnishing and Activities	After the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. no longer a central focus or locus for congregating for the followers of Christ.	
Priestly rituals	Christ became the last great high priest for all (He. 7:23-28). Believers are also now the priests of Christ (Rom. 15:16).	
Offerings		
Burnt Offering Grain Offering Fellowship, Sin, and Guilt Offering	Christ has fulfilled all sacrifices so burnt offerings were discontinued by both Jews and Christians after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.	
First fruits	Offering for ministries within the church body and for the needy (Ac. 4:32, 34-35)	Gratitude, community

Development of an Oral Tradition of Ritual

If ritual practice in the days of the patriarchs had seemed elaborate and detailed by the New Testament period they had become even more so. According to D.J. Lane, by the time of Christ the oral "tradition of the elders"¹⁸ (Mt. 15:2; Mk. 7:9), later known as

¹⁸ "It was not until c. A.D. 200 that [the tradition of the elders] was put into writing in the Mishnah" (Barker 1995:1461).

the *Mishnah*, had equal status to the recorded Law of Moses and the Prophets and was used as the standard by which scripture was now understood and practiced (1979:1290). This was a gradual cultural evolution that slowly but surely added layer upon layer of contextual requirements to the original commands.

After the Babylonian captivity, the Jewish rabbis began to make meticulous rules and regulations governing the daily life of the people. These were interpretations and applications of the law of Moses, handed down from generation to generation. In Jesus' day this "tradition of the elders" was in oral form (Barker 1995:1461).

Over time the original rituals and rules in the Pentateuch had been explained, expanded and multiplied to such a degree that the amplified code now had a life of its own which had become a heavy burden upon the practitioners. In fact because of the complicated details it had grown beyond the realistic capacity of anyone to maintain all of the traditions with the proper heart attitude. Roger Grainger describes the Covenant relationship this way:

The Covenant relationship is a gracious relationship, instituted by, and ultimately dependent on God alone. The cultus is never conceived of as a way of influencing Yahweh. The crude notion that Yahwistic sacrifice benefits God in the sense of bribing Him with the flesh of animals implies an understanding of man's relationship with God that runs counter to all Old Testament teaching. God does not need to receive, *but man must give*. The cultus provides men with an opportunity to express their responsiveness to God in a symbolic way, that is, as direct communication, by a concrete expression of feeling. The cultus is thus God's gift to men, and not their own invention – it is His provision for humanity, and in it, He keeps trust with His people. This idea is as much a part of the Old Testament as of the New (1974:101 Original author's italics).

In the process of defining religious ritual practice God's original deep-level meanings had gradually been replaced in many instances with a legalistic allegiance to the practice of the rituals themselves. This was Jesus' complaint with the Pharisees when he told them "You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes

one, you make him [by forcing heavy ritual regulations upon him] twice as much a son of hell as you are” (Mt. 23:15 NLT).¹⁹

Throughout Jesus’ ministry the scriptural account describes the conflict between those who felt a deeply loyalty to upholding the oral tradition and Jesus’ quest to return to God’s original deep level meaning underlying these additional layers of requirements. Jesus soundly condemns as hypocrites those who would revere human tradition over the command of God (Mt. 15:3). He quotes the complaint voiced originally by Isaiah, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain: their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Mk. 7:6-7; Isa. 29:13 NIV). Jesus gave examples of how God’s original meaning had been lost by the practitioners of his day and the word of God nullified by the continued practice of and allegiance to legalistic tradition or to the forms and not God’s intended meanings (Mk. 7:13).

One other point must be noted regarding the role of ritual in Jesus’ ministry. It is very evident from the records that Jesus remained within the Jewish traditional forms but desired to bring them to fulfillment. He did nothing that instituted a new ritual tradition *ex nihilo*. James Dunn would argue that in fact Jesus did nothing sacramental at all:

Perhaps most striking of all is the *complete absence of anything that could be called a sacrament from Jesus’ own ministry*: he practiced no baptism (at least for the bulk of his ministry) and his table-fellowship consisted simply of the common daily meal; his ministry lacked all ritual features, he allowed no cultic hurdles to be erected. If we wish to describe Jesus’ ministry as ‘sacramental’ in a broader sense, then we must note that this broader sacramental significance had *no ritual focus* (1977:171 Original author’s italics).

Following Cultural Forms

In spite of the excess that surrounded them, it is also evident that Jesus as seen in Table 5, and later his followers, did uphold the Jewish ritual traditions of assemblies,

¹⁹ Today’s selective hermeneutics rarely applies this disturbing passage to current missionary practices which bear a very troubling similarity.

feasts, and offerings. After his ascension the scripture tells us that Jesus' followers continued to celebrate the Jewish rituals of Pentecost (Ac. 2:1), and even kept the tradition of the three times of daily prayer (Ac. 3:1), a tradition that began outside of the commands of the Pentateuch.²⁰ Jesus, according to David Bosch, had no intention of founding a new religion nor were his followers to ever disconnect themselves with their surrounding cultural context (2001:50). The majority of Jewish believers continued to feel it mandatory to maintain a ritual religious cleanliness by remaining physically and socially separated from uncircumcised Gentiles (Ac. 10:27-28, 45-46). They even criticized those among them who did not do likewise (Ac. 11:1-3). The first missionary strategy employed by the Jewish believers was to participate in the Sabbath assemblies and wait respectfully after the scripture reading until the synagogue rulers invited them to share a message of encouragement for the people (Ac. 13:13-15, 14:1).

TABLE 5
GOD'S DISTINCTIONS AND NEW TESTAMENT
WORLDVIEW

Name	NT Worldview	God's Distinctions	Warnings
Feasts			
Communion, Lord's Supper	Former Jewish meaning of Passover eventually retranslated as love feast. Misunderstood by outsiders to be cannibalism eating actual human flesh and drinking blood (Richardson 1970:293).	Taking the bread and wine internalizes the relationship with Christ by comparison with eating his body and drinking his blood (Lk. 22:17-20).	Motives weighed before taking or be judged by God, may even die (1 Co.11:27-34). False teachers who abuse feasts will live (2 Pe. 2:13) in blackest darkness forever (Jude 12-13).
Sabbath	Although the OT Law only commanded fasting once a year (on the Day of Atonement) by Jesus' time the Pharisees had begun fasting twice weekly (Lk. 18:12).	Jesus said fasting be done privately. Fasters should continue to wash their faces as normal rather than advertise their piety by looking sorrowful and unkempt (Mt. 6:17).	Jesus warned that public recognition would be only reward for those who fast with inner motivation of outwardly demon-strating personal piety (Mt. 6:18). As in all ritual, the

²⁰ "The three stated times of prayer for later Judaism were midmorning (the third hour, 9:00 A.M.), the time of the evening sacrifice (the ninth hour, 3:00 P.M.) and sunset" (Barker 1995:1651).

	It was legal to make food on the Sabbath, even picking wheat, however Pharisees disagreed (Mk. 2:23-24).	The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mk. 2:27-28).	motivation behind it is for good, not legalistic repetition (Mt. 2:25-26).
Assemblies			
Baptism	Proselyte baptism practiced in Judaism “an act of self-dedication to the God Israel” (Flemington 1984:348).	Deep meaning was a new identity found in unity with Christ in death and resurrection (Co. 2:9-12).	The physical act was less significant than meaning behind symbols (1 Pe. 3:21).
Circumcision	By NT times, naming of child on eighth day accompanied rite (Lk. 1:59; 2:21) (Hyatt 1984:629).	Replaced with baptism by followers of Christ.	
Sacred Assembly	Gathering for teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer (Ac. 2:42-47, 5:12; 1 Co. 11:34)	Continued to be important in life of church.	
Tabernacle/ Temple Construction, Furnishing and Activities	Jewish meaning was the physical dwelling place of God. An annual half-shekel temple tax charged for men over twenty (Ex. 30:11-16; Mt. 17:24-27).	Jesus gave new meaning to temple as the people in whom God dwells (2 Co. 6:16) individually (1 Co. 6:19) and as a corporate entity (Eph. 2:19-21, Rev. 3:12).	Those who destroyed God’s temple would themselves be destroyed (1 Co. 3:16). Foreshadows what will no longer be needed in new heaven (Rev. 21:22).
Priests and priestly rituals	OT forbade high priest from tearing his garment or becoming unkempt (Lev. 21:10). At Jesus’ trial this was broken by high priest who tore his clothes accusing Jesus of blasphemy (Mt. 26:65).	During his lifetime Jesus was loyal to the priestly system (Shepherd 1984:890). Christ became great High Priest, and personified sacrificial role (Mk. 10:45)	Church is priesthood of all believers (1 Pe. 2:5,9).
Offerings			
Burnt Grain Fellowship Sin Guilt	The meaning was found in the ritual as mentioned in the chart on Old Testament above.	No longer required by God as Christ became the ultimate sacrifice (He. 10:10) Christians are called to be living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1).	The blood of lambs and goats was insufficient to pay for the sin of the people but it held off the final penalty (He. 10:5-10)
Offering, tithe	Viewed as a ritual duty and when practiced publicly done as a proclamation of personal piety (Mt.23).	Filial duties come before human tradition (Mt. 15:3-7; Mk. 7:9-13).	Honoring tradition nullifies God’s word (Mk. 7:13). Giving deceptively can be punishable by death (Ac. 5:1-11). Giving for public affirmation is its own reward; the inner spirit of giving more highly valued to God (Mk. 12:41-44).

A Radical Re-Evaluation

Ultimately, however, the entire legal and oral tradition of Jewish religious practice was put in question when God “granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life” (Ac. 11:18 NIV). The role of Jewish ritual in the spiritual and communal life of the new Gentile believers became the major issue of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15. Based upon the indisputable testimonies of the work of God among the Gentiles shared by Paul and Barnabas, and the mutual recognition that keeping all aspects of the ritual law²¹ was a yoke that the Jews themselves were unable to bear, the final decision on all the Jewish religious ritual tradition (including circumcision) was reduced to merely two requirements for Gentile believers: abstain from idolatry and abstain from immorality (Ac. 15:6-29). Some Jewish believers, however, (including Peter who played a significant role in the Jerusalem council) would continue to remain faithful to Jewish ritual tradition in their demonstrations of allegiance to God (Gal. 2:11-21), and this diversity of expression and perspective on cultural worldview values would continue to challenge and redefine the understanding of Christianity to our present day.

The scripture record reports that the decision to lighten the yoke of ritual requirements for the Gentiles was received with gladness and encouragement by the non-Jewish members of the church of Antioch, and later presumably by the Gentile believers of Syria and Cilicia to whom the letter was also addressed (Ac. 15:23, 30-31). In one gracious, spirit-filled communication the entire course of the future movement of Jesus followers was redirected and redefined. Michael Green describes this change:

. . . It was hard for a Roman citizen to demean himself by becoming a second-class citizen of a despised and captive Oriental nation. But this was not necessary in order to become a Christian, where all men were brothers and distinctions of race, sex, education and wealth meant nothing. Furthermore, whilst retaining all the attractions of Judaism, Christianity dispensed with those two great Jewish stumbling-blocks, as they appeared

²¹ In this context the two terms ritual and law describe two aspects of the same thing. The law demanded ritual expression and ritual was mandated by God’s law. In the Jewish religious sense, one did not have a ritual without some basis for it from the law though in some cases this was greatly extenuated.

to the Graeco-Roman world, circumcision and food laws. Food laws the Gentiles thought simply laughable. Circumcision was much worse: it was mutilation—the sort of thing you might expect from wild, exotic sectaries like the devotees of the Cybele cult, and quite definitely non-Roman. The substitution of baptism for circumcision gave Christianity an enormous advantage over Judaism, for baptism seemed in line with the lustrations to which pagans were accustomed (1977:26).

It took time for this gracious message to travel throughout the Roman Empire and to impact the hearts and practices of all followers of Jesus. The lack of unanimity was evident among the Jewish believers some of whom continued to feel both a strong cultural and spiritual obligation to continue in the rites and ways of their heritage. The Apostle Paul, himself formerly a faultless follower of every detail of the law (Phl. 3:4-5), described the continuation of loyalty to the former practices as a sign of weaker faith (Rom. 14:4), as following shadows of the reality of Christ (Co. 2:16-18), and even as an ungodly form of slavish bondage (Gal. 4:8-11). He called for personal transformation from the deepest inner level of worldview values rather than merely an exchange of external forms (Rom. 12:2). To traditionalists who continued to insist that Gentile believers mutilate themselves by submitting to the Jewish initiation rite he argued with emotion, “Why don’t these agitators, obsessive as they are about circumcision, go all the way and castrate themselves!” (Gal. 5:12 *The Message*). Robert Capon describes the church’s response to the gospel at this Greco-Roman period of its expansion in this way:

This was a period of extremely rapid development in the context of a rich secular environment from which the church freely borrowed. Please note again that this borrowing was not necessarily a bad thing—not “secularism,” if you will. It was simply the inevitable working out of the process by which any group, at any time, defines itself: we can think about what we are only in terms of categories and institutions we already have in mind. *Context*—not *just* secular context, of course, but secular context with a vengeance nonetheless—is always in there pitching (1996:48).

Following the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 A.D. the practices of the non-Jewish majority won out and the Jewish forms became significantly reduced among the believers. “Most Christians saw the violent cessation of the sacrificial system and

disruption of the priesthood in the ruins of the temple as proof positive that God had got no further use for it (Green 1977:106-107).

Summary on Biblical Examples of Worldview Expression

God seeks to bring himself, his message, and his activities into the lives of people, “For God does speak—now one way, now another—though man may not perceive it” (Job 33:14 NIV). He uses cultural linkages in his communication with which people can relate such as language, symbols, forms, and rituals. Even through initially shallow or sometimes syncretistic responses he is divinely able, by his providence, to somehow move people further in the direction that he intends. This can be seen in the forms God chose to use in the scripture reaching people from within their own particular worldview. God participates in human culture but is not limited to it. He chooses to use cultural expressions of worldview as a starting point in many cases from which to expand his work of transforming people and in this way mysteriously brings together divinity and humanity, other-worldly transcendence and this-worldly imminence.

Ritual places the participants in a posture where God becomes visible.²² It clarifies what (if anything) is required of both parties and reinforces the original purpose of the agreement—when this is not too elaborately enveloped by additional unnecessary accoutrements. Ritual concretizes ethereal concepts and is a tangible expression of intangible truth. Ritual has implications both vertically and horizontally. God was especially displeased when his rituals were practiced without any attention whatever to the needs of fellow human beings, even fellow practitioners. In this way they became null and void. When meaning was lost or drifted away from God’s original intention the ritual itself was invalid and no longer effective for its primary purpose. It needed to be transformed, or even disposed of completely in order to transform people. This did not

²² Here I am indebted to Dr. Paul Larsen for his definition of worship, “the posture in which God becomes visible.”

indicate a change in God but a change in the way transformation needed to more effectively happen among people. Ritual provides opportunities to assess, confess, and progress. It is a source of hope for the practitioners: hope for the future, for the individual, for the community and for the world. The cultural context supplied the position from which God was able to act.

If God is genuinely the Lord of history, then *context* can just as appropriately be ascribed to divine providence as it can be to the interplay of social, cultural, and economic forces. Indeed, if it's truly *history* that he's Lord of, those "secular" forces will be the very things he'll use, in all their developments and collisions, to tip his hand and express his Word. It's important to add, however, that in both Scripture and the church's life, God the Holy Spirit presides over the historical process *mysteriously*, not ham-fistedly: he lets events take their natural course and still gets the results he wants. . . Freedom in no way precludes providence, and providence has no need to interfere with freedom (Capon 1996:30-31 Original author's italics).

String Tying and a Biblical Understanding of Ritual

Observation of ritual is extremely important in the Isaan worldview that says that when something important happens there must be a ritual to mark it as official. Western Evangelical Protestantism with its meager two major rituals (one done only once in a lifetime and the other added quickly to the end of worship at most monthly) seems irrelevant to the serious consideration of most Isaan people. Genesis corrects all this by weaving the role of God-centered yet not religiously commanded ritual throughout the book. God desires to relate to people and he showed this in his first book in ways considered culturally significant to people in that day and the present. A background to God's use of ritual in the Bible shows Isaan people that he can continue to speak today using meaningful forms now just as much as he did in the past.

Being able to see the work of God in the story of the people he chose in the Old Testament is a reminder of the oral tradition of the Isaan people. Although few elders continue to train the younger generation today there are cultural pointers that show how

God gave a message of hope to Isaan people in the past about one who was to come. String tying ritual links the God of biblical history with the God of Isaan history.

God's use of ritual in the Bible did not merely take local forms and rubber-stamp them. In each case, starting in the Old Testament and moving all the way through to the book of Acts, local rituals were chosen with which people could identify but to each one a deeper meaning was attached. New inner messages were brought out of formerly familiar symbols that broadened the understanding of God's truth for the recipients in Bible times and moved them towards new relationships through the power of God's Holy Spirit. In the same way Isaan string tying ritual when used by the creative power of God today motivates a new expression of his message of God infusing what for many is mere routine into a deeply moving experience of the holy.

CHAPTER 6

HISTORIC CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RITUAL

The previous chapter reviewed the biblical position found in the Old and New Testaments on God's use of cultural ritual as means of communication and effecting a response towards himself in order to develop a biblical hermeneutical framework from which to view Isaan string tying ritual as used by followers of Christ in northeast Thailand. This chapter will briefly present a review of the theological positions on ritual found in historic Christianity, specifically from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the Protestant tradition, the Roman Catholic tradition, and the tradition of the author's denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Church. The historic Christian theological position will be added to the biblical position in order to build a foundation for a biblical theological hermeneutic useful for the interpretation and understanding of the role of string tying ritual for Isaan believers.

Christian theological works on religious ritual written within the last thirty years borrow heavily, as do their secular counterparts, upon symbolic anthropology. They focus primarily upon forms rather than upon what happens inside the practitioner or in his or her community. It would seem that few attempts have been made to discover the deep-level meaning elicited in the recipients through communication occurring during religious ritual. The literature on Christian ritual presents two extremes of Christian theological position on ritual. At one end is mystical sacramentalism, the Orthodox and Catholic position as expressed by Schmemmann (1979, 2000) and Cooke (1968, 1992) respectively. On the other end is actual symbolism, the position held by many Protestant

and Evangelicals such as Luther, Calvin, Grainger (1974), as well as Jewish writers such as Frank Gorman (1990). In general, the historic Christian theological perspective on ritual appears from the literature to be one that can be represented as a spectrum such as in the following diagram.

FIGURE 9
RANGE OF THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON RITUAL

This chapter will focus upon the outward external religious ritual spectrum which ranges from the sacramental to the symbolic as exemplified by positions within the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, Mainline Protestantism, and the Evangelical Covenant Church denomination.

Eastern Orthodox Position

The Eastern Orthodox Church (EOC) is known as a church deeply committed to Christian ritual. The term most frequently used within the EOC to refer to ritual is the term “liturgy” which comes from the two Greek words *leitōs* (public) and *ergon* (work) (Stamoolis 2000:715). The Russian Orthodox priest, Alexander Schmemmann wrote in his book *Church, World, Mission* that liturgy “is still the main—one almost could say the exclusive—“occupation” of the Church” (1979:131). The protection and on-going continuity of that liturgy is of the utmost priority for the Church:

The natural and essential “term of reference” in Orthodoxy is always *tradition*. . . If the forms of the Church’s life and organization change, it is in order precisely to preserve unchanged the “essence” of the Church; for otherwise the Church would cease to be a divine institution

and become a mere product of historical forces and developments (1979:87 Original author's italics).

Protestant and Evangelicals will have difficulty accepting these statements without also understanding the deeper concerns of those like Schmemmann related to the inner life of liturgy. He himself felt deeply concerned that liturgy was becoming separated from "virtually all other aspects of the Church's life" (:131):

One may be deeply attached to the "ancient and colorful rites" of Byzantium or Russia, see in them precious relics of the cherished past, be it liturgical "conservative," and at the same time completely fail to see in them, in the totality of the Church's *leitourgia*, an all-embracing vision of life, a power meant to judge, inform and transform the whole of existence, a "philosophy of life" shaping and challenging all our ideas, attitudes and actions (1979:131).

Schmemmann decries what he describes as the emerging crisis: the liturgy of the church no longer viewed as having any relationship to life beyond the church doors. In an ironic twist on the key terms used to describe ritual anthropologically, he writes:

Liturgy is neither explained nor understood as having anything to do with "life"; as, above all, an *icon* of that new life which is to challenge and renew the "old life" in us and around us. A liturgical pietism fed by sentimental and pseudo-symbolic explanations of liturgical rites results, in fact, in a growing and all-pervading secularism. Having become in the mind of the faithful something "sacred" *per se*, liturgy makes even more "profane" the real life which begins beyond the sacred doors of the temple (1976:132).

In view of this presumed desire to release the sacred influence of God as experience in his people through the sacraments out into the profane and needy world or what EOC theologian James Stamoolis to calls, "the liturgy after the liturgy" (2000:715), it is critical to ask the missiological question, which Schmemmann himself states, "Can a church whose life is centered almost exclusively on the liturgy and the sacraments, whose spirituality is primarily mystical and ascetical, be truly missionary?" (1976:210). Put another way, "What is the church's ritual doing for its practicing community and what effect does it have on the surrounding community and the world?" This question deals with the application of the anthropological concepts of liminality, and the role of ritual in

the church as it relates, as God's agent of transformation, to its various cultural contexts. For Schmemmann the sacrament of the Eucharist is the central centrifugal highlight of EOC liturgy; he views it as the commissioning moment for the body of believers to the world:

The Eucharist is always the End, the sacrament of the *parousia*, and yet it is always the *beginning*, the *starting point*: now mission begins. "We have seen the true light, we have enjoyed life eternal," but this life, this light, are given to us in order to "transform" us into Christ's witnesses to the world. Without this ascension into the Kingdom we would have had nothing to witness to. Now, having once more become "His people and His inheritance," we can do what Christ wants us to do: "You are witnesses of these things" (Lk. 24:48). The Eucharist, transforming "the Church into what it is," transforms it into mission (1976:215 Original author's italics).

The fore-mentioned "mystical and ascetical" nature of the Orthodox church's sacramental practices raises the question, what does the sacrament (or liturgy) really do? How does it operate? Is it not somehow mankind's manipulation of God in a mechanistic or even magical fashion? Schmemmann would view this western (including both Catholic and Protestant) need to systematically categorize and explain the ineffable as a loss of the primary focus of the scripture itself:

It was no accident, of course, that the chief focus of interest in the sacraments for western theology was not their essence and content but rather the conditions and "modi" of their accomplishment and "efficacy." Thus, the interpretation of the eucharist revolves around the question of the method and moment of transformation of the gifts, their conversion into the body and blood of Christ, but with almost no mention of the meaning of this transformation for the Church, for the world, for each of us. As much as it may seem paradoxical, "interest" in the *real presence* of the body and blood of Christ replaces "interest" in Christ (2000:67-68 Original author's italics).

The Orthodox position, then, would focus not on the "what" or "how" questions of sacred ritual but upon the "why." According to Schmemmann, transformation of the gifts occurs during and as a result of the encounter with God through the sacraments, and this transformation is not merely for personal benefit of the individual or the church, but

for the benefit of the world and the ultimate glory of God. Other troubling questions remain avoided and unanswered.

Roman Catholic Position

Catholic theologians prefer to use the term “sacrament” when referring specifically to their particular religious rituals. Ancient Hebrew and early Christian rites were part of the development of Catholic ritual but these only became official church doctrine in the fifteenth century. According to Muir, “in the twelfth century Peter Lombard codified the seven sacraments¹ and promulgated the doctrine that Christian ritual practice should be anchored to them, but that codification only became official church dogma in 1439” (2000:155). Catholic systematic theologian Bernard Cooke defines Christian sacrament as, “specially significant realities that are meant to transform the reality of “the human” by somehow bringing persons into closer contact with the saving action of Jesus Christ” (1992:8). Although the Catholic catechism teaches that “sacraments are sacred signs, instituted by Christ, to give grace” (:56), Cooke dares to posit that, “there is little trace, if any, of such institutions by Jesus, except perhaps for baptism and eucharist. . . It is almost impossible to hold the opinion that the sacramental rituals were foreseen, much less commanded, by Jesus” (:57).

However, apart from the highly diverting question of ritual origin, the central issue of efficacy (what do rituals do?) is the more problematic issue for Cooke. In response to the Protestant repudiation of the sacraments as a means of salvation, or as expressed through Catholic teaching *ex opere operato* he writes:

¹ The seven sacraments are baptism, confirmation, marriage, ordination, extreme unction, penance and communion. Baptism and confirmation provided initiation rites into the church, marriage initiation into a new social identity, ordination set men apart to perform the other six sacraments for the laity (and excluded marriage in the West after the eleventh century, but remained possible in the Orthodox church), extreme unction, prepared the soul for death and was received only once, penance was to be at least annually observed, and communion quite often (Muir 2000:155).

Unfortunately, this Latin phrase often conveyed to popular understanding the (less than accurate) notion that sacraments worked automatically—one had only to receive a sacrament in order to get grace. Catholic teaching always insisted that the attitude and openness of those “receiving sacraments” influenced the extent to which sacraments could give grace. Yet, this acknowledgment of the need for human input during sacramental actions was overshadowed by the idea of sacraments being channels through which people received necessary spiritual power. At times, the popular understanding of sacramental effectiveness came close to the magical. The action of God in sacraments was seen as mysterious and hidden, as completely unexplainable and spiritual—an understanding of “mystery” that was the very reverse of the New Testament understanding where “mystery” means what God has revealed in Jesus as the Christ (1992:6).

This may give some indication of what the ideal biblical viewpoint of sacramentalism should be for Catholic participants but it is unclear as to how either “attitude and openness” are achieved outside of Christ initially. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* from Vatican II further reinforces this dilemma, “Christ’s faithful, when present at this mystery of faith [in sacrament], should not be there as strangers or silent spectators. On the contrary, through a proper appreciation of the rites and prayers they should participate knowingly, devoutly, and actively” (Cooke 1992:8). The question as to suitable ways of personal or corporate participation both internally and externally remains mysteriously unanswered.

Does a Catholic believe that there is special power in the sacraments to transform human beings? Cooke sidesteps the larger question of power (and magic) by redefining the goal of the sacraments (alluded to by “the human” in the definition above) as “helping make human life a more truly human and fulfilling reality” (1992:8). He rephrases the question as, “Do sacraments have any intrinsic power to make either individuals or human society as a whole more truly human?” (:7) and answers affirmatively with the Latin Catholic theological maxim *sacramenta pro populo* (sacraments exist for people) (:8):

Through Jesus as Word and sacrament, God shares with us the creative grace of his own Spirit. God acts sacramentally to transform human life,

to make it a “graced” reality. In this mysterious self-giving God is “uncreated grace”; the resultant transformation of humans as persons “created grace.” Since this transformation comes about sacramentally, we can also call it “sacramental grace” (Cooke 1992:234).

What precisely is the work of sacramental grace in the humanizing process? And what would be the Catholic understanding of the outcome of grace-oriented transformation?

Grace is the transformation of individuals and communities at the deepest levels of their being and meaning; it is also the transformation of their finality, their basic destiny. . . . Grace is not just for the sake of the graced individual or community; it is given so that it can be communicated to others. Christians have no monopoly on the God they worship as Abba. Knowledge of that God is a privilege but it is also a responsibility. The call to evangelization is intrinsic to Christian discipleship (Cooke 1992:237).

Even as they remain loyal to historical forms and sacraments Catholics have had a long history in employing local customs into their liturgy.² It is helpful to review how this has been done in the area of ritual and to consider some of the results of these adaptations. Shaw and Shaw Van Engen give warning in this regard:

We must be mindful of the dangers of inappropriate contextualization that could result in syncretism and heresy (Hiebert et al. 1999:22ff). [Robert J.] Schreiter’s answer was to focus on what has gone before, on theological development elsewhere. He was not willing to let go of tradition. Ecclesiastical creeds and dogma, for him, are at the center. That is why the Roman Catholics have been very good at what they earlier called ‘adaptation’ and more recently ‘inculturation.’ This approach reflects on God’s Word from below by focusing on cultural issues as the basis for biblical understanding—hearing God speak out of the pain and need of people who need liberating. Schreiter suggests that in order to contextualize, a faith community must understand itself within a particular culture from which it interacts with the traditions of the church at large. However, when Schreiter’s model is taken to its logical conclusion, it may produce syncretism as a theology almost purely from below (2003:241).

² Refer to Pope Gregory’s instructions to the first Christian mission in England in 596 A.D. “And since the people are accustomed, when they assemble for sacrifice, to kill many oxen in sacrifice to the devils, it seems reasonable to appoint a festival for the people by way of exchange. The people must learn to slay their cattle not in honour of the devil, but in honour of God” (Thomas 1998:22).

The warning given cannot be solely aimed at the Roman Catholic position. While faith must be expressed in culturally appropriate ways, it remains a mystery as to how ritual operates in God-directed ways in the lives and hearts of Christian participants of all traditions.

Mainline Protestant Position

The parameters of this brief overview of theological positions on ritual cannot adequately explore all the historical and theological reasons related to the abuse of sacramental ritual that motivated and gave birth to the Protestant movement which would eventually be split from the Roman Catholic church. Certainly ritual abuse was evident during the period of the reformation and has been well-documented.³ The various responses to ritual between Lutherans, Calvinists and Anabaptists varied greatly but A.H. Mathias Zahniser summarized the Protestant position on ritual succinctly, “Protestants tend to associate ritual with salvation by works and contrast it with salvation by faith” (1997:73). Charles Spurgeon later blamed his Church of England’s dependence upon ritual for ruining souls, and turning the country to infidelity. According to Brude Heydt, Spurgeon linked economic disparity and poverty with European countries where church ritual most prospered (2004:44). Since the reformation, however, Protestant theologians have done little to resolve the issues revolving around the vacuum remaining when ritual is removed from the life of the believers.

While Judaism and Catholicism in different ways recognized the significance of these “symbol-generating situations” and tried to accommodate to them, Protestantism refused any adjustment to this need for symbols. Protestant disciplers thus left a vacuum that believers filled with magical practices and folk cures inherited from their traditional religion (Zahniser 1997:75).

³ One of the best works on this subject is Ozment’s *The Age of Reform: 1250-1550*.

In spite of the fact that the Old Testament is full of ritual, the works of most Protestant Old Testament theologians regarding ritual ignore meaning and focus almost entirely on an archeological approach that either seeks to link Hebrew practices with that of the surrounding cultures or to somehow prove their uniqueness from the neighboring pagan cultures entirely. In other words, this reverts back to the previously mentioned debate about origin of ritual. Writers such as S. Hooke (1933, 1938), and W. O. E. Oesterley (1933) represent the perspective of Old Testament ritual growing from out of the cultural environment but give little regard to either issues of communication of meaning or the results of ritual individually or corporately. Gorman gives the following reasons for this neglect of a deeper study of OT ritual among Old Testament theologians, and particularly Protestants:

1. Theological studies have been primarily focused on literary and form criticism rather than ritual.
2. Protestants view ritual as, “the law (that) thrusts itself in everywhere; it commands and blocks up the access of heaven; it regulates and sets up limits to the understanding of the divine working on earth. As far as it can, it takes the soul out of religion and spoils morality.”⁴
3. Ritual described in narrative did not fit into literary-criticism, nor was it viewed as theological reflection, even though it was assumed to be Israel’s primary method of theological reflection (1990:7-8).

For Protestants there is a very narrow distinction between symbolism and idolatry. “We need to keep in mind that the symbols we use to represent gospel truths have the potential of replacing those truths” (McElhanon 2000a:923). Ritual itself can become idolized, and whereas this accusation has been raised against the Orthodox and Catholic positions the Protestant position must also be considered. This will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter. At the same time that westerners embrace numerous of their own non-religious cultural symbols uncritically into Christian ritual practices (funerals, weddings, Christenings, etc.) there is often quick reaction among those same westerners (mainly Protestant evangelicals) to critique the forms and symbols observed to

⁴ Spurgeon’s position.

be incorporated in the religious ritual practices of other cultures unfamiliar to our own. The great American cultural critic Samuel Clemens once quipped, “We despise all reverences and all objects of reverence which are outside the pale of our list of sacred things. And yet we are shocked when other people despise and defile the things which are holy to us.” The belief that particular objects inherently convey messages that invoke certain kinds of meaning to people in certain cultural contexts is often viewed by Protestants as “magic, divination, numerology, and astrology” (McElhanon 2000a:923). Just as communication theorists continue to debate the exact location and definition of symbolic meaning, Protestants cannot determine the difference between what is idolatrous and what is merely symbolic.

In comparison to Orthodox and Catholic expressions, Protestants tend to react to, or at least shy away from, the use of sacred ritual outside of basic symbolic representations, particularly in baptism and communion. Within the Protestant camp, however, there is little agreement even upon these two. Are they sacraments, rites, or ordinances? Who has the right to perform them? Who is a proper candidate? What are appropriate and acceptable expressions? Alan Neely remarks, “Disagreement over the rites occurred early in Christian history, and rather than serving as marks of unity, they became issues of intense debate and ultimately grounds for sectarian divisions. Christians have continued to differ” (2000:844). Even as Protestants continue to split and divide there are few who would be moving towards incorporating more than baptism and communion into the liturgical life of their communities. Some of this hesitancy can be attributed to a theological understanding of grace, salvation, and atonement:

Western rationalists, in general, and Protestant Christians, in particular, have exhibited a bias against ritual. Western rationalists such as Lewis Henry Morgan consider rituals archaic and irrational; they discount them as superstition and magic. . . . Popular Western use of the term contrasts ritual with meaning and understanding and considers it merely going through the motions of religion (Zahniser 1997:73).

The distinction between symbolism and magic seems so uncomfortably ambiguous for many Protestant Christians that the entire discussion of the role of ritual in the life of the believers (much less its possible application) is discouraged and sometimes even religiously ignored. “Some disciplers who are familiar with traditional religious contexts may be leery of using symbols and ceremonies for two reasons: They associate myth and ritual with non-Christian cultures, and they know that symbols and rituals are involved in magic” (Zahniser 1997:75). It is the author’s observation that just such a leerness to ritual has been exported and firmly transplanted overseas to Isaan where it exists in the isolated pockets of Christianity surrounded by a society where ritual is the guidepost for life, and where outside of ritual nothing of lasting significance may occur.

Evangelical Covenant Church Position

Coming from Baptist and Presbyterian backgrounds the author and his wife had different ecclesiological backgrounds and were seeking a church where both could participate with full conviction and support, particularly in regards to baptism. It was soon after marriage that we discovered the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) where both adult and infant baptism are accepted and practiced. Donald Frisk, former dean of the ECC denomination’s seminary, describes it thus: “Recognizing that careful scholars have arrived at differing interpretations of the biblical texts, the Covenant refuses to divide the Church on this issue [of baptism]” (1981:135-136).

The ECC follows closely to the traditions and practices of the later Pietistic Protestant, and specifically the Free-church movements of Scandinavia.

The idea of a free church of committed believers—a church not under the control of the State and bound ultimately only to Jesus Christ its Lord —was vigorously promoted by the Anabaptist wing of the Reformation, and later, by elements of the Pietist movement (although with some modification). It is in this free church tradition, especially as shaped by Pietism, that the Evangelical Covenant Church stands, although

other traditions have also contributed significantly to its understanding of its nature and mission (Frisk 1981:128-129).

As a non-creedal church, the ECC affirms, as quoted by Glen Wiberg, “the Bible to be the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct” (1981:296). Uncovering the ECC’s position on ritual required deeper investigation. The 1981 version of *The Covenant Book of Worship* included the following statement on the origin of the sacraments and the ECC position on them, “We join with many other Christians in recognizing two sacraments: Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Through these sacraments we respond in obedience to our Lord, who has ordained them” (Wiberg 1981:83). In describing the function of the sacraments, and what they symbolize for the participants, the following description was given:

The Word of God is central to our worship. That Word comes to us through the Holy Scriptures, proclamation, and sacraments. From the Scriptures the Word of God is read; in the proclamation the Word of God is expounded; in the sacraments the Word of God is enacted. St. Augustine’s definition of a sacrament is helpful: “It is the outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible grace.” The sacraments are rooted in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Here the emphasis is not on what we do, but rather on what God does. The highest and the deepest things of life cannot be spoken; they can only be acted. What the sacraments convey transcends the language of words and can best be expressed in the language of action (Wiberg 1981:83).

But how does the ECC view the work of the sacraments? What do they do and how do they do it? Their historical position, described in the 2003 version of the *Covenant Book of Worship*, stands theologically somewhere between that of the Catholics and of the mainline Protestants:

The Evangelical Covenant Church has historically argued that, while nothing *magical* occurs in the water or through the bread and cup, something real and powerful does.

Early Covenant theologian P.P. Waldenström rejected “every claim that [baptism] is efficacious *ex opere operato*. . . . But he also rejected the idea that “baptism is merely a witness which we make to our acceptance of Christ.” He also denied the Roman Catholic view that the bread and wine are “nothing but signs or reminders of Jesus’ death and

resurrection, which aid us in our devotions.” For Waldenström, neither baptism nor communion were “mere symbols.”

Covenant thinkers have consistently argued that the sacraments are “mysteries.” The Latin word *sacramentum* was used early on to translate the Greek word *mysterion*, “referring broadly to hidden realities or sacred rites.” The worship book of 1964 explains sacraments as “common things used to channel God’s grace” or ordinary things “clothed with transcendent meaning.” How this happens is not explained. That Christ and his grace *are* present in the water, bread, and wine has been more important than explaining *how* they are present (Notehelfer 2003:13 Original author’s italics).

In the 1981 and the 2003 versions of *The Covenant Book of Worship*, orders of worship for the celebration of the two sacraments, baptism and communion, are listed as well as orders of worship for the celebration of several non-sacramental rites of the church which include marriage, witness to the resurrection (funerals), and special services such as healing, confirmation, lamentation, affirmation of baptism, ordination, commissioning, consecration, and installation (Notehelfer 2003:xii-xiii, Wiberg 1981:vi).

Summary

Diversity has been and always will be a hallmark of the church of Jesus Christ. Each new context requires new ways of communicating the unchanging gospel message.

Confessions framed in one context do not remain the same when that context changes. New situations call forth new confessions. A Christianity that ceases to develop new confessional language ceases to confess its faith to the contemporary world (Dunn 1977:59 Original author’s italics).

Throughout history God appears able to handle a huge range of diversity of practices from his chosen people for his purposes. The church has the sacrament of the Mystery of Christ. “And even if it hides that mystery under bushel after bushel of forms that do its witness no favors, it will always have the Gospel to rediscover and proclaim” (Capon 1996:90). How that huge range of diversity is expressed and accepted by the existing Christian community is a matter of careful attention to the scriptures and to cultural values as will be seen in the context of northeast Thailand.

CHAPTER 7

THE RITUAL DANGER ZONE

The previous chapter discussed the historic theological perspectives on ritual ranging in a spectrum from mystical sacramentalism to real symbolism. A study of Christian writing on the topic of religious ritual found in much of the theological and historical works reveals several areas of concern which collectively the author has called the ritual danger zone. The areas of ritual concern expressed here are very real for many Christians because in very subtle ways they often unknowingly lead practitioners to replace allegiances, redefine meanings, and even substitute with counterfeits the truth originally intended by God. Within this danger zone are the seemingly innocuous forms of folk traditions sometimes called local or cultural customs, but also include the root of the most heinous forms of satanic and occult practices. It is within this danger zone that some of the most serious and complicated issues related to the use of religious ritual for Isaan Christians reside, issues that are rarely discussed in the church in Isaan, or when raised tend to result in a quick dismissal of the entire question of the relationship between Christian faith and Isaan culture as too difficult to address.

It is clear from both the biblical and the historical theological perspectives that the role of ritual in the life of the people of God is important for a number of reasons in every cultural context yet this importance must be balanced by reviewing some of the very present dangers which can and do creep into the life of Isaan communities of believers. Several topics could be explored, but this discussion will be limited to the topics raised most often in the research study which are the dangers of dual allegiance, stumbling blocks, magic, counterfeits, and legalism.

Danger of Dual Allegiance

Perhaps the red flag most quickly raised by critics of indigenous ritual used in Christian worship is that of syncretism. Zahniser quotes Schreier's definition of the term as, "a distorted form of Christian faith, skewed by cultural and religious forces in the environment into which Christianity has come" (1997:160). A. Scott Moreau defines syncretism as, "the replacement of dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements" (2000:924). Usually the discussion of syncretism centers around the impact of non-Christian religions or beliefs upon the expressions and practices of Christianity demonstrated by people in distant non-western countries when in reality it should be, as Davis noted that "syncretism of some form has been seen everywhere the church has existed" (1999:924). Davis repudiates the western tendency to point fingers abroad by stating, "The western expression of Christianity is as syncretistic as many other expressions of it in other parts of the world" (:15). He feels that the challenging process of de-syncretizing the church with which earlier believers struggled remains the same for believers today:

The missiological task today is no different from the methodological procedure of this first [Jerusalem] Council; stripping those elements of the message, that only have particular relevance to Western expressions of Christianity on the one hand, while encouraging 'surgery' for those elements of the recipient culture which are incompatible with the essential nature of the Gospel on the other. Throughout the Old Testament, into the New, and up to today there are four supra-cultural, non-negotiable 'I's that cannot be countenanced, namely *Idolatry, Immorality, Injustice and Individualism. These are trans-cultural behavioural distinctives which cannot be negotiated* (:21-22 Original author's italics).

Popular Buddhism, as is true of folk religions of all types including Christianity, combines elements of various religious practices into a contextualized conglomeration made very practical for use by the followers of their own faith in their own location. Buddhist purists denounce syncretism as a distortion of their own particular religious truth. Too few western Christian theologians have seriously reflected upon the dangers of western Christianity's own syncretistic tendencies and distortions.

Problems with Syncretism

Why then, if this is the norm for religions everywhere, is this seen as such a concern for Isaan Christians? It becomes problematic when uncritical syncretism results in “the mixing of different beliefs and practices in ways that distort the truth and power of the gospel” (Hiebert et al. 1999:13). The term “uncritical syncretism” (Davis 1998:15), however suggests the possibility of a critical syncretism. This may be helpful in understanding that there may in fact be a syncretism that is not completely negative.¹ It would be difficult to distinguish, for example, between a critically and carefully syncretized faith from a so-called contextualized expression of the gospel. However, if western Christianity were able to honestly assess its own western tendencies and practices it would not be able to escape the realization that along with non-Christian people everywhere, western Christians also have a strong tendency to syncretize faith in ways that also distorts the truth and power of the gospel. If this is so, syncretism as an analytical measurement of religious purity of practice and belief (or lack thereof) may now be a concept too broad to convey the narrow meaning that it once widely held. Although it still has an essentially negative meaning, we can no longer freely label the practices of others as syncretistic without first carefully reflecting inwardly upon the singularity of purpose (or lack thereof) found in our own religious practices and spiritual heart values.

The dangers of syncretism are real. However, the author declines from using the term syncretism for reasons described previously and chooses to use instead Kraft’s term of dual allegiance as more definitive of the core issue of the dilemma. Again, it should be re-iterated that this is not an issue of us versus them. Followers of Christ north and south, east and west, must struggle with it. In whom (or what) do Christians truly trust?

¹ “Hollenweger uses the term ‘*theologically responsible syncretism*’ thus acknowledging the fact that all expressions of Christianity will in some measure be syncretistic but he calls for distinctive Christian theological parameters” (Davis 1999:17 Original author’s italics).

If it is more than the God of the Bible alone then it is not singular allegiance. It is a mixture and has moved into the realm of idolatry and dual allegiance.

Jaime Bulatao first referred to this issue as “split-level Christianity” (Hiebert 1999:15). Hiebert and others have expanded upon this to describe an excluded middle section in Christianity that fails to address some of the heart-felt needs of people. Dual allegiance is clearly unbiblical. Essentially it is this form of dual-devotion idolatry that is repudiated by God repeatedly throughout the scriptures. Present day readers of the scriptures may wonder what the Israelites failed to understand, and also fail to notice the flaw in their own religious values. What causes this lack of total allegiance when Christians are given so many reminders of God’s trustworthiness again and again? Kraft states that one reason often found in the nonwestern context has been western Christianity’s primary focus on cognitive truth that has left a critical element lacking:

It is probably that the majority of Christians in nonwestern, and many in western contexts, find so little spiritual power in Christianity that they regularly seek help from non-Christian power sources. In most of the world the kind of Christianity they have received has been strong on the intellectual and spiritual distinctives of western evangelical Christianity but virtually powerless in areas such as healing, deliverance, blessing and other areas traditionally covered by pagan shamans and priests. So, failing to find these needs met within Christianity, the Christians, including many pastors and other church leaders have continued to go to traditional power brokers (2005a:38).

For the Isaan context, within Christian ritual knowledge, relationship, and power can come together in a transforming experience that can communicate and transform worldview values in the direction God desires. When these are lacking, there appears to be a tendency to drift back to former sources of ungodly power.

If we ignore traditional religious symbols and ceremonies in our discipling, believers from traditional religious societies may revert to their former practices in times of crisis and affliction. Split-level Christianity results when disciplers do not relate faith in God to intimate life issues. Using symbols and ceremonies to relate faith to life ought to reduce the risk of syncretism (Zahniser 1997:215).

Scriptures on Separation:

One of the major fears of those who see the danger of dual allegiance in using non-Christian ritual expressions such as string tying, is the fear of a lack of clear separation from the old allegiances. Kraft and Hiebert both feel that for first-generation believers the issues of separation from their pagan past is more critical than for succeeding generations

First generation Christians are more likely to be concerned about issues of *separation* and *contrast*. Their attention will most probably be focused on assuring that they are safe from the revenge of the spiritual powers they have renounced (if they have renounced them). Furthermore, they want to discover which customs they are supposed to reject in order to demonstrate their new faith in contrast to the life of those around them who are not converted (Kraft 2005b:2 Original author's italics).

Because first generation converts often feel this call to change most deeply, they are adamant in rejecting specific customs in their past. They are all too aware of the meanings of these old ways, and they want to have nothing more to do with them now that they are Christians (Hiebert 1985:185).

The scriptural text in both the Old and New Testament has much to say on the subject of separation. Here is a selection of three often quoted passages:

The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness (Ezra 9:1-2, also 10:11 NIV).

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat (1 Co. 5:9-11 NIV).

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does

a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said, "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you" (2 Co. 6:14-17; cf Isa. 52:11 NIV).

The separation discussed in these passages operates at the deep inner heart level, not at the external level of behavioral forms and expressions. Through the incarnation God continued to affirm the human cultural expressions of devotion and allegiance. *"The supreme paradox of the Incarnation is that Christ fully identified with culture, and at the same time 'judged' it, in order that it might become a suitable mechanism to usher in the Kingdom of God"* (Davis 1999:19 Original author's italics). There is no indication that previously used ritual forms, when centered upon God as their object and focus, needed to be abandoned or replaced.

Suppose a group of people change their allegiance from fear and placation of local spirit beings to an allegiance to the one true God. Can we assume that their worship styles and ways of expressing spiritual interest will suddenly be null and void? Of course not. The same rituals and meaningful vertical communication they used before their new understanding of the 'transempirical' can now, by and large, be used in worship, although the focus of their allegiance will have changed. What is important is their understanding of God and the inferences they make about the supernatural in their context (Shaw and Van Engen 2003:158).

Moving Beyond Fear

Because something has the potential to be somehow misinterpreted by someone somewhere, should it therefore be avoided?

Fear of syncretism is . . . a very real fear. This fear should not, however, drive us to resist the adaptations and transformations required in cross-cultural discipling. Minimizing distortion of the gospel requires cross-cultural disciplers to grapple with the problem of syncretism (Zahniser 1997:161).

Simply introducing a new methodology or form does not necessarily indicate that the meaning will be clearly understood by the hearers or participants. Questions could be

raised from the western perspective regarding the ability of people to distinguish Santa Claus from Jesus. More importantly is the concern that Christians around the world substitute new external foreign forms for old indigenous forms but internally do not change loyalty or meaning. This is true dual allegiance and all the more dangerous because it lies under the external expression deep in the inner levels of worldview. There is no form that inherently does not have the potential to be misunderstood and used incorrectly, but this should not be an excuse for either making the gospel message less clear or more complicated than is necessary.

Danger of Stumbling Blocks

Another danger of incorporating critically-contextualized cultural forms into ritual used in Isaan Christian worship is that of the potential for them to become stumbling blocks. This concern actually has two sides: stumbling blocks within the Christian community and stumbling blocks for those outside of the Christian community. Within the Christian community the concern is that using such forms would cause a weaker brother or sister to stumble, although the loaded terms “weaker” and “stumble” are rarely unpacked. These terms come from Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, and are often quoted to support the view that old forms with ungodly or ambiguous connotations should not be used if they will cause problems for someone else’s faith. These passages deal directly with the issue of the deep-level meanings that certain rituals and practices held for the practitioners and for the observers in the context of their time. These practices did not always hold the same meanings for everyone and therefore conflict arose. Some believers were able to participate in many rituals and eat all kinds of food and drink without the slightest tinge of conscience whereas others were experiencing serious difficulties both socially and spiritually merely observing what other believers did.

Apparently harsh judgments were being made back and forth between the two sides as to which side was more spiritually mature or more religiously correct (Rom. 14:3).

Stumbling Blocks within the Community of Faith

The issue of stumbling, or offending one another, revolves around the question of the degree of diversity acceptable within the community of faith that will still allow for (much less promote) Christian unity. How much diversity is too much? It appears from scriptural accounts of the church in Corinth that there were two groups (or more) each busy abusing the other(s) around this issue. One side indiscriminately expressed personal freedom found in Christ the other side expressed personal preference also found in relationship to Christ. Based on 1 Corinthians 8:12², it would appear that those who felt free to eat meat sacrificed to idols were encouraging those whose consciences would not allow them to do so to participate in something which they felt was sinful. Paul commands them to back off. Later, in 1 Corinthians 10:23-30, it is evident that the weak of conscience are judging those (including Paul) who partake of all food with thankfulness to God. Paul commands this side also to back off. From the scriptural examples, it is evident that both sides needed to put aside their differences on the non-essentials and to attempt to unite in love. Christian commitment to one another in the midst of diversity can present unique opportunities for learning, spiritual growth, richness in relationship, and provides a unique and extremely powerful witness to the outside community as well. According to John Dunn the unifying focus in the midst of this diversity was Jesus himself, “in the continuity between the earthly Jesus and the exalted Christ which the sacraments embody and express” (1977:172).

² “And you are sinning against Christ when you sin against other Christians by encouraging them to do something they believe is wrong” (1 Co. 8:12 NLT).

Stumbling Blocks outside the Community of Faith

The second way that local ritual used in Christian worship is often viewed as a stumbling block has to do with the concern for witness to outsiders. What will outsiders think if they view so-called followers of Christ participating in rituals and practices that appear no different from their own? Will not outsiders interpret that Isaan Christians who use string tying ritual are really no different from everyone else, and then fail to perceive any distinctiveness that would draw them to Christ? Is this not the heart of the matter regarding the need for a definite separation between Christians and non-Christians?

In this author's experience in Thailand both the Romans and Corinthians passages mentioned above have been incorrectly interpreted to define the "weak" as people both inside and outside the church. This is clearly a misinterpretation of Romans 1:1 and 1 Corinthians 8:11. Christians are to be separate in heart-values and spiritual alliances but not in interactions with those in the world around them. The author has heard missionaries and Thai believers voice the concern this way, "Oh, it is fine to use contextualized forms of ritual within the church because there it is explained and people understand what is going on—but what will people outside the church think if they see (for example) Christians with strings tied on their wrists? Won't they think that the Christians are still afraid of evil spirits and wearing the strings to ward them off?" There are two sides of this concern as well. One is that the Isaan Christian might fear the opinion of other Christians (not present at the ceremony) who might see them (wearing strings for example) and might consider them spiritually immature, and think less of them because of it. In status-conscious Thailand this is an unavoidable reality but one which is also addressed in the passages mentioned above. Fear of what others think was never given as a valid reason for either faith or lack of it. The second side of this concern has to do with those who might be called the seekers, those who are trying to leave behind the spiritual bondage they have experienced in cultural forms and are seeking freedom in Christ. To these individuals the strings would need to be interpreted and explained. It is

impossible to avoid some misunderstandings either by participating in contextualized forms of ritual or by completely replacing them with foreign forms. The question needs to be raised as to which method best communicates to the inner heart values of those who are present.

Jesus Christ himself is the chief stumbling block (1 Pe. 2:4-8). His unique message causes people to stumble and fall, and to discard him as unsuitable. Use of critically-contextualized local forms in ritual, even correctly communicated, does not mean that the offensive message of the gospel of Christ will be watered down or that everyone will like it and respond positively. It may, however, provide a means of setting up a situation where the inner-ear of the heart can be tuned to listen in a unique way whether that message is responded to at that point in time or not.

Ignorance as Stumbling Block

The worst stumbling block that can be placed in the path of a believer, a seeker, or someone violently opposed, is that of the silent use of a local form in Christian worship where nothing is said about it, and interpretation is left entirely up to the individual. This provides nothing but an opportunity to reinforce whatever meaning previously existed in the recipient. It gives no opportunity for Christian communication. Any form, foreign or local in origin, will continually need explanation in order to promote godly meaning. In the Old Testament God commanded that the meaning of ritual be taught to each succeeding generation (Ex 10:2, 12:26-27; Deu. 4:9, 6:7, 11:19, 32:16; Jos. 4:6-7; Joel 1:2-3). Paul gives two principles regarding this. The first is to aim for peace and mutual edification for the sake of the gospel over and above personal convictions (Rom. 14:19, 22; 1 Co. 9:19-22). The second is in Romans 14:5, “each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” Nothing in Christian witness and worship should be done without an understanding of the meaning, direction, and purpose of that which is being done.

Danger of Magic

In anthropological studies, there has long been an association between magic and ritual. Some, such as Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff, would argue that the two are indeed inseparable:

In anthropology the study of ceremony and ritual has been confined largely to consideration of religious and magical procedures. . . . The association between those formalities we call “ritual” and their religious or magical purposes has been so strong that analysis of the two has almost invariably proceeded together (1977:293).

In regards to religious ritual, both Catholics and Protestants have an intolerance for magic. It was the fear of ungodly magic polluting religious practices with power attributed to Satan that brought about the pogroms and other torturings of often innocent victims throughout European church history (Muir 2000:291). Grimes, in his review on research in ritual studies states, “I know of no theory that adequately differentiates and relates magic, healing rites, and meditation rites. These types, like worship, are fraught with we-they assumptions” (1985:165). Since Christians are specifically told to stay away from magic (Isa. 47:12-13, Eze. 13:18-20, Rev. 21:8, 15), the question remains, what separates ritual from magic?

Divine Manipulation

In the religious context, Grimes prefers to use the term “liturgy”, not specifically in the Christian context but in the religious realm in general, which he defines as “any ritual action with an ultimate frame of reference and the doing of which is understood to be of cosmic necessity” (1995:299). To clarify his position between liturgy and magic, he would view the distinction thus, “In liturgy we wait upon power. . . In [liturgy] we actively await what gives itself and what is beyond our command. This is what separates liturgy from magic and what lends it an implicitly meditative and mystical character” (:299). Grimes further clarifies:

Liturgy speaks in an interrogative voice, then a declarative one: “Can this be?” then “This is the case.” By contrast, magic depends on the declarative to reach the imperative: “This is how things work; therefore, let this be the case!” Magic has in common with ceremony a propensity for performative utterances, but the frame of reference of the former is political, while that of the latter is transcendent (1995:299).

Zahniser clarifies how the conception of magic has evolved from around the black cauldron of the witches’ fire to an antiseptic white laboratory in our modern thinking:

Magic, using the term literally, involves the manipulation of powers of one kind or another to achieve specific objectives. The Bible opposes getting good things with magic because doing so renders God unnecessary or irrelevant. Although science, in contrast to magic, pursues knowledge systematically through controlled experimentation, it too can prove a way to pursue benefit automatically without reference to God’s involvement. In this sense, magic and science are similar. Science can become *scientism*—an exaggerated trust in science applied to all areas of life—when it ignores God. *Scientism* deserves the same harsh treatment the Bible gives magic. (1997:76).

One of the major dangers that is rarely discussed is how quickly the church can move into a position of scientism, the lower level of Hiebert’s diagram on the western worldview of reality, without a feeling of spiritual compromise.

Magic and Mystery

What exactly is the danger of magic for the believer? If ritual is powerful in enabling godward transformation why do Isaan believers need to avoid any magical association with it? Hiebert describes the reason thus:

Magic is the opposite of Christianity. In magic humans are in control. In Christianity they are called to submit unconditionally to God and his will. The difference between the two is not in practice. It is in attitude. Magic is formulaic and mechanistic. Christianity is based on worship and relationship (1999:378).

Tom Driver attempted to bridge the vast chasm between meaning and magic, found particularly among Protestants, in his book first published under the title, *The Magic of Ritual*. Driver attempts to defend the word “magic” against its acquired

pejorative connotations of mere superstition and wishful thinking. His prophetic plea is that Protestants break out of their fear of the unknown in ritual, and add to the priestly task of maintaining religious order some of the shaman's role of effecting transformation, found in ritual (1998:71). He summarizes the barriers to this in his quote by Ralph Sockman, "The church has less to fear from the wolfishness of the wolves than from the sheepishness of the sheep" (:xvi). The fear of stepping into the realm of magic has, in Driver's opinion, driven out some much-needed creativity in Christian worship, particularly in the area of ritual that needs both routine repetition and a certain degree of ineffable mystery for it to be effective in the life of the practitioner.

Sacred Ritual Replacements

Kraft describes the process that first generation converts go through in relation to local forms of ritual being replaced by new Christian forms:

These forms are often regarded as sacred, unchangeable, delivered once and for all from heaven to the missionaries and through them to the receiving people. Furthermore, they often feel that these "Christian" forms (including rituals) are *magical*, containing supernatural power made available to those who practice them exactly.

There is an important communication principle involved here. *When cultural (including language) forms that deal with the supernatural are not understood, they will often be perceived as sacred.* People will, therefore, often hold firmly (even fanatically) to these forms as if the *forms* themselves, as opposed to the *meanings* they convey, were God-given. They will assume that these forms are *magical*, containing power in and of themselves. And people are loath to abandon or change them, lest they lose the blessing or power that these forms supposedly contain (2005b:13-14 Original author's italics).

This danger of devotion to ritual will be discussed further below. It is clear, however, that using ritual substitutes is an exacting art that needs prayerful consideration and must be done by insiders who are aware of the invisible inner-meanings that are held by the practitioners. Explanations must be part of every ritual experience in order that the

new message be communicated in a way that focuses on God and his transformation of lives, and not on a supposedly magical manipulation of him.

Danger of Counterfeits

There is a very real danger in moving into the territory of the enemy without understanding what deep-level meanings and power encounters are taking place beneath the visible level of non-Christian religious ritual. Some of these very rituals were originally used by Satan to counterfeit rituals that might otherwise point to God.

Instead of originating things and ideas, Satan and his hosts spend their time counterfeiting and damaging those things that God has brought into existence. They can, however, influence people who are creative and thus, through deceit, gain some ability to originate. Whatever creativity Satan has, therefore, comes from the humans he deceives. . . [Satan] counterfeits spiritual reality by producing religious systems . . . that are quite logical once people believe the basic lie or deceit underlying them. . . We note, however, how predictable it is that our enemy will always in some way direct attention to humans, spirits or created objects under his control as the objects of worship, never to the Creator of all (Kraft 2005a:16-18).

It is to be noted that not only can the ritual themselves be counterfeited but the results can be as well. A false sense of community, transformation, enlightenment, and rebirth are not outside the realm of possibility.³

The Half-Truths

Rather than make ritual something that is completely foreign, Satan uses forms that appeal to the individual, to the community, to the cultural values, and to the senses. There is a thin layer of truth upon which Satan builds to bind and entrap people into ritual routines that focus on individuals, on satanic power, and move away from God. A

³ For a study on Satan's strategies to counterfeit Jesus' claims in the context of popular Buddhism in Thailand refer to the author's article, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists" (DeNeui 2003).

selection of half-truths shared with the author from Isaan believers who have been delivered from spiritual bondage include the following:

1. God is waiting for you to act.
2. God can't act without you.
3. God needs your help.
4. You need spiritual power.

The Lies

Along with half-truths Satan uses outright lies that can become incorporated into the worldview and builds upon them. Some of these include the following:

You can have power as a human to control the divine cosmos.⁴

You do not need God actually, He needs you (as in number three above).

You can become God and I will provide you the way.

Follow the path that everyone is following.

I can take care of you.

If you don't follow you never know what will happen to you. (Read: fear).

The theme of fear is a motivating force in all the previous three dangers discussed (dual allegiance, stumbling blocks, and magic). Certainly Satan wants to build upon the fears of his dependents and keep them looking to him for a sense of security which is promised at an ever-increasing price:

It requires considerable motivation for people to abandon what they know from their own understanding of the 'transempirical' and come to trust a new message that, if followed, may draw them into uncharted spiritual territory. The devil is very good at playing on natural, human-centered fears that would keep people from changing their allegiance (Shaw and Van Engen 2003:163).

⁴ This is the oldest lie of all found in Gen. 3:5. It has been in active use worldwide ever since.

The Price of Power

Isaan believers formerly involved with spiritism rituals have shared with the author that any former spiritual power or ability they received only came at great personal cost.⁵ This was understood to be exacted both in the present life and in the life to come. “Satan is an excellent contextualizer. He does an expert job at meeting people at the point of their felt needs in culturally appropriate ways. The fact that he often does so through deceit is not usually recognized” (Kraft 2005a:15). Isaan believers have explained that the price for their personal power included bondage—both present and future, loss of freedom, and the complete bankrupting of self. Christ-centered ritual must be carefully explained when presented in order to present the biblical message of truth and freedom of the God of the scriptures to Isaan people today.

Danger of Legalism

In all four dangers previously mentioned (dual allegiance, stumbling blocks, magic, and counterfeit), fear is a very real motivating factor to drive people towards the practices of dangerous ungodly ritual. In this fifth danger fear is not usually mentioned but indeed should be. This danger is not about drifting from the practices of God in ritual but rather clinging so close to the practices as to drift away from the purposes of God in ritual. It is the self-righteous view that the religious practice of ritual now makes one inherently more deserving of God’s approval and that of other people. It is the essence of every religious effort. “The essence of any religion is its promise that, if it is followed diligently, God will smile on its practitioners” (Capon 1996:4). This follows the Isaan worldview belief in the law of karma that says that doing good will insure getting good and doing bad will only result in getting bad in return.

⁵ Some of these testimonies are written in the author’s article “Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists” in *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World* edited by Lim and Spaulding (2003).

During the times of Isaiah and Amos, it was not the rituals themselves that displeased God but the loss of inner meaning and purpose associated with the practices in the hearts and worldview of the practitioners.

Prophetic displeasure with the feasts as observed by the Jews (Isa. 1:13-20) was not because they were in themselves on a lower plane of piety, but because many Israelites had departed from their spiritual purpose. They made the sum of religion consist in eternal observance, which was never the divine intent for the feasts from the time of their promulgation (Na. 1:15). In the New Testament this was well understood by our Lord and devout believers who diligently and spiritually observed the prescribed feasts of the old economy (Lk. 2:41, 22:8; Jn. 4:45, 5:1, 7:2, 11, 12: 20) (Freeman 1979:420).

Misplaced Allegiance to Ritual in the Old Testament

When allegiance to religious practices takes priority over God's intentions the end result moves not towards God but towards self. This was the problem with the attitude of Israel's most religious strata who felt themselves highly favored and beyond God's reproach because they had the temple and were impeccably faithful to its ritual practices.

Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless (Jer. 7:2-8 NIV).

Because devotion to the outward actions had blinded the people of Judah to the reality of the people around them, God judged their actions not as pleasing to him but as worthless. This indicates one of the basic principles about the use of ritual in the Bible, God will not ignore injustice that can and should be addressed by his people simply

because they are performing ritual acts of worship to him instead. God's position towards ritual rebukes the inevitability of the law of karma.

Misplaced Allegiance to Ritual in the New Testament

In the New Testament Christ also addressed the same issue of the attitude of the heart with the religious elite of his day, the Scribes and Pharisees. Their external actions were not demonstrating an inner motivation or heart attitude that was directed towards God and this made their ritual activities null and void:

.Jesus Himself denounced the Scribes and Pharisees for 'setting aside the commands of God, in order to observe your own traditions'. Jesus quotes in the same passage from Isaiah 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. . . 'Thus you nullify the word of God by your traditions that you have handed down' (Mk. 7:6-9). . .

It must be pointed out: Jesus was addressing the inner attitudes of his hearers, rather than their outward actions. . . Jesus did NOT state that the ceremony should be given up - instead it should be reinvested with its true original 'inner meaning.' Jesus would not have objected to the ceremonial washing, if at the same time, the people's hearts had been close to Him. Thus any ritual or ceremony is in itself null and void, if it is divorced from inner meaning. Even Christian rituals are 'an outward sign of an inward spiritual grace'. (Davis 1999:138-139).

The danger of misplaced allegiance to religious ritual is a concern for Christians of all backgrounds and cultures. The subtle influence of self-righteousness at the expense of heart-righteousness with God and with others is difficult to detect until it is almost too late. The words of warning by Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama apply as much to the devotion to religious ritual as they do the institutions in which they are used:

The deceptive theology characterized by 'this is the temple of the Lord' can be at work in diversified forms: 'This is what the Pope says', 'This is what the Church Council decides', 'This is what the theological faculty thinks', 'This is what the House of Bishops decrees', 'This is what the mission board says,' 'This is what the denominational headquarters agreed', and so on –*therefore* we are safe! . . . 'Live the life of the covenant people! Emancipate yourself from the illusion of institutional salvation secured by institutional religious life!'

. . . We are not called to serve institutions as our end. That would be idolatry. Institutions are only *humble means* by which we may participate in God's work in history. We are called to serve God and humanity, sometimes upholding and sometimes demolishing institutions, sometimes within and sometimes without institutions. It belongs to the very life of 'freedom of a Christian' to discern the positive Christian value in any given institution, and to protest, as Jeremiah did, whenever he finds the deceptive theology of institutional 'therefore-we-are-safe' (1974:189-190 Original author's italics).

A final statement of warning regarding legalism comes from the history of the early church itself. The struggles of the earliest Jewish believers, in spite of Acts fifteen, to continue to hold on to their ritual tradition divided the church and eventually led to their own irrelevance in the global perspective. In his important work on the topic of diversity in the Bible, James Dunn theorizes about the decline of Jewish Christianity:

Jewish Christianity was counted unacceptable when it *failed to develop*, when it hardened the inchoate expressions of the earliest days into a system, when it lost the flexibility and openness to a new revelation which questions of law and mission demanded in a developing situation, when it became rigid and exclusive. *One of the earliest heresies was conservatism!* In short, the failure of heretical Jewish Christianity was that it neither held to the unity (the exaltation of Jesus showing Jesus to be the unique expression of God) nor allowed for the diversity (of developing Christianity) (1977:266 Original author's italics).

Misplaced Allegiance to Ritual Today

Clearly the mistakes of the past are lessons for those of us today. The danger of such a study is in thinking that we are exempt from such failings. The reality is that many Christian today can become as attached to their liturgical forms, rituals, as was any nomadic Semite. The false belief that one particular Christian group is the sole possessor of the chosen way of ritual interaction with God should be a danger sign of pride and invincibility that can invoke the same warnings and consequences today as it did in the days of Jeremiah.

CHAPTER 8

A BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC FOR RITUAL

What is the starting point for putting together a biblical hermeneutic for ritual? The biblical starting point must be with God himself, the Creator of all things, and the Original Communicator. Rather than looking at the various pieces of the puzzle and attempting to determine where they fit in the larger scheme of things, there is a need to go to the one who made the puzzle and learn as much as possible of him. Anthropology analyses external behavior to determine social meaning, ritual study looks at the practices to determine themes, and theology perceives symbols from the forms of ritual and filters them through Christian tradition to find spiritual meaning. But, based upon the study of ritual in the Bible and in historic Christian tradition in the previous three chapters, what can be learned about God himself that will inform a biblical hermeneutic for this topic of ritual as a means of communication of and response to God's message?

Ritual Expresses God's Heart for the World

God initiated contact with humanity. God's desire has been to pursue his created beings long before they had any desire for him (Gen. 3:9, Eze. 16:4-14; Rom. 5:6-8). God continues to pursue people, including those who do and those who do not understand themselves to be his chosen ones, even when they both reject him (Mt. 23:37). Out of an infinite multitude of possible methodologies at his disposal, God chose to pursue people in ways that they could easily understand. He began by using human language and cultural forms that represented worldview values. God did not require that people learn his language or move to his level before interacting with them. God revealed his heart

for the people of the world by first establishing sacred places and ritual means (selected from a familiar cultural milieu) by which his relationship with them could regularly occur. God did not require the world to come to him; he came to the world where it lived. Through the ritual commandments and practices he literally pitched his tent among us (Ex. 25:8; Jn. 1:14).

God did not reveal himself in ritual interaction for his own personal benefit or need (Ps. 50:8, 13). Nor did he do so merely for the betterment of his chosen people. His desire from the time he first called Abram was that his people share his heart for the world and be a channel of blessing to others. His rituals, unlike that of other territorial deities, were not solely for the benefit of a particular race, or the protection of a particular piece of property, nor were they a means of drawing down curses upon the enemies of his people. Promises and protections were part of the covenant he made with his people but they were, in the words of Don Richardson, merely the top line of God's covenant (n.d.:3-4). The real bottom line of the covenant was so that the entire world would be blessed through them and this blessing often took the form of ritual expression (Gen. 12:1-4).

God revealed his heart for the world through the warnings given against the abuse of his commanded rituals as well. If God's ritual was performed in a manner that was self-seeking it became null and void for the practitioner; it became unacceptable to the very God who commanded it initially (Is. 1:11-14; Amos 5:21-23). In the New Testament the Great Commission of Christ to go and in the process perform certain rituals (Mt. 28:19) was not made for personal promotion of the church but to extend the blessing of God. Christian witness is not merely to proclaim but it is to be people-oriented. In the words of Koyama, it is not one-way teaching but two-way listening which Christ himself modeled.

'Christ-like going' is not 'one-way-traffic.' It is intensely two-ways. And in this two-way-traffic situation with his people, he gave up his right of

way! . . . I understand that ‘to be human’ means to live in two-way traffic and to ‘to be divine’ means to give up one’s right-of-way for the sake of the other in this two-way traffic (1980:53).

Ritual is a motivation for mission when it is understood to be the basis of expressing the heart of God to others. Christ’s command to regularly practice a ritual remembrance of his death and resurrection is to serve as a reminder for his people to re-evaluate themselves and their participation in his worldwide mission. In the words of Schmemmann, “the Eucharist is always the End, the sacrament of the *parousia*, and yet it is always the *beginning*, the *starting point*: now mission begins. “We have seen the true light, we have enjoyed life eternal,” but this life, this light, are given to us in order to “transform” us into Christ’s witnesses in this world. . . The Eucharist, transforming “the Church into what it is,” transforms it into mission” (1979:215 Original author’s italics).

Ritual Indicates God’s Identification with the World

To what end has Old Testament theological study pursued and continues to pursue the question of the origin of biblical ritual? Is there a desire, on the part of those who would seek a separate supernatural source of origin for ritual, to defend the transcendence of the Creator and keep him aloft, incorruptible, and distant? Is there a fear that if human cultural origin were discovered as contributing to biblical commanded ritual forms that this would somehow defile God’s divinity? Or, on the other hand, does the fact that biblical ritual draws its roots from human culture perhaps indicate that the entire concept of God is merely a manmade socio-cultural construct to control human behavior and perpetuate powerful political institutions including the religious?¹

For those who would either seek to keep God distant or dissolve his divinity, a rediscovery of the role of ritual as found in scripture seems to indicate that God is not greatly concerned with issues of origin of his rituals. He doesn’t seem to care. In fact, as

¹ David Kertzer notes, “The condescending view that ritual is something that can pull the wool over the eyes of the credulous, while serving the well-informed as a tool for exploiting the ill-educated, has been around for a long time (1988:178).

the Originator himself it appears to be entirely within his right and realm to appropriate any form he chooses. To draw any another conclusion would conflict with a theology of a divinely designed creation. However, even though it was well within his right to do so, God did not deliberately demand obedience to unfamiliar forms in order to establish a human relationship with him. God knows what people need but he does not force them to know it. Instead, he established ritual opportunities in which relationship could occur, freely choosing from a host of cultural expressions to do so.

Also, instead of exerting his strong right arm as Creator to win the world by domination to a particular ritual form he chose instead, after an initial restart with Noah, to lay down his weapon symbolically as a bow in the sky and win the world another way—through free choice. By coming as a human God set aside his destructive powers and instead chose to use what Capon refers to as “left-handed power” in interacting with his creation.

There is one effect that cannot be the result of a direct application of force, and that is *the maintenance of relationship between free persons*. . .

The power of God that saves the world was revealed as left-handed power; and therefore any power that the church may use in its God-given role as the sacrament of Jesus must also be left-handed (1996:62-63 Original author’s italics).

God creates opportunities in ritual to promote receptivity and free relationship but he does not force them (Ex. 25:22). This is the model that he has set for his church in mission as well.

Ritual reveals the left-handed gentle power of God. Taking the most ordinary of life’s elements, God infused them with deeper meaning that speak to the heart through many often overlooked systems of communication, more than to the head. In ritual, time and space become holy; through ritual, water, wine, and bread become a means to understanding and encountering the sacred. In the midst of these rituals the human participants are amazed by the most transforming feature of all: God is here. The immanence of God represented in God-centered ritual places his human participants in a

position to encounter him and even more miraculously understand that God himself eagerly seeks to identify with them in those moments, even as he does at all times.

God's left-handed power is demonstrated in the way he chose to identify with humankind through participation in local ritual. Christ's life demonstrated this from beginning to end. Before he was able to verbalize words the infant Christ proclaimed his identification with God's people by undergoing a ritual that marked him physically for life (Lk. 2:21). As an adult he desired to publicly identify himself with the sinful world through a water ritual that fulfilled all righteousness (Mt. 3:15; 2 Co. 5:21). During his life he redefined, restored, and transformed many rituals, religious, social, cultural, and political, with God-centered deeper meanings (Sabbath laws, offering, fasting, Passover, Tax payment and many others). At the end of his life he endured the degrading ritual humiliation performed upon all those whom the political powers of the day desired to demonstrate its dominance and condemnation. The scripture indicates that Christ unashamedly proclaims those in need of salvation as his brothers and sisters (Heb. 2:10-11). Together with them, and all people, he celebrates, in a ritual of worship, the wonders of the work of God (Heb. 2:12).

It appears from the scriptural examples that God is not hesitant to change his commanded ritual practices when it is his purpose to do so. He is not concerned about the preservation of tradition for tradition's sake. God's use of ritual, even though it often focused on remembrance in both the Old and New Testaments, evokes a striking lack of interest in nostalgia or cultural preservation. God desires every new generation to externally repeat through ritual expression the core issues of meaning found in a God-centered worldview (Jos. 4:4-7). His interest continues to be people's relationship with himself and is not limited by cultural forms, ethnicity, or worldview values, although he can and does use them all. Ritual appears to be a means of mission to accomplish the purposes of God.

Ritual Demonstrates God's Purposes in the World

The ritual that God commanded is focused not on the human giver's efforts but on God who is the recipient. In ritual, the human participants can see what God is doing in the world beginning within themselves and from there reaching out to others. Because it is an interaction with the sacred, the liminal moment of sacred ritual defines what is different; it describes the holy and the human relationship experientially. It is as Koyama describes "depth-holy, which is always 'something more', is focusing-holy" directing the worshipper towards God (1980:23-24).

God honors heart-felt ritual but he himself is not changed by it, nor is he limited to it, or controlled by it in anyway (Acts 6:14). To God neither the quantity (Isa. 40:16), the extravagance (Jer. 6:20), the splendor, or the pomp of a ritual is as significant as the attitude of the giver. He does not respond more to larger offerings or more elaborate ritual than to that of the poorest practitioner. God viewed Solomon's fantastic offerings at the Temple dedication in his day (1 Kg. 9) as no more significant than that of the widow's last mite that was worth more than that of all the offerings of the wealthy in her day who gave out of their excess (Mk. 12:41-44).

Ultimately God's purpose as revealed in the scripture and often enacted in ritual is transformation. Ritual heightens the receptivity of many of the epistemological senses so that there are opportunities for transformation to occur during the performance of a sacred ritual. "With their condensed meanings, rituals have great power to move people and to motivate them to renew their ultimate allegiances. They also have the power to transform humans totally in a very short time" (Hiebert et al. 1999:291). In the words of Moore and Myerhoff, "Transformation is invited but not commanded by ritual performances" (1977:13). It may be anticipated but cannot be predicated. As Cooke explains, Christ demonstrated God's desire for personal transformation throughout his lifetime of ministry in the way he used ritual:

Probably the most basic symbolism that runs through the Christian sacraments is that of transformation. In his public life, in the first of the signs he worked in preparation for the understanding of the sacraments, Christ at Cana transformed the water into wine. At the high point of sacramental life, at the consecration of the Mass, the symbolism is still that of transformation (1968:249).

God desires to reach in deeper to effect more profound personal change does not demand that people remove themselves from their socio-cultural context (Mt. 5:13-16; 1 Co. 5:9-11; 1 Jn. 4:7). He wants to change people who can be agents to help change other people (2 Co. 5:15-20). Transformation is accomplished in God's timing neither *ex nihilo* nor by complete accommodation to existing cultural worldview values. It is a process of re-creation that demonstrates what conversion looks like both in event and in process:

Conversion implies the use of existing structures, the "turning" of those structures to new directions, the application of new material and standards to a system of thought and conduct already in place and functioning. It is not about substitution, the replacement of something old by something new, but about transformation, the turning of the already existing to new account (Walls 1996:28).

Grace is God's means of transformation. Through ritual God's grace can be experienced repeatedly. God's embracing use of cultural ritual indicates that there is freedom to allow his influence and power to be expressed in and through ways that may not be considered appropriate by the religious faithful as can be seen in the Pharisees' attitude towards Christ's interpretation of ritual in Matthew 15:7 and Mark 7:5.

The dynamic of Christianity, however, is not in the sacredness of cultural forms—even those that God once used. The Christian dynamic is in the venturesomeness of participating with God in the transformation of contemporary cultural forms to serve more adequately as a vehicle for God's interactions with human beings (Kraft 1981:173).

This act of venturesomeness in God's mission indicates that ritual is a means for mission, not for its own preservation, but for transforming communication that reaches into every part of the whole person.

Ritual Reveals God's Relationship with the World

God's deepest intention for ritual is found in himself alone. He will not allow manipulation (magic); he will not tolerate substitution (idolatry); he will not stand for dual allegiances even if religiously performed by faithful followers in his name with his own required rituals. God cannot be fooled by religion.²

Above all, God desires joyful obedience more than religious piety (Ps. 40:6-8, 1 Sa. 15:22-23, Jer. 17:21-27). Righteous offerings please God because they come from righteous hearts; mere ritual does not impress him (Ps. 51:16-19). Any ritual given out of obligation might just as well be consumed by the one making the offering or not done at all; it is its own reward (Jer. 7:21-23, Mal. 1:13-14, Mt. 6:2-4). Jesus said that obeying the greatest commandment is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mk. 12:33). God will judge injustice and immorality over ritual religious practice (Hos. 6:6). Offerings do not manipulate God in any way but they prepare the attitudes of the giver's heart to be in a responsive frame for what God intends (Joel 2:12-14). The true worshipper honors and values God by giving him those things that are held most dear (1 Sa. 24:18-25; Ps. 50:22-23). On the other hand, the worshipper can dishonor God, nullify ritual, and draw down the curse of God by merely going through the motions or bringing second-rate gifts to him (Mal. 1:7-14). God remains a holy mystery that desires to be revealed. Though ritual forms may change, God does not change (Num. 23:19; 1 Sa. 15:29; Mal. 3:6; Jas. 1:17).

Applications for Isaan String Tying Ritual

To summarize, God commands ritual as one means, among many, that he uses to express his heart, identify with people, demonstrate his purposes, and reveal himself. String tying ritual was nowhere commanded directly by God as were his other rituals, however, according to scriptural records, God accepts the offerings of the joyful and

² Refer to Capon quote under "The Danger of Legalism" in the previous chapter.

willing heart in whatever forms or amounts they may come (Isa. 42:3; 2 Co. 9:7-11). Cultural or religious origin and preservation of forms are of little concern to God; his heart is for people and finding ways to draw them to himself. A ritual that is focused upon him gives him pleasure. Legalistic attitudes in religious ritual of any kind are unacceptable to him and are idolatrous from his perspective. String tying ritual must not be done assuming it will prove the practitioner's piety nor will it win God's approval. He will not be manipulated by ritual and condemns such an attitude by his followers when coming to him in worship using forms that are Christian or of other origin. At times ritual allows new revelations of himself to occur but it cannot demand them. String tying ritual may make God real to Isaan people in new ways but these will never be in conflict with former revelations or the scriptural record and in this way they cannot accommodate idolatry or dual allegiances. Ritual is a means not an end that accommodates the human need for relationship, order, and transformation. String tying ritual when performed with a focus upon the source of power and life in Jesus can do this as well as lead participants farther into God's truth and his other deeper and higher purposes.

PART III

**FIELD RESEARCH AMONG ISAAN CHRISTIANS
REGARDING STRING TYING RITUAL**

CHAPTER 9

**INTERVIEW DATA FROM ISAAN CHRISTIANS ON
STRING TYING RITUAL**

Interview data about string tying ritual was collected from two major sources: practitioners and nonpractitioners. Practitioners included not only Christians but also ordinary Isaan who were not yet followers of Christ some of whom were not yet even interested in a relationship with Jesus Christ but who were familiar with string tying ritual. Outside of the Christian community the author was unable to find an adult Isaan who had grown up in the local popular Buddhist context of Isaan who had not participated in or was not familiar with string tying ritual therefore precluding the category of a non-Christian non-practitioner. Only within the Christian community could nonpractitioners of string tying ritual in Isaan be found (as could be predicted by Protestant teachings from the past towards Isaan culture) and this became the second group, the nonpractitioners.¹

The author conducted twenty-nine interviews in the local language ranging in time from fifteen minutes to two hours with Isaan people of all ages and stations in life. Nineteen of these were life story interviews that averaged about one hour. The methodology of the life story interview was chosen because it seemed to follow the natural conversation among Isaan people in matters of personal importance. This approach seemed to follow the experience of Herbert Phillips who found when interviewing central Thai villagers that they tended to tell their stories with an almost

¹ Some Thai people raised in other regions beside Isaan and then moving to Isaan as adults may have never participated in STR and were included in the survey population but all Thai people have at least seen someone wearing strings and have some opinion about what the strings represent.

poignant seriousness” (1965:53). As fellow Christians the life story interview experience became more than a fact-finding mission. For some there was, as in the case with Phillips, an unburdening that came from taking personal interest in the individual and in several cases tears were released (:53). Reflecting upon the work of God in the life of an Isaan believer became a powerful moment of worship for the author as well.

The format used for the life story interviews followed a modified life-story format using the questions listed in Appendix A as guidelines that. A list of all interviews conducted is found in Appendix E. Upon completing over one dozen interviews with practitioners of CSTR the author began to seek out nonpractitioners among the Isaan Christian community in order to hear their stories, listen to their concerns, and gain from their perspectives. Along with participant observations and interviews, data was also collected from conversations conducted with Isaan people whenever they were encountered in travels throughout Thailand during the research period. These are listed in Appendix F.

In order to respect the privacy of those interviewed the author has used the abbreviation “IN” for “interviewee” with a number in place of personal names. For casual conversations the author has used the abbreviation “CC” for “casual conversation” also with a number in the same way.

Discovering Meaning in String Tying Ritual

Reviewing the interviews, tapes, conversations, and notes with practitioners of string tying ritual, both Christians and non-Christians, the author discovered several themes of stated meaning for Isaan string tying ritual (not specifically Christian in emphasis) running consistently throughout including blessing, welcome and honor, Isaan identity, sense of place, relationship, and communication of message and assumptions of meaning. A summary of each of these discovered themes is presented below.

Giving a Blessing

In every case when asked the meaning of string tying ritual the person being interviewed both Christian and non-Christian would say the meaning of the string tying was to give a blessing. The source of the blessing for non-Christians could not be identified any more specifically than *sing saksit* (sacred powers) (IN3, 5, 7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 16, 22). In no instance did string tying ritual have anything to do with appeasing a spirit or connecting with an evil source of any kind, although some Isaan believers did mention how other Christians and/or missionaries had thought it had evil connections (IN26, 27) or taught them to understand the ceremony in that way (IN29). Tongpan shared that many Thai Christians are simply afraid of string tying ritual, “They don’t think it is right. 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” (2001:41). The author can merely theorize that perhaps this fear is a misinterpretation by early missionaries of the concept of *khwan* or life essence to mean a controlling separate spiritual force which had to be appeased in a idolatrous way. The topic of *khwan* came up during an interview with IN19, a Buddhist Isaan professor who travels abroad frequently. Noticing that she was wearing several strings on both wrists the author asked her the meaning:

According to the belief you have your *khwan*, your spirit, with you in everything so when you are changing a stage of life your *khwan* will be very frightened. It might go away so you need to tie your *khwan* to your body so that you will maintain your mental and physical health. That is the original meaning. But for me, I also take this [the tied strings] as a symbol of love and affection and relationship between people. When people tie this to you they give you some of those things. I feel it is necessary. For example when I go to the US and I have the string I think, “Ah! I am okay.” I can think of people who tied the string for me but when the string is gone I think, “Oh no! I have to find someone to tie the string for me” (2004).

A clear definition of *khwan* was difficult for nearly everyone. Some people described it as the soul yet when pressed to describe the difference between absence of

soul at death and absence of *khwan* few were able to distinguish a difference (IN17). This is reflective, perhaps, of what would appear to be a widespread lack of understanding of elite Buddhist cosmology among the general Isaan population. Some described *khwan* as their emotions that could come and go (IN25). Others simply connected it with their personality (IN10). The author would conclude that *khwan* continues to be an important concept within the Isaan worldview but the actual term is used less and less frequently and talked about very little within Isaan society and almost never among Isaan Christians.

In every case, the result of receiving the blessing through string tying was for the encouragement of the individual. Sometimes, as in the case of IN2, it was transformational so that he became committed to lifetime service of Christ at a moment of discouragement. Many even remember the specific wording of the blessings given to them especially at their weddings. Several, as shared by IN13, IN4, IN8, and IN22 have witnessed exorcisms in the name of Christ through the blessing of this ceremony.

Welcome and Honor

For some older Isaan people it was important to always have string tying whenever welcoming a guest. According to IN17, age 78, any visitors to him must be tied (although this interviewer was not). The grandmother of IN22 also insisted on string tying each time her relatives came to visit her even if it had only been a week or so since their last visit. According to IN14, in the Lao PDR there must be string tying whenever a guest comes to visit. According to her, if the family is welcoming a relative or friend the family does it themselves with normal threads and nothing about the ceremony is considered religiously sacred. IN4 mentioned one elderly church member who welcomed everyone who visited him by stripping strands from the edge of his *pakama* cloth and used these threads to tie onto the wrists of his visitors. This would appear to be much

closer to the origin of the ceremony which began, so it has been theorized by Anuman, with what was readily at hand (quote). In the past Isaan people made cotton thread for weaving so it was a common household item (Banpote 1986:63).

CC3 shared how his group working with Thai university students found string tying ritual to be helpful in giving honor and helped resolve a very delicate situation:

In our group we have a program where (western) young people come for a two to three year period to learn Thai and serve in the churches. This has been very popular and successful with the Thai youth but what has also happened is that a number of the single young men have fallen in love with young Thai women in the youth groups and some have wanted to get married. This was not a problem with us but it became something of a problem for some of the [Thai Buddhist] families who were not in the church.

I remember one of the first situations where a young man, I think he was American, had fallen in love with a Christian Thai girl and they wanted to have a Christian wedding [western style in the church building]. The American came and directly asked the [Thai] father and it became a huge ordeal with shouting and angry words. In the end the family did not support it but the couple went ahead and did what they wanted anyway.

The church began to see that this was a trend with the American men. They still wanted them to come [in the program] but not to act the same way. The next time this came around friends of the couple told the young man that they would help him. He was to go along with them to the father's house but not to say anything.

“But I want to tell him I love her!” He complained.

“No,” his Thai friends warned him, “You just sit there and say nothing.”

Complainingly he finally agreed. The friends prepared a large *pha khwan* of flowers with the strings and all the necessary gifts on the tray and presented it to the Thai girl's parents. Together they all came and bowed down to the parents. The friends did all the talking and asking, not only for the couple to be married but to be married in the Christian way. The foreign young man merely sat respectfully with them.

The mother spoke first, “I did not want my daughter to marry a *farang*. I was very much against it. But now that I see that he can behave himself I agree that my daughter can marry him if she wants to.”

Then the father spoke, “I was very angry to think that my daughter would marry a *farang* but when I see how you have honored me by sitting so quietly I also agree that you can get married. And as far as I am concerned you are free to get married any way that you think is best” (2003).

According to this account, the use of the string tying ritual made all the difference and was used again with good results in other similar situations that arose later in CC3's experience.

It would appear that the concepts of honor and welcome have significant missiological implications for use in the presentation of the gospel throughout Isaan. According to interview data, in the mind of Isaan people there is already an association of welcoming and honoring connected with string tying (IN5, 11, 17, 22). It would appear to be one of the reasons that practitioners use this ceremony as a welcome for those who are new to the family of God.

Isaan Identity

According to IN3, IN20, and CC7 string tying is part of being Isaan. The same was also stated by IN14 from the Lao perspective. When Isaan Christian youth were asked whether they would want a wedding that used string tying or not most agreed they would want it. CC9, an Isaan Christian aged seventeen, said that having a string tying ceremony would be important for him at his wedding because it stated something about his culture and his position in Christ. CC7, another youth, said, "Even if the string has no powerful mantra connected to it, it is still very important. If the elders want to bless me at my wedding they can't just do it verbally. Whoever does not tie doesn't show their love. Plus, then they can give me money." One youth, CC8, said he wanted a western wedding and that string tying was not significant to him. He had also been trained at a Bible college in Isaan where the use of cultural forms was discouraged. CC2 told the author about Lao Christians in America who struggled in the church over the issue of whether or not to include string tying in Christian Lao weddings there. It became a divisive issue with one side strongly opposed and another equally supportive, the latter led by a particularly opinionated Lao grandmother who insisted that string tying was not

religious but was who they were as Lao people. IN22 said that an Isaan wedding without string tying would be considered very strange and incomplete, that there was no way to tangibly give a blessing in that setting. She said it was the Isaan way of acting out the words that were being said. In conversation with a pastor, CC13 said that his church had decided to begin to incorporate string tying into Christian wedding ceremonies held in his church building because the church leadership discovered that without it the Isaan non-Christian relatives would not come to the church for the wedding but would instead hold a second service to complete the ceremony somewhere at home after the church service was over. From the data it appears that in the minds of most Isaan people a wedding is not complete without string tying.

While living in the central Isaan province of Khon Kaen the author noted how government officials tried to promote string tying as a tourist event with an annual festival of *Pha Mai Phuk Siew* (Silk and Friendship Tying Festival). This took one particular form of string tying, in fact one of the most intimate and binding of them all, and attempted to turn it into a tourist attraction. This can also be observed being promoted by the tourism authorities elsewhere for other events throughout the Isaan region and other parts of Thailand. According to Klausner, this commercialization of a source of Isaan identity trivializes the deeper meaning of tying two people together:

Recently, several governors of Northeast Thailand, in concert with the Tourism Authority of Thailand, undertook campaigns to encourage foreign tourists to visit their provinces and participate in mass *Phuk Siew* ceremonies. This evidenced a complete misunderstanding of the ceremony as well as confusing it with *Su Khwan* rituals. The *Phuk Siew* ceremony has an entirely different meaning and should not be devalued or trivialized by holding mass ceremonies for visitors or guests who are unfamiliar to and with those undertaking the ceremony and who are not prepared to enter into the long-term binding commitments so central to the *Phuk Siew* ceremony (2002:35).

It is ironic that the very term *siew* encouraged as a commercialization of Isaan identity is also the very term that is used among central Thai in one of the most degrading

of insults for outsiders to give to Isaan people, “*Bak siew kin pla daek*” (literally “Siew buddies eat fermented fish”) which takes a stab by twisting language meaning at both the staple of the Isaan diet and the staple of Isaan social structure in one mocking blow. As Seri and Hewison note, this is not the only instance of Isaan cultural abuse.

Cultural identity has been manipulated by government agencies in order to attract tourists, with large religious and cultural celebrations being organized in towns as gimmicks to attract visitors. These celebrations are taken out of their cultural context, and lose meaning for villagers. In a similar way many other cultural rituals, objects and forms are being manipulated for the economic benefit of outsiders and locals alike (2001:152).

It would appear therefore, that for those attempting to be practitioners of string tying ritual, particularly those who claim to be ambassadors of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is critically important that forms from local rituals be used with respect in regards to identity and culture and not merely as a means of exploitation whether the ultimate goal be one of economic improvement or religious conversion.

Sense of Place

The interview data from Isaan people suggests that another worldview theme that remains important to Isaan people is that of location. Often the first question heard among two previously unacquainted Isaan people is, “*Chao ben khon ban dai?*” (What village are you from?) From the answer the questioner will immediately begin to make certain assumptions and will attempt to determine mutual relational connections. Normally the question refers to the place of birth but since Isaan people are becoming much more mobile, it is becoming more common to hear multiple answers—place of birth, place of residence, place of work. The author found everyone was eager to talk about their place of birth and held a certain allegiance to it; this was found to be the easiest topic to open the life interview conversation with. It set a comfortable beginning for moving on to deeper issues. A sense of place appears to contribute to a sense of Isaan

identity. According to Banpote, STR bridges the geographic differences of being from separate places when “two entire groups become united together as one” (1986:135). Isaan followers of Christ reported that the use of string tying ritual for house dedications gave a new deeper biblical meaning to the concept of the place and location of what is truly home for those in the family of God (IN9).

Importance of Relationship

One theme that surfaced repeatedly in various forms through the interviews was the importance of the sense of relationship in community for the recipient during a string tying ceremony. It was reported that in the secular context anyone that possibly could would come to a string tying ceremony to give their blessing by tying a string even if they said nothing. The gesture itself symbolized blessing. It was stated that not coming would be considered an insult for a friend or acquaintance, so naturally people who were not friends would avoid attending. In the context of believers in Jesus people tying the strings on a new believer was a cognitive affirmation of a significant rite of transformation for the individual and also an affective experience of the fact that people who had no previous connections were now intentionally coming together to bless and show a unity in welcoming the person into the family of God. Even the recollection of this event was powerful for new believers such as IN10. Knowing in a concrete way that the community had come together in the name of Christ to glorify God and bless someone had a profound and usually emotional effect on the recipient.

The ceremony in a non-Christian context was considered powerful relationally and spiritually, if it was done according to the properly recited mantras and in the correct auspicious order according to IN17 who admitted, at age 78, to not yet having mastered these completely and therefore did not feel qualified to attempt to lead STR. It appears therefore, that the difference with this and Christian string tying is that in the former case

people had come together in a new relationship that had nothing to do with location, money, genetics, marriage, magical mantras or status in the community. Christians were tied simply because they were now believers together by the work of Christ and the grace of God. Those not yet following Christ might also be tied if present with a verbal blessing for them in Jesus' name. In fact, one of the most significant and moving times during a string tying ritual has been observed to happen when the blessing moves beyond the original recipient(s) and suddenly breaks loose beyond the predicted and begins to spread informally through the Spirit's leading from one person to another. This has been a repeated occurrence during which all pretenses of formality drop and people seek out specific individuals in order to say a word of blessing, or ask for restitution, and then tie that person in Christ's name. Worshipping relationally in community in this way appears to speak deeply to Isaan people and, as this author can testify, to people of any race open to the movement of the Spirit in their lives.

Communication and Assumptions

Most Isaan people in the interview population stated that they had never been given a clear explanation as to meaning when they had participated in typical Buddhist STR. IN19 shared that the ceremony was practiced as a welcome for several thousand new incoming students at her university in Isaan every year but no explanations or interpretations were given. Elsewhere, the author was told by a Thai faculty member that the same non-descriptive procedure was followed annually as a tradition at his large Christian university in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai as well. IN19 noted that because her university conducted string tying ceremonially on a large scale repeatedly without any personal application it appeared to her that many students acted as if it was a tedious experience and did not express much interest in it. The faculty member from

Chiang Mai reported that when he had been tied as a new student at the same Christian university in northern Thailand it had held little meaning for him either.

The author was informed by IN2 that all new military recruits were tied before coming to boot camp. When asked if he ever pursued an inquiry as to the meaning of the strings tied on the wrists of all his fellow rookies in the Thai army IN2 responded, "I'm not stupid." According to IN25 it was acceptable in Isaan society for herself as a child to ask questions about the ceremony and she was fortunate enough to have a sympathizing adult who took the time to inform her. However, most interviewees (including IN5, 8, and 17) did not feel comfortable asking such questions of the adults they knew as children and felt safer following what others did without questioning what was going on even without understanding the details of meaning. IN19 stated that it was assumed that the new incoming students at her Isaan university would all understand the meaning of string tying ritual simply because they were Isaan. This data would indicate not only a high degree of assumed insider knowledge of string ritual in Isaan but also that for an Isaan adult to ask about the meaning of string tying ritual might cause such an individual to appear to be ignorant of one's own cultural worldview heritage and to be labeled, in a word, stupid. Within the highly face-conscious culture of Isaan therefore, it seems that to appear as less than culturally informed before others would be much worse than to actually be culturally uninformed which, in fact, several individuals admitted to the author individually (IN11,12, 14, 17).

Few non-Christian Isaan (all of whom had been tied several times in their lives) could explain any detailed meaning attached to the ceremony except to say it was special or even powerful (IN18, CC1, 4, 5) yet when the ceremony had been performed specifically on their behalf it was still considered deeply significant for them. All interviewees who felt they had experienced personal impact in their lives from string tying stated that this had come from events personalized to their particular context whether it was their wedding (IN5, 14, 25), another rite of passage in life (IN2, 6, 11, 15,)

or spiritual empowerment (IN12, 18). Some remembered string tying from their childhood and the recollection still brought tears to their eyes many years later (IN2, 17, 21). In most cases of string tying not practiced by followers of Christ, it was stated that there was not usually a specific explanation before or during Buddhist ceremonies yet when personalized it had a deep impact that elicited significant meaning in the recipient. Again, this would appear to reinforce the concept that cognitive explanation is secondary to the relational element of the experience. This would also appear to be an opportunity for a God-centered meaning to be inserted or perhaps re-inserted back into the ceremony where he was never before recognized as the true source of the benefits being received.

Christian practitioners of string tying reported that clear explanation has become a critical element towards insuring that the focus of the ceremony is directed towards God. The relational continues to be equally important yet is extended in this way beyond merely the human level. Even as the elements may look the same as those used elsewhere when the worshipping community of faith claims this cultural tradition with its ambiguous meanings open for interpretation, and infuses it with the message of the gospel often it becomes an experience of the presence of God himself. For Isaan Christians the experience of string tying was reported to bring deep meaning on a number of levels: personal (IN2), corporate (IN11, 15), spiritual (IN14), physical (IN22), psychological (IN20), and social (IN3).

For those who were being tied as Christians there was no expectation that they would suddenly do something or become something other than what they already were. The work was understood as already completed in Jesus Christ. Some individuals stated that there was significant internal spiritual transformation occurring but it was not produced by the efforts either of the individual or of the community that had come together to bless the individual (IN2, 10, 14). The source of the transformation was in God alone and the community came together to celebrate this reality with the person in progress.

Differences in Perspective between Christian and Non-Christian Isaan Practitioners

For those who were not Christians when asked the meaning of the string tying ceremony the author frequently heard the descriptive term *sirimongkhon* (powerful, auspicious, helpful, sacred) referring to both the ceremony and the strings themselves. For example a taxi driver in Bangkok, CC1, explained that he had been wearing one particular strand of nylon string continuously for two years because it was *sirimongkhon*. An eighty-four year old peddler (CC5) in the market in Chiang Mai offered to tie the author with strings that he claimed were *sirimongkhon*. Some people kept the strings after they had been removed from their wrists because they were considered *sirimongkhon*. As mentioned earlier, both IN2 and CC6 told the author from their personal experiences that nearly every new recruit in the Thai army wore strings on his wrists from his family and friends when he arrived for training. On the first day of boot camp, however, they were required to remove them and place them somewhere safe because they were *sirimongkhon*.²

When asked why Isaan Christian practitioners did not use the term *sirimongkhon* in relation to string tying, it was explained that the term tends to focus more on the form than on the source of the power (IN10, 25). For Christian Isaan, God is the focus, not the strings. It would appear that the critical point during the Christian ceremony comes when the leader of the ceremony plucks a stick of strings from the bouquet and raises them up for all to see. Suddenly the room becomes silent and every eye looks to see what will happen next:

Brothers and sisters, these strings have not been empowered in any way. They are simply cotton thread that God has provided for us to use. We use the strings to physically represent something we cannot see which is the love that we have in Jesus Christ. The strings that we tie externally today will break but the love of God that they symbolize will never break within and can never leave us (IDF 1993:27).

² Interestingly enough, sacred Buddhist amulets are not required to be removed but were to be worn inside uniforms during training lest they get in the way of military exercises.

With these words the leader would then tie the recipients and invite the rest of the group to join in giving a blessing without any financial obligation (often a social requirement in the Buddhist ceremony). Some Isaan Christians told the author that they kept their strings on for three days as was the Buddhist tradition (IN5, 11, 12). Other removed them immediately after the ceremony (IN10). Some kept their strings in a safe place for awhile but, unlike non-Christians, the author found no believers who kept them as objects of veneration or referred to them as *sirimongkhon* (IN2, 5, 21, 22).

Suggestions for Improvement by Practitioners

Most practitioners could not suggest any improvements for deepening or clarifying the meaning of string tying ritual for Christian use. A few gave the following suggestions:

Change the Color of the Strings

A number of nonpractitioners suggested to the author that if the external form were changed then the old associations with old non-biblical meanings could be avoided. IN21, who uses strings regularly in her church work, felt it important for Christians to use strings that were red to represent the blood of Christ but only wanted to do this in order to separate appearances from the Buddhist interpretation. She had personally been confronted by a relative who was not a practitioner on this issue and challenged to defend her practices. Most other Isaan Christian practitioners of string tying ritual would disagree. It was felt by most that the meaning is not in the string or its color but in response to the explanation. They said that outward appearances, while perhaps important to a certain extent, cannot dictate everything. One Christian who had been deeply touched by the string tying ceremony removed the strings immediately after the ceremony before leaving the location. She admitted that she did not desire any Thai

Buddhist who saw her wearing strings to think that she was also Buddhist (CC14). Red is the color used by Chinese in Buddhism according to IN20. She felt strongly that because red strings are now used in Buddhism occasionally that this color has a deeper magical connotation than simply pure white or raw cotton thread. She, along with many others, felt that the white color symbolized purity and should be retained (CC7, IN2, 12, 22). The author has observed braided threads of many colors used by Brahmanist and Buddhist monks worn by Thai of all ages. Friendship bracelets appear to be simply one further outgrowth of the original string tying threads and the meaning of these can vary greatly. The challenge of knowing what meaning has been generated within the receptor of the message continues to plague those who fear that ungodly connotations might be suggested. Perhaps all that can truly be measured are the outward effects that have been somehow elicited through the use of such media as strings as a communication method.

Change Implements Used

One Isaan pastor (IN24) shared how he has done string tying ceremonies after youth camps by having the youth unravel the edge of the canvas banners used to name the camp event. This meant that each young person went home with a part of the event themselves. In one instance, as mentioned earlier by IN7, an elderly church member in Udon Thani welcomed visitors by removing the threads from his *pakama* and using those to tie on as a blessing. The use of these threads instead of the cotton thread used in the popular Thai Buddhist ceremony looked different and had a different source of origin so it gave these individuals a sense of separation from the non-biblical forms to some degree while still retaining the symbolically deep meaning of joining together through tying.

Redefine Effective Communication Methods

As mentioned previous the meaning of most Buddhist string tying ritual is not well explained verbally which leaves a great deal of ambiguity in the understanding of the participants. In spite of this, when personalized these events are reported as deeply meaningful for the participants. From the interview data it appears that many important messages are communicated during string tying ritual through non-verbal forms. In contrast to western cultures (including Christians) that condone or tolerate a high degree of physical contact in public among the genders, Isaan society does not. During string tying ritual close spatial proximity is very intimate by Isaan standards yet fully condoned. Even more significant perhaps are the communications that occur on the tactile and the olfactory levels when strings are tied, hands touch, and people are close enough to feel breath. For many participants the event stimulates emotion making it difficult to verbalize what is in their hearts. The tears that flow indicate something meaningful inside that has been stimulated by a communication method that goes deeper than the cognitive level.

Rename the Ritual

IN9 felt it was important that the ritual be renamed. He does not refer to the ceremony as *sukhwan* (khwan calling), the typical name for string tying ceremonies in Isaan and Laos, but as *phuk khaw daw khaen* (wrist-tying). He felt this to be important for new believers. He also admitted that the actual knowledge of the details is less important than the impact of the event relationally, socially, and in spiritual encounter. This seems to reflect the transformation of a Buddhist worldview value of spiritual dependence for power (even from the *khwan*) towards a dependence upon God alone as the source of all power. It was observed that among Isaan Christians who did use string tying no one intentionally referred to the ceremony as *sukhwan* but used either *puk khaen* (tying on the arm) or *pittee oway pon* (blessing ceremony). In most other ways the

ceremony physically looked the same as that of *sukhwan* rituals held in the society at large.

Recurring Themes among Nonpractitioners

Isaan Christians who did not practice string tying ceremony in their fellowships shared some of the concerns they have with the use of such rituals.

Might Cause Christians to Stumble

For those that trained in Thai Bible schools, the fear of causing someone to stumble appeared to be the knee-jerk response to the question of anything cultural being used in the church. The rapidity with which this answer came suggested that most individuals had not personally grappled deeply with the topic but appeared to be simply repeating the party line. Both IN1 and IN23 felt strongly on this position but others also voiced this concern which some said was based upon their interpretation of Romans Chapter 14 verses thirteen through fifteen:

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died (Romans 14:13-15 NIV).

In every case that this concern was raised, the author asked the person suggesting it to give an example of someone who had stumbled and in no case was the author able to obtain a real life example. IN23 reported that since his church did not practice string tying he did not have any examples and that the author should ask himself as one coming from a practicing group to see if such an event had ever occurred. The author agreed that believers have stumbled within our movement but would have to account this to factors other than having observed or participated in a CSTR.

Family Background

During the interviews it became apparent that most Christians who were nonpractitioners of string tying ritual came from a background of either conservative Christian parents, or were influenced at an early age by a missionary or church teaching with strict separatist teachings. To IN1, IN23, and IN24 any accommodation to things appearing Buddhist was anathema. They were taught at a young age never to participate in such events and these teachings were unquestionable; it was part of the early formation of their worldview perspective on faith and culture. This again would appear to emphasize the reality that culture is nothing apart from people and perhaps nowhere are cultural values more deeply entrenched and treasured than at home. Going against such cultural values, therefore, moves beyond mere theoretical issues, it has to do with how one responds to the wishes of ones' parents. One interviewee explained that Thai culture is from the family. In this sense Thai Christians can understand the reaction of those who come from Thai families who forbid conversion to Christianity. This is viewed as personal betrayal of all traditional practices and persons held near and dear.

The opposite also appears to be true, however. According to interview data, in cases where neither parents nor teachers were careful in explaining meaning this created an opportunity for the next generation to insert new explanations into a ceremony or perhaps to define the meaning back to ways that may have existed earlier but were now forgotten (IN3, 4, 9). According to IN4, when done in ways that are biblical this has actually led some Isaan people to choose to follow Christ. For the majority of those interviewed who were Isaan followers of Jesus, inserting deeper spiritual truths from God's message into the string tying ritual was a culturally attractive form of communication that enabled their entire families and the participating community members to learn together about the message of the gospel and from which to choose to respond out of their own context (IN10, 11, 15, 16, 20).

Concerns about What Christians Think

From the interviews it became clear that an important worldview value for Isaan people was the consideration of what others, particularly those of a similar peer or *boonkhun* group, might think. According to Peter Jackson there is a Thai preoccupation with conformity to a national identity that remains a sensitive issue for the Thai (2002:155) and the author would suggest that this is particularly true for Isaan who strive hard to accommodate themselves to the national standard. However this is even more so for Isaan Christians who struggle not only with the issues of Thai identity but with the cultural complexities involved in following what is considered a new or even an outsider's religion. Although several interviewees stated that there are fewer negative comments regarding Isaan Christians as sell-outs to westerners than in previous years (IN1, 9, 21, 24), there is still a great need by Isaan people to feel a sense of belonging to some socially respected group. One Isaan Christian non-practitioner of string tying ritual said that because Christians are a small minority in Thailand they need to show a unified face to the world—that they need to love and support one another even as they attempt to reach out to those around them in various tangible ways. If an Isaan Christian does not act in the same way as other Christians elsewhere in Thailand he or she will have a difficult time being accepted by the majority of Thai Christians. Some felt that acting differently as a follower of Christ or using cultural forms like string tying ritual would reflect badly upon Christians in Thailand in general as it showed lack of unity and this was a risk they were not willing to take (IN1, 28). Others were fearful that they might perhaps be sinning against God by using some of the local forms such as string tying (IN1, 23, 24). This may suggest that personal conformity to an understood form of Christian religious practice within Thailand, even if that practice is considered foreign by the majority of members of Thai society, appears to be of higher priority for many Isaan Christians than delving into the complexity of the application of rituals with seemingly ambiguous meanings. Such is the cultural allegiance to uniformity that from the author's

observations of the research data and experience, few Christians within Isaan or the rest of Thailand appear to be willing to move independently into this realm of combining local cultural expression with their faith in Christ without a great deal of support and encouragement from committed missionaries or strong local leaders.

Christian Leaders Could Lose Face

New missionaries working in Isaan are often eager to see local cultural forms such as string tying ritual incorporated into Christian worship and witness but are seemingly unable to convince local Isaan Christian leaders to move in this direction. One reason for this that came out of the interview data was the possibility that such practices might lead to an Isaan Christian leader or perhaps the professor (Isaan, Thai, or expatriate) of that Isaan leader losing face. Expatriate missionary CC12 shared the lack of success she experienced at her repeated attempts to encourage a particular Isaan Christian church to incorporate some Isaan music into its worship that she personally was convinced would have been so good for them. Finally after making no headway an Isaan sister in the church quietly took her aside and asked her to back down:

Don't you realize that the pastors have not been trained that way? If they have not been trained that way they will not use another way because it would say that the way in which they have been trained is wrong. They can't say that so they are not willing to change what they are doing (2004).

Showing respect for such people as teachers and professors is extremely important to Isaan and indeed all Thai people. Thai psychologist and social commentator Suntaree Komin lists ego-orientation as the top priority within Thai psychology (1991:133). Authors such as Suntaree seem to indicate that to destroy the face of another is a greater social sin than to attempt to gain more face for one's self. This value is no different for Isaan Christians, therefore stepping out and doing something that might

possibly injure the ego-orientation of another is something that apparently few Isaan Christian leaders are willing to risk.

Lacks Christian Distinctiveness

Some Isaan and expatriate Christians told the author that they would not want anyone to see them wearing strings on their wrists for fear that those seeing them might think that they were Buddhists (CC14, IN1, 23). Certainly, the strings could be removed immediately following the ceremony and, as was mentioned, is occasionally done. However, this fear of religious accommodation, or the appearance of being Buddhist, is often given in combination with that mentioned above of potentially causing a brother or sister in Christ to see such an event and then to falter in their faith. Others have found the identification with Buddhists through wearing strings created an opportunity to explain what has really transpired in their lives and in their new communities (IN2, 3, 9, 11). Some interviewed feel strongly that the external communications represented by what is worn, or the colors of the strings, must be changed to be distinctly Christian. When asked how this distinctly Christian form of communication insured Christian meaning in the mind of the receptors the author was unable to get clear answers; usually he was told that more explanation was required (IN1, 23). This is exactly the perspective of Isaan Christian practitioners of string tying ritual as well who would say that clear, culturally appropriate explanations assist in eliciting meaning that is in line with God's message (IN3, 10). Meaning elicited in the minds of others cannot be controlled externally. What is evidenced are the responses that forms of communication evoke. The question as to whether a distinctly Christian form of communication is at all of interest to the non-Christian member of Isaan society seems to be of less importance than the avoidance of any appearance of non-uniformity with the majority of Christians in Thailand by non-practicing Isaan believers.

Perceived Threat to Buddhism

There are some nonpractitioners who raise that possibility that Buddhists would not like Christians using their traditions including string tying ritual. When a Buddhist Isaan spirit-medium of 78 years of age (IN17) was asked this question by the author he replied, “It’s fine if you [Christians] use our ceremonies. Just don’t make us look bad.” His answer reflects the Isaan (and Thai) value on social harmony. Another opinion contributed during an interview with IN10 was, “God and Buddha are all the same so it is fine if you use our ceremony. Besides, string tying is not really Buddhist anyway.” This again emphasized the reality that in Isaan there is very little of elite Buddhism to be found in practice among the general population. The accommodating nature of popular Buddhism in the Isaan context remains highly contextual with the approval of most. The author was unable to find an Isaan Buddhist who felt that Christians could or should not also be contextual specifically in regards to the use of strings to ritually express the love of God to each other and even to those not yet followers of Christ.

Suggestions from Nonpractitioners

In spite of the fact that nonpractitioners, as a rule, would not have had experience using string tying ritual nor would they be open to doing so in a Christian way, many of them encountered during interviews seemed either to understand or to have a strong opinion about the social function that string tying ritual plays in the lives of Isaan people. This would appear to indicate that certain long-standing Isaan worldview values, including those related to string tying ritual, are transferred throughout many levels of Isaan society including the Christians in numerous small nearly imperceptible ways from birth and collectively create a framework for understanding and interpreting life in the Isaan cultural context that is virtually undetectable to Isaan people themselves until it is challenged in some way. During the interview period the author encountered some Isaan Christians in churches that do not practice string tying who understood that there was a

need for something tangible in their Christian community to fill the social and spiritual gap left when string tying ritual was not practiced recognizing that leaving a vacuum only led to people drifting back to whatever helped them fill the void they felt including biblically compromising dual allegiances. Though unaware of Hiebert's model, these Isaan believers were not unaware of the apparent inability of Protestant Christianity as predominantly practiced in Isaan to address the issues that came from an animist or primal religious worldview background in the life of the majority of Isaan popular Buddhists in the area that Hiebert would refer to as the middle zone. Even though these Isaan Christians were not practicing string tying ritual and would not have used terminology such as primal religious worldview they were seriously seeking solutions to address that which they recognized as lacking. The following are suggestions that came from three interviews with Isaan Christians in churches that had decided against using string tying ritual as a communication tool for the gospel and yet were seriously grappling with the issue of what to substitute instead in an effort to meet a certain worldview need of their membership and ultimately stop the flow out their backdoor:

Substitute Something Else in Place of Strings

IN1 pastors a church in central Isaan and clearly felt that there was a definite need for something to substitute for string tying in his congregation. His own upbringing and childhood teaching from a Christian grandmother and the established policy of his present ministry did not allow him to freely embrace using string tying ritual in his church. While agreeing that the concept of tying together was biblical and that it was important for Isaan Christians to express Christian unity in tangible ways, he stated that he could not disassociate the strings from meanings that were either idolatrous or at least uncomfortable theologically and felt that neither could the members of his church. His church had decided therefore that instead of using strings which he stated as having an

association with Buddhism, to use a *pakama* cloth to tie around the waist of new believers instead. He explained that as the pastor he was the one who tied people; there was not much group interaction. He did encourage group prayer at that time and the laying on of hands, something considered a cultural taboo among most Isaan if done by members of the opposite sex.

The reaction to this substitution of the strings with the *pakama* by IN3 was that it was exactly what the politicians from Bangkok do who come to the northeast to curry favors with their political constituency. Externally they attempt to appear as one with the locals when in reality they are identified internally no more than the sticky rice that they eat. These highly publicized photo-ops are not generally viewed as expressions of genuine identification with the Isaan populace. IN1's creativity in attempting to find a cultural substitute for string tying is admirable even if it may have limited depth of meaning for participants.

Corrective Teaching

Some Isaan Christian leaders (IN1, 27) felt that all that was needed to wean new believers away from a dependency upon string tying was further teaching. Mature Isaan Christians according to IN27 would understand that they should no longer have attachments to such traditions or ways of the past. Such pastors would advocate a complete and total separation from ways that present an appearance of the old religious beliefs. This reflects the Protestant methodology used by McGilvary and early missionary teaching in Isaan directly. In a very real sense such churches were demanding that their members forsake their old worldview, deny the reality of the middle zone (to use Hiebert's terms), and become western in thinking (or human secularists) at which point Christ as presented in that particular format would meet their needs.

From the interviews there appeared to be three groups of Isaan Christians towards the research topic: those who felt strongly against using string tying ritual in the context of their church, those who felt strongly towards including string tying ritual within the context of their church, and those who continued to use it before, during, and after Christian conversion whether it was Christian or not. Following the period of interviews the author, in conjunction with Isaan assistants, developed a survey questionnaire in order to delve in more detail into the perspectives of Isaan Christians towards string tying ritual. The following chapter describes the results of the survey questionnaire research in detail.

CHAPTER 10

SURVEY DATA FROM ISAAN CHRISTIANS ON STRING TYING RITUAL

This chapter will review what Isaan believers from a selective survey sample from seven Isaan provinces said that their churches and they personally were doing, believed, or felt regarding string tying ritual. The survey questionnaire was developed with input from Thai assistants familiar with the research project and was tested three times before being put to field use. The original Thai questionnaire appears in Appendix B with an English language translation in Appendix C. One hundred and thirty survey forms were distributed to eight different locations who expressed willingness to participate in seven Isaan provinces. 118 completed forms were returned.

When passing out the survey no specific restrictions or instructions were made other than that the informant be a Christian.¹ An assumption was made that all respondents would be literate and this is one reason that the survey cannot be called a purely random sampling of the population. Since each respondent was required to fill out the form themselves, this excluded an estimated ten percent of the Isaan population.² A complete record of the data received from the survey is listed by record and question in Appendix G. A list of the locations of the eight churches and Christian institutions who responded to the survey is found in Appendix H. A descriptive summary analysis of the survey data is presented in this chapter with resulting missiological insights discussed in Chapters 11 and 12.

¹ Three respondents noted themselves as Buddhist and not Christian on the survey but claimed to be members of local Isaan Christian churches.

²Based on figures from the National Statistical Office, Thailand's literacy rate for the general population six years and older was 90.8 percent in 2003 (Chiratas 2003:6).

Demographics of Survey Population

Demographic questions by the author inquired about the age, gender, occupation, level of education, location of residence and church, and migration of the interviewee. This section of the chapter will review each of these elements and how demographic differences impact the practice of Isaan string tying ritual in churches in northeast Thailand.

Age, Gender, Education, and Occupation

Of the 118 respondents sixty-one were men, fifty-six were women and one left the question blank. The pie graph in Figure 10 summarizes the age range for the general population of Thailand for the year 2003 as reported by Chiratas Nivatpumin (2003:6). The age range of the respondents of the survey is shown in Figure 11. It should be noted that the age categories do not line up exactly with that of the general population of Thailand according to the Thai government's statistics. Youth were not a target group of the survey and in the author's opinion few Isaan young people have spent much time pondering issues related to string tying. The average median age range of the survey respondents was between the ages of thirty and forty-five. Forty-one of the respondents were single, sixty-three married, nine widowed, three divorced and two left the question blank.

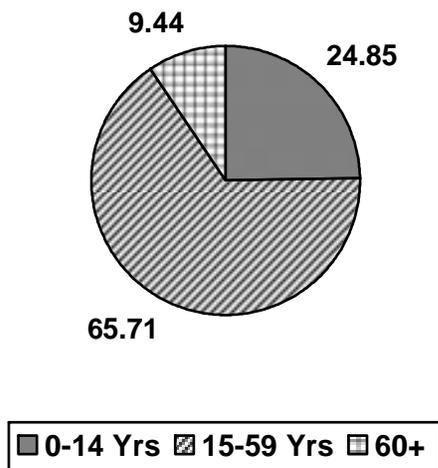


FIGURE 10
AGE OF THAI POPULATION FOR 2003 BY PERCENTAGE
 (Chiratas 2003:6)

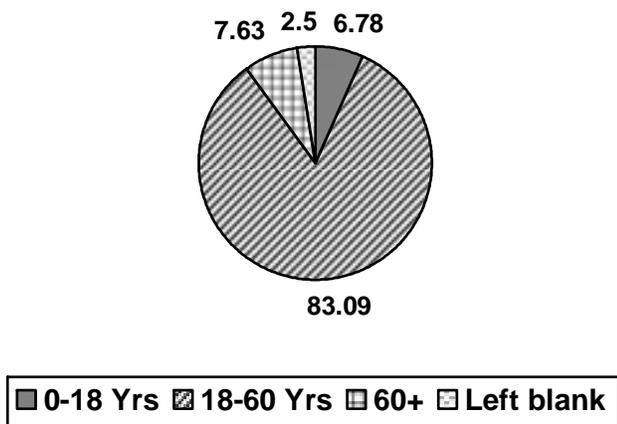


FIGURE 11
AGE OF SURVEY POPULATION BY PERCENTAGE

Thirty-one respondents or seventy-six percent of total survey respondents stated that they had finished primary education. This could conceivably be only fourth grade. Fifty-two percent (sixty two respondents) had finished secondary education and seventeen percent (twenty-one respondents) had finished college level or above. Four left the question blank.

Occupations varied among the respondents with twenty-five percent (thirty respondents) as hired labor, twenty-two percent (twenty-seven respondents) students, twenty-one percent (twenty five respondents) working in agriculture and twenty percent (twenty-four respondents) listed their employment under other. Less than six percent (seven respondents) claimed they were in sales. The remainder either left the answer blank or listed multiple answers.

Of the total respondents fifty stated that they were in a position of leadership in their church (forty-two percent); the majority of the remainder stated they were simply members (sixty-three respondents or fifty-three percent).

Language and Religion

Eighty-six of the respondents said they used the Isaan language at home and twelve said more than one language. Ninety-seven respondents (eighty-two percent) stated that their parents were born in Isaan. Sixty-eight respondents (fifty-seven percent) stated that their families were Buddhist while they were growing up. Forty-seven (forty percent) stated that their families were Christian while they were growing up. The author had specified that respondents be Isaan Christians yet of the total respondents only 112 listed their religion as Christian. Three claimed to be Buddhist, two answered both Christian and Buddhist, and one left the question blank. Fifty-six respondents stated that their church used Isaan language in worship (over forty-seven percent of total); thirty

eight stated that their church used the central Thai language in worship (thirty-two percent).

The survey asked how many years the respondent had been a follower of Christ. Fifty-three respondents (forty-five percent) stated more than fifteen years; forty-six (thirty-nine percent) stated between five and fifteen years. Seventeen stated less than five years and two left the question blank. When asked what had made the respondent interested in God sixty percent (seventy-one respondents) stated that someone close to them shared Jesus with them. Others gave multiple answers. Only two respondents stated that radio, television, or other media had led them to be interested in God reinforcing again the highly relational nature of Isaan society.

Rural and Urban Isaan Population

Ninety-one respondents or seventy-seven percent of total survey respondents stated that they were born in the rural Isaan setting; seventeen respondents, or fourteen percent, stated that they were born in an urban Isaan setting. To those unfamiliar with the Isaan region the suggestion of an urban Isaan setting runs contrary to the popular (but unrealistic) image of Isaan as a vast empty wasteland of parched cracking soil. The definition of urban in the Isaan setting remains somewhat ambiguous as it does in most of Thailand. However, with the passage of the Sanitary District to Municipality Act of 1999 the number of urban areas in Thailand jumped from 139 in 1990 to 1,131 in 1999 with the redefinition of urban as “areas provided with sanitary amenities [trash collection], with over 5,000 inhabitants” (Kermel-Torrès 2004:36).³ Whether any of the survey

³ The reason for this long delayed redefinition of urban was due primarily to a strong centralization policy of the central Thai government. “Until recently, the government, which was very highly centralized, was reluctant to agree to the devolution of power inherent in municipality status: municipalities number 117 in 1947, and this figure had increased to only 139 by 1996. . . The purpose of the reform is administrative and political . . . and although it allows a better understanding of urbanization, the definition of urban areas is still not based on functional and socio-economic criteria (Kermel-Torrès 2004:36).

respondents were aware of this redefinition of urban or not is unknown to this author. In the understanding of most Isaan people *muang* urban generally refers to something other than the rural village setting although rural villages fringe the outskirts of most urban Isaan cities.⁴ A Thai concept of sub-urban has yet to be fully developed. Urban Isaan could be interpreted to be anywhere from sanitary district (*sukhaphiban*), to a sub-district (*tambon*) community of over one thousand people to a provincial capital (*amphur muang*) of several hundred thousand. Sharp distinctions between an urban and a rural Isaan worldview are equally impossible to draw. Perhaps reflecting this confusion nine percent of respondents answered both urban and rural as place of birth.

Urban Migration within Isaan Region

To determine present demographics of the survey population the questionnaire asked for the location of the churches to which the respondents were members, assuming that the members would live in the area near their churches. Sixty-four of the total respondents or slightly more than fifty-four percent said that they were part of a rural church; fifty respondents or nearly forty-three percent said that they were part of an urban church. It was assumed that these were within the Isaan region. Some respondents from a Bible college in Isaan came from other regions of Thailand or countries neighboring Thailand. A comparison of the movement from those born in rural Isaan to those now living in urban Isaan is given in Figure 12.⁵

⁴ To go from a rural village into the nearest town is often referred to as simply, "*Pai dala*" ("Going to market").

⁵ In Figures 12 - 28 data was compared using the Abstat program. Figure 12 does not include those who wrote they were born in both the urban and the rural areas.

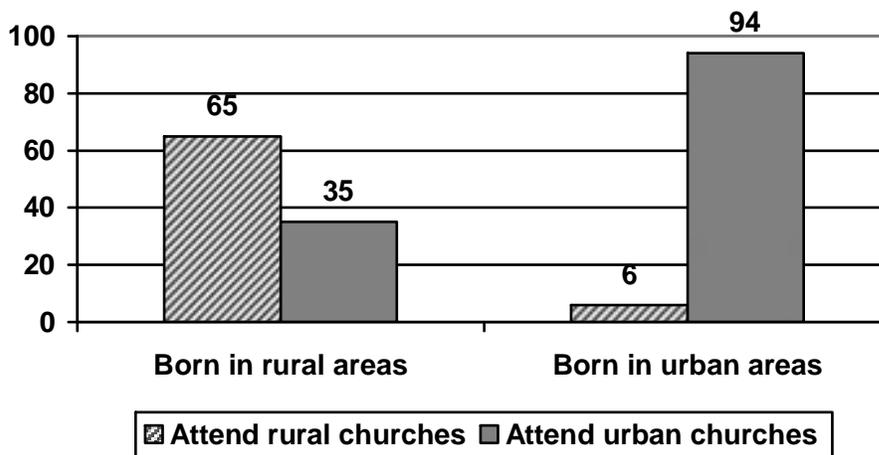


FIGURE 12

**DEMOGRAPHIC MOVEMENT OF SURVEY
POPULATION**

A study of Isaan urban migration is beyond the scope of this research. What Figure 12 attempts to show is that thirty-five percent of the survey population had moved from their original rural place of birth in Isaan and were attending a church in an urban area of Isaan at the time they responded to the survey. The assumption made here is that this would indicate a relocation of that individual from the rural to an urban setting. This was important to the study only as it related to a change of worldview from a rural perspective to that of an urban perspective even within the same region of the country. It could be argued that since most migrants to the city are coming from the rural area that a large percentage of the urban population still maintains, at least for some undetermined time, its rural mindset and worldview. Actual percentages of urban migration vary from place to place in Thailand, but it is understood that significant portions of the Isaan working class are moving or have moved from rural communities to urban areas. The fact that six percent (actually only one respondent) who had been born in an urban setting

were now attending a church in a rural area is not significant enough to extrapolate even a small percentage of flow from urban to rural. This one person who was born in an urban area and was now attending a rural church was in fact a rare oddity countering the trend of the majority of Thai population. Figure 12 does not include those who did not answer the question, those from regions outside of Isaan, or those who gave multiple answers to the questions.

Demographics and Practices of Isaan Churches

Of the 118 total respondents in the survey forty-six stated that their church practiced string tying more than ten times presumably within recent history, seventeen said that their churches had practiced it fewer than ten times, and fifty-four said their churches had never practiced string tying.⁶ These three groups the author classified as practitioners, infrequent practitioners, and nonpractitioners. These three classifications are used extensively for comparison purposes in several figures presented in this chapter.

A comparison between the frequency of practice of CSTR (CSTR) between rural and urban churches in Isaan indicates that churches in the Isaan rural setting practice CSTR nearly twice as much as do those in the urban setting as shown in Figure 13.

⁶ One respondent in the second group felt it important enough to write a further note of clarification explaining that his church had only practiced string tying twice in the last fifteen years and indicated that in his opinion this was excessive.

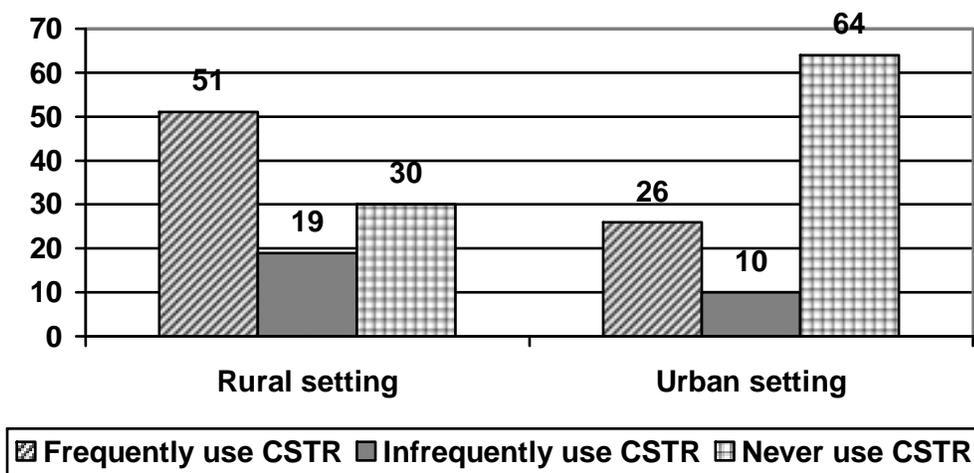


FIGURE 13

PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN STRING TYING RITUAL BY PERCENTAGE

Behavioral: What Do They Do?

In this category the author was looking to see what Christians did in their churches regarding string tying ritual. In order to understand something of the background of the informants the survey included questions regarding the participation of the respondent in string tying ritual during his or her childhood and youth. Thirty-three respondents said they had participated all the time at virtually every string tying function that was available to them. Eighty-three stated they had participated occasionally. Two left the question blank. The author's Isaan assistants were insistent that there would not be an adult who had grown up in Isaan who had never participated in any string tying ritual their entire life. Perhaps these were the two individuals who left the question blank. Fourteen respondents (twelve percent) had been forbidden sometime during their

childhood or youth by someone from participating in STR. According to the statistics given in the previous question most of these had evidently participated anyway.

When asked to enumerate participation in string tying ritual as an adult eighty-one respondents (sixty-nine percent) stated that they had participated in ten or more string tying ceremonies in recent history. Twenty-two (nineteen percent) had participated in less than ten ceremonies recently. Only thirteen respondents (eleven percent) stated that they had never participated in a string tying ceremony. These were not specifically stated as Christian string tying ceremonies.

Question 16 asked what churches did to welcome new members. Twenty-six respondents (twenty-two percent) stated that their church performed a welcome ceremony. Sixty four respondents (fifty-four percent) stated that they introduced the new person to the church. Six stated that their church baptized immediately; two did nothing. The remainder gave multiple answers.

How Much Does Background Influence Behavior?

During interviews the author discovered that individual parental and religious background played a significant role in attitudes towards acceptance or rejection of string tying ritual (IN1, 13, 23, 24). In the survey data the comparison between practitioners, infrequent practitioners, and nonpractitioners who had been forbidden to participate in string tying ritual (STR) produced the following figure:

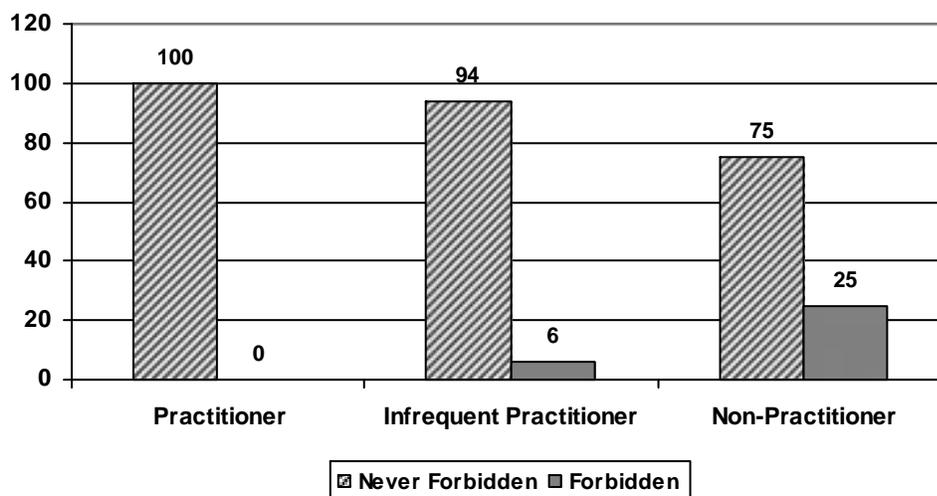


FIGURE 14

INDIVIDUALS FORBIDDEN TO PARTICIPATE IN STRING TYING RITUAL COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE

No respondent who claimed to be in a church that practiced string tying had ever been forbidden to participate in such a ceremony. Only one of the sixteen infrequent practitioners had ever been forbidden. Of the fifty-one nonpractitioners who responded (three left the question blank) thirteen or twenty-five percent of the respondents had been forbidden at some time in their life against participation in string tying ritual. From these thirteen nonpractitioners who had been forbidden from participating in string tying ritual at some time in their life, the author also received written comments as to reasons why. R34 said that an older Christian had told him not to “because we are Christian people.” R41 said her maternal grandmother had forbidden her because “we are God’s children and we don’t need these things.” R42 said her parents had forbidden her because, “our family has been Christian since I was a child.” R48 said his family had forbidden him to participate in string tying because, “as Christians we believed in only one God.” R54 affirmed that someone had forbidden him to participate in string tying because,

“Christians don’t *phuk khaen*. Those who use string tying will use sacred lustral water but Christians have the greatest God already.” R73 wrote, “I heard it [forbidden] from a preacher whose name I cannot remember.” R80 wrote that both family and pastor forbade it because, “it is deep entrenchment in beliefs that are wrong.” R81 wrote that his parents forbade him because, “it is not in God’s word so therefore we endeavor to distance ourselves from this ceremony.” R82 wrote that her parents had forbidden her because, “it is not in the Bible and I was taught since my childhood that this ritual should not be practiced among the gathering of Christians.” R83 wrote that a missionary forbade her because, “it has to do with evil spirits.” R85 wrote that a missionary had forbidden him to participate but did not write down any reason as to why the missionary had done so. Comparing members of churches that did not practice STR but who had participated string tying ritual anyway produced the following figure:

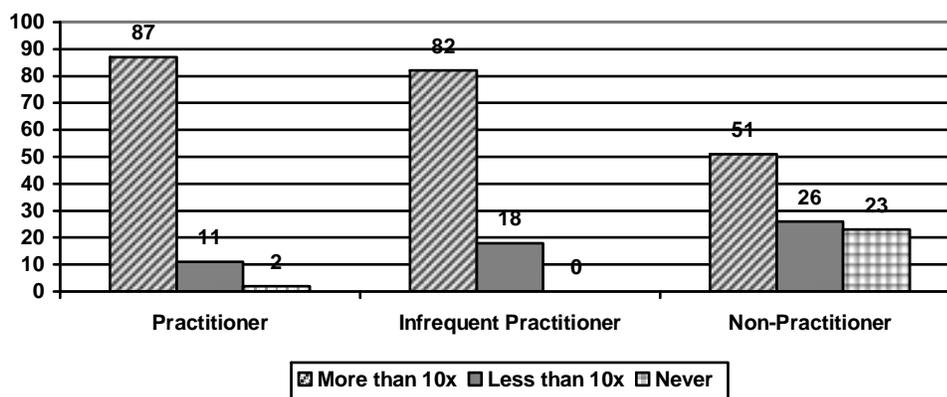


FIGURE 15

**COMPARISON OF PARTICIPATION IN STRING TYING
RITUAL BY PERCENTAGE**

From this figure it could be assumed that over half of Isaan Christians attending churches that do not practice Christian string tying must have participated or must still be participating in string tying ceremonies somewhere outside of their church.⁷ This is a very revealing number. Taking this question one step further, what about those who had been specifically forbidden to participate in string tying? Did they ever participate? Comparing the answers to these questions produced the following figure.

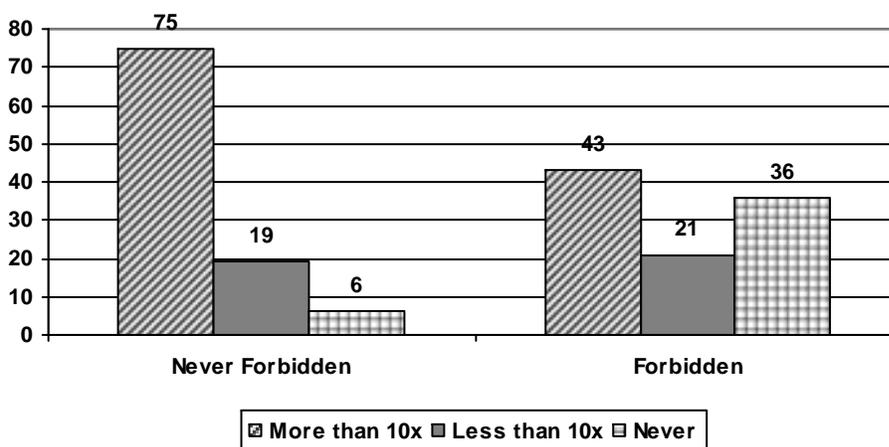


FIGURE 16

COMPARISON OF PARTICIPATION IN STRING TYING RITUAL BY PERCENTAGE

Once again, nearly half of those who had specifically been forbidden to participate in string tying ritual found a way to participate frequently. It is not clear from this question whether or not the ceremonies in which they participated were CSTR

⁷ The one confused individual who is in a church that practices string tying frequently but has never participated is either a non-social member or misunderstood the question. The author believes it is the latter reason.

(CSTR) or not, but since nearly all of those who were from the forbidden group (thirteen of fourteen) came from a church that did not practice string tying it would seem unlikely that the ceremony could have been Christian. This would most likely mean that under some kind of social circumstance, they were involved more than ten times in recent memory (whether under pressure or voluntarily cannot be determined) in a popular Buddhist string tying ritual. It would have been even more revealing to know how many of these non-Christian ceremonies had been specifically performed for the benefit of these non-practicing Christian individuals. These figures would seem to indicate that for those churches that are not practicing these rituals the existing present practices of worship within those local Christian churches are not necessarily meeting the social and relational needs of its members and the surrounding community. There appears to be a serious and dangerous problem of dual allegiance expressed here. These figures would also seem to raise the question as to what degree church policy and personal piety among Isaan Christians are related.

Does CSTR Change Relational Behavior?

Relationship became a frequent theme during interviews for practitioners. The author compared answers from questions on this issue in many ways in the survey data to see if this continued to hold true among the survey respondents. The following three figures show some of these perspectives:

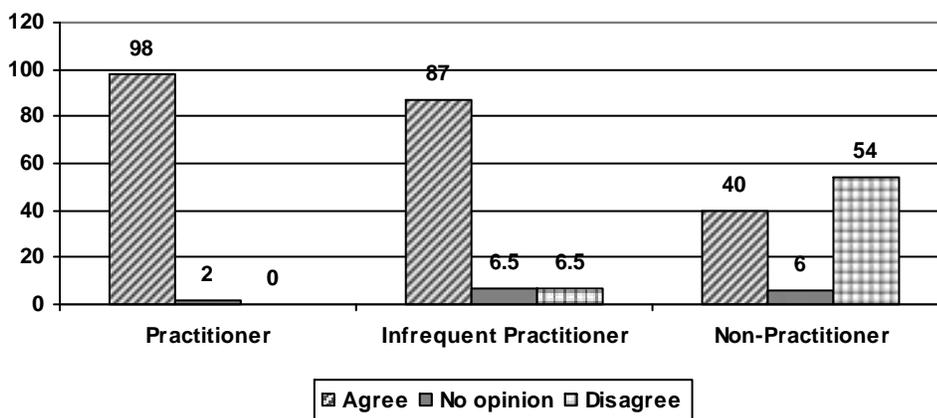


FIGURE 17

CHRISTIAN STRING TYING RITUAL CAN RECONCILE PEOPLE TOGETHER COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE

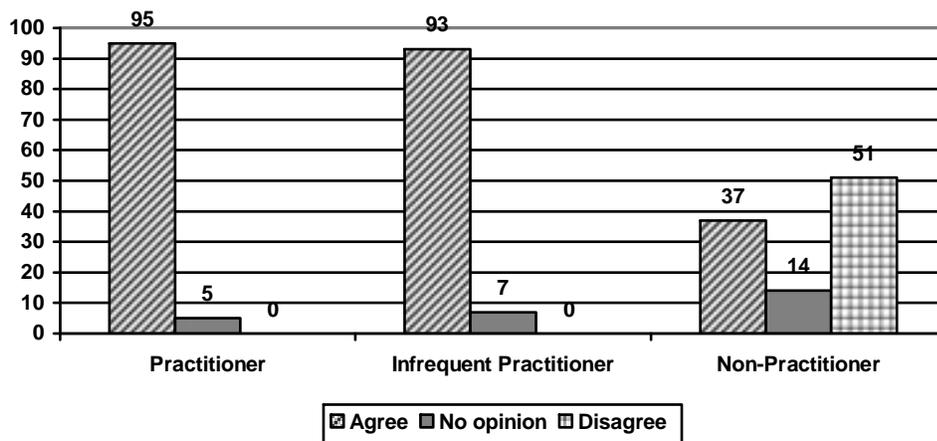


FIGURE 18

CHRISTIAN STRING TYING RITUAL CAN MAKE STRANGERS INTO FRIENDS COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE

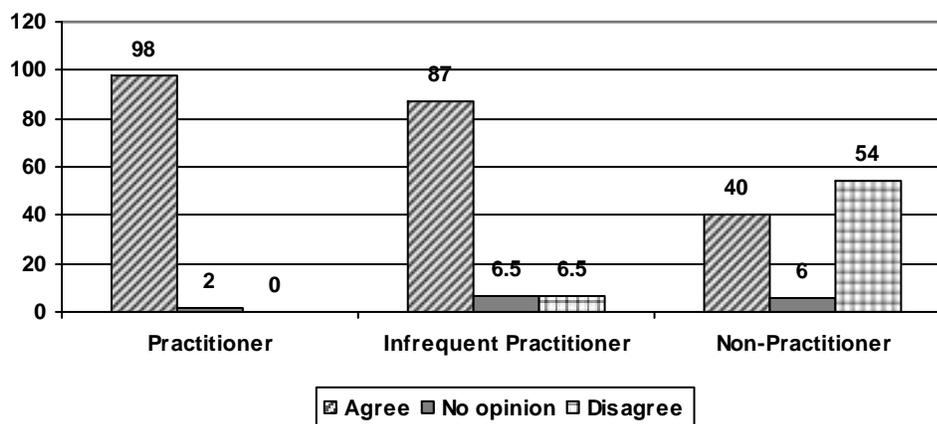


FIGURE 19

CHRISTIAN STRING TYING RITUAL CAN MAKE TWO PARTIES ONE COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE

The above three figures indicate that for participants, the relational factor continues to be extremely important and that string tying ritual benefits relationships in numerous ways. Perhaps more significantly is the fact that a large percentage of nonpractitioners also say that STR benefit relationships. How would they know this if they had not participated? The author believes it is because, as was alluded to earlier, within Isaan culture string tying ceremonies carry such an important social function that this value has somehow been communicated even to Isaan Christians sometime during their life even though they may be outside the Buddhist mainstream of the community through the mysterious osmosis-like transfer of worldview themes. Hughes cites Mary Douglas' theory on worldview learning as starting in childhood "through the social control system as it operates through discipline in the family and the community" (Hughes 1984a:313). Isaan Christians are teaching their children worldview themes when they direct their offspring away from certain practices, whether cultural or religious, as much as when they direct them towards others.

The data indicated that the sense of being tied together in Christ through string tying ritual had recognizable limits regarding its application in the daily life of the community. This showed most strikingly in regards to the relationships within the *boonkhun* network. When asked if CSTR built up a *boonkhun* relationship (or, as it is sometimes viewed, an indebtedness) the overwhelming response among the survey respondents was negative. Only nineteen percent of the respondents (twenty-three people) agreed that this was somewhat possible. Fifty-three percent (sixty-three respondents) said that this was not possible. From this data it seems apparent that an Isaan CSTR in and of itself does not create or determine the deepest type of relationships for Isaan people, namely, those within the *boonkhun* network. This would appear to indicate the ritual itself is not enough to build the depth of relationship that would extend beyond that of any visitor or newly-introduced stranger among Isaan Christians. When asked if the ceremony practiced by Christians would create problems with Buddhists a nearly equal number said yes and no. This could be attributed to the ambiguity of meaning found in string tying ritual for many of the non-practicing Isaan Christians.

Why is String Tying Avoided by Some Isaan Christians?

When asked why churches did not practice string tying of the fifty-three that stated their churches never practiced it five reversed their answers and stated that their church indeed did practice or had practiced it. These respondents were removed from the category of churches that did not practice. One individual left the question blank so he was also removed leaving forty-eight remaining. Thirteen respondents selected multiple answers as to why their church did not practice CSTR. The answers were divided fractionally among the others. The reasons why churches did not practice string tying ritual are shown as a percentage from greatest to least in the figure below:

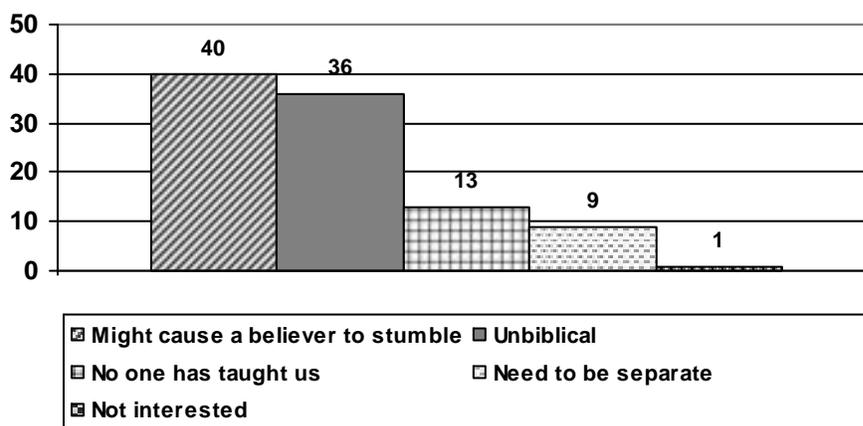


FIGURE 20

REASONS CHURCHES DO NOT USE CHRISTIAN STRING TYING RITUAL COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE

Nineteen or forty percent responded that they felt that use of CSTR might cause a new believer to stumble. This confirms the response frequently heard in oral interviews. Again, this seems to be the standard response. The survey did not provide for a place to give examples of stumbling. Accounting for the divided answers from those who answered multiple selections, eighteen respondents or thirty-six percent stated that they felt that string tying was unbiblical. From the written comments under “other,” unbiblical presumably meant that since string tying was not mentioned in the Bible it should not be practiced by believers. Another interpretation was that since string tying was from the old ways it would be going against the Bible to participate in such events based upon scriptural references specifically commanding Christians to remain separate from the world.

Six nonpractitioners or thirteen percent stated that no one had ever taught them about the possibility of using string tying in their Christian community. This possibly indicates some degree of interest if such teaching were to become available. This is an

area of Christian education that should be addressed in future training of Isaan church leaders. Four and half responses selected “other reasons” for not using the ritual. Most of these wrote in something to the effect that it is necessary for Christians to be separate from their surroundings and not to have anything to do with old ways. It was interesting to note that one of these respondents affirmed in Question 9 that string tying ritual was more cultural than religious, raising the question as to the definition of culture but confirming a corrective worldview that would seek to purify the church by divesting it of cultural practices. Two people wrote that we should not use string tying because it is not in the Bible and another said Isaan people should not use it because they had never heard of either a westerner or a European using it either. Only one of the forty-eight nonpractitioners said they did not practice string tying in their churches because they were not interested.

To further substantiate and evaluate comments from the earlier interviews, respondents were again asked to evaluate the statement, “If Christian string tying ceremonies were seen by new believers it may cause them to be confused or to stumble spiritually.” This time respondents were asked to evaluate their opinion of this statement from most strongly agree (rated as one) to most strongly disagree (rated as five). The results of this comparison are shown below in Figure 21.

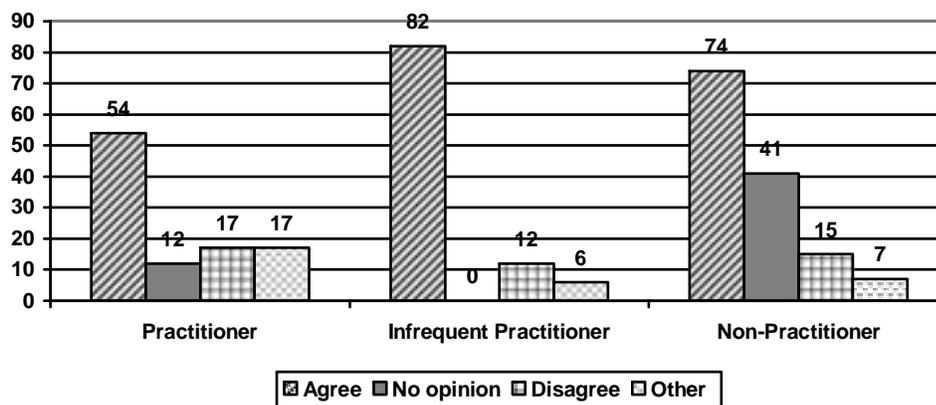


FIGURE 21

**BELIEF THAT CHRISTIAN STRING TYING RITUAL
MAY CAUSE NEW BELIEVERS TO STUMBLE
COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE**

The result of this comparison indicates that of the fifty-four respondents from churches that claim to never practice string tying ritual twenty-nine or seventy-four percent strongly agree that to use CSTR might cause a believer to stumble. Eleven somewhat agree with this. Interestingly enough, among respondents from churches claiming to regularly practice CSTR in their community, seven respondents strongly agree that it might cause a new believer to stumble and eighteen somewhat agree with this as a possibility. This response from practitioners seems contradictory. The author feels that there may be some misunderstanding of the question due to somewhat ambiguous wording. The Thai word “อธิษฐาน” in the question left open an interpretation that if a new believer was to observe such a ceremony it might possibly (or possibly might not) cause that person to stumble spiritually. Since the wording allowed for the possible occurrence of such an event it became impossible for a respondent to say conclusively that such an occurrence could categorically never happen nor would that individual

absolutely have to stumble, only that this remained within the realm of possibility. This survey also did not attempt to define what was actually meant by spiritual stumbling.

Cognitive: What Does It Mean?

In the interviews it was discovered that very few Isaan people had ever had anyone explain the meaning of Isaan rituals to them. This also came through in the survey. Ninety of the total one hundred and eighteen respondents had received either minimal or no explanations during their childhood about the meaning of STR. For those who did get some explanation it was usually parents or grandparents who shared something with them. Only in one case was a Buddhist monk listed as the source of explanation and in no case was it the Brahman leader who traditionally leads such ceremonies in Isaan. Of those who selected “other” as the source of their explanation, six wrote comments including R45 who said that her parents explained the meaning of string tying to her and cleared up her confusion on the issue. R48 said a friend had been the one to explain the meaning of string tying to him. R49 said no one explained the meaning to him; he simply followed along with the ceremony. R54 marked his parents as explaining the meaning to him but also in the space for other wrote, “Sometimes we just understand things” (again, the work of mysterious cultural worldview osmosis). R80 wrote that a teacher at school had explained the meaning of string tying. R90 wrote that he gained understanding of string tying ceremonies by reading about them from books. Individuals who had some clear explanation of the meaning of STR were rare.

The survey questionnaire asked what string-tying ritual meant assuming that individuals would respond with meaning from their own perspectives. Sixty-four respondents (fifty-four percent) stated that the meaning of STR was blessing. Nineteen respondents (sixteen percent) stated that the meaning had to do with *khwan*. Only three people mentioned spirits as part of the meaning.

Can Meanings Change?

During interviews the author heard the response among non-practicing Isaan Christians that the old associations of meaning could not be changed for STR (as well as among other cultural forms) and therefore its use was inappropriate for the life of the Isaan Christian community. This approach appears indicative of a worldview perspective that would approve of, or require, the denial of old ways in favor of those interpreted as biblical or Christian as understood by Isaan believers. Comparison between practitioners and nonpractitioners is indicated in the figure below.

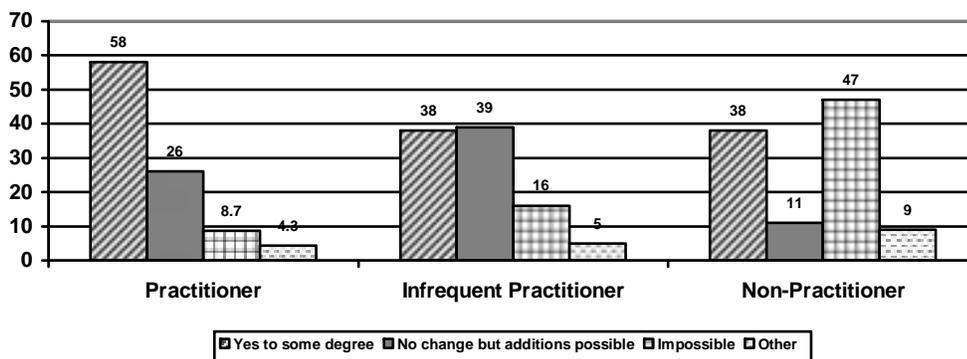


FIGURE 22

BELIEF THAT BELIEF THAT MEANING OF STRING TYING RITUAL CAN BE CHANGED COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE

As indicated in the figure above thirty-eight percent of nonpractitioners felt that the meaning of STR could in fact be changed either completely or significantly yet their churches did not practice it. Forty-seven percent of the fifty-three nonpractitioners felt that it was impossible to change the former meaning of the ritual as did over eight percent of the practitioners (four respondents) who apparently have no problem continuing to use it in their churches anyway.

Question 14 asked if change of meaning was possible what was the agent of such change? Sixty respondents (fifty-one percent) stated that explanation was the key to change. Thirty (twenty-five percent) stated that it was the belief of the participants that caused meaning to change. The exact location of meaning was not clarified in the question. When asked if Christian STR should include an explanation to attempt to communicate the meaning of the event seventy-eight respondents answered with agreement and twenty disagreed.

In attempt to ascertain whether concerns regarding external forms were as important as stated in certain interviews a question was included in the survey questionnaire as to whether or not the particular color of the thread should be changed when using STR within the community of followers of Christ. An emphatic answer came back with fifty-two respondents disagreeing strongly and ten disagreeing somewhat; these respondents felt that the color of the strings should not be changed in order to communicate a message through string tying that was consistent with biblical teaching. Only four agreed strongly that the color of the strings should be changed and eight somewhat agreed.

Is String Tying the Isaan Baptism?

Early in the research process one of the author's committee members posed the question, "Is string tying the Isaan baptism?" During interviews this question always caused believers to stop and think. Ultimately, however, ninety-one respondents stated that baptism was more meaningful than Christian string tying for them. Only seventeen stated that Christian STR was more meaning for them than baptism. When asked if baptism and Christian string tying had similar meanings fifty-seven respondents said no, thirty-seven said yes. No one suggested that string tying replace baptism for Isaan followers of Jesus. The responses to these questions would appear to indicate that both

baptism and STR are important yet serve distinctly different functions within Isaan Christian practice.

Does String Tying Impart Spiritual Knowledge?

Zahniser promotes the idea that ritual can be useful in discipleship (1997:58-71). Can Christian STR impart important spiritual knowledge about God to Isaan people? Is it useful as a tool in Christian teaching and discipleship for the northeastern Thai? Figure 23 shows the results of this inquiry:

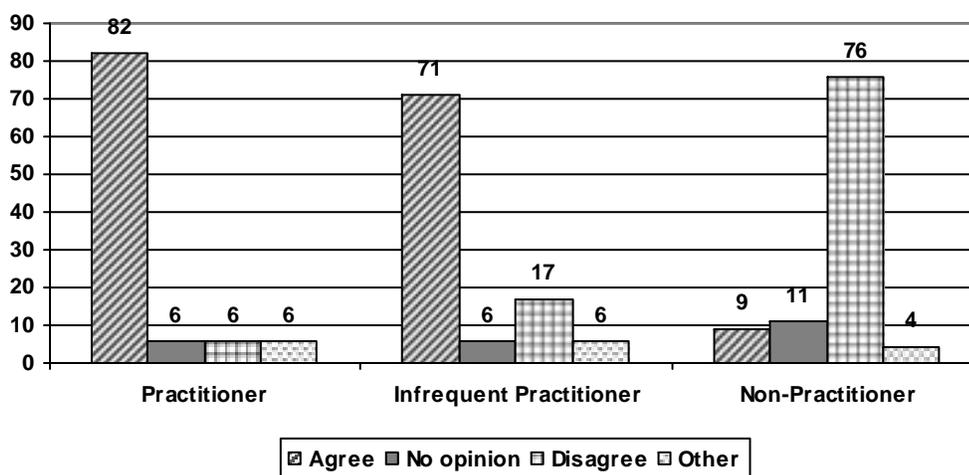


FIGURE 23

CHRISTIAN STRING TYING RITUAL INCREASES KNOWLEDGE OF GOD COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE

The results of this question indicated that when incorporated as part of the life of the worshipping community STR reinforces biblical teaching as well as incorporating many important Christian social and relational responses that Bible discussions or

sermons, because of their usual non-interactive format, do not. Even nine percent of nonpractitioners felt that CSTR increases cognitive knowledge about God.

When asked whether CSTR promoted spiritual growth among Isaan believers an equal number responded yes and no. When asked if CSTR increased the power of God in the lives of participants an equal number said yes and no. When asked if CSTR helped the church to grow in spiritual maturity an equal number of respondents said yes and no. A more general question asked whether CSTR could change the course of people's lives and slightly more (fifty-four) responded with agreement than those who disagreed (forty-seven respondents).

Can String Tying Correct Spiritual Belief?

What impact does CSTR have on changing and correcting the beliefs of the participants? The answers to this question are below:

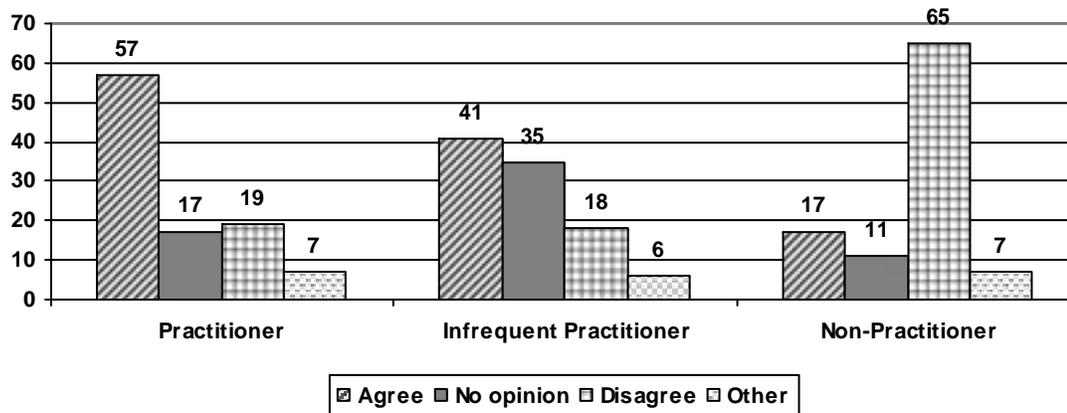


FIGURE 24

**CHRISTIAN STRING TYING RITUAL CAN CHANGE
PEOPLE'S BELIEFS COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE**

Just how beliefs are changed and what the new beliefs are is not determined by this question. However, as a teaching and discipling tool even a significant percentage (seventeen) of non-practicing Isaan Christians would agree that string tying ritual is useful.

Affective: How Do They Feel?

An old maxim states that people will forget what you say but they will never forget how you make them feel. Mulder writes, referring to rural Thai including Isaan, “The tradition-oriented people are not interested in spiritual or intellectual depth but rather in survival” (2000:108). The author’s experience in Isaan supports both of these. It appears from the following review of data that Isaan people are not so much concerned about cognitive knowledge but about relationships, feelings, and connections for the future.

This avenue of the affective was pursued in question asking what should be the Isaan Christian’s position towards string tying ritual. Fifty percent of the respondents (fifty-eight) said that Isaan Christians should participate with understanding. Twenty-eight respondents (twenty-four percent) said forsake it because it was part of old ways.

How do Isaan Christians Feel about Their Culture?

One aspect of determining the affective perspective of Isaan Christians towards string tying was to begin with the question asking whether or not a person felt that string tying ritual in general was basically religious or basically cultural. When compared among practitioners and nonpractitioners the results produced the following figure.

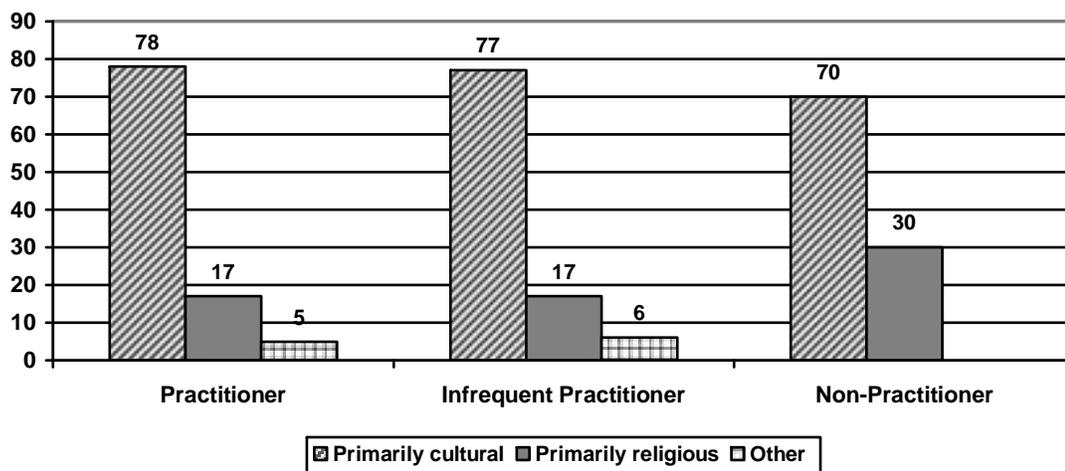


FIGURE 25

**IS STRING TYING RITUAL RELIGIOUS OR CULTURAL?
COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE**

It is remarkable how similar the views of the members of the three groups are in this issue. The majority of respondents, practitioners, both regular and infrequent, and nonpractitioners responded that string tying ritual was more cultural than religious. Certainly no one with even a limited understanding of the cultural history of the Khorat Plateau could state that the string tying ritual has no religious elements nor could they deny that it was originally derived from a non-Christian religious belief system. The important observational question is in regards to the definition of terms. The fact that so many nonpractitioners stated that string tying ritual was cultural does not in and of itself indicate an acceptance of cultural forms or an openness to use them within the life of their Christian community. In fact, the author would interpret these answers to represent the corrective perspective on worldview which would seek to reject forms that are cultural and to instead replace them with something that is assumed to be Christian and specifically not from the local culture, even if that may come at the cost of making strong

anti-social statements or cause rending of relationships in the process. Thirty-two or sixty percent of these same non-practicing respondents who felt so strongly that string tying is cultural also felt that it was important to reject string tying (Question 40 in the survey) precisely because it comes from the old cultural ways as shown in Figure 26.

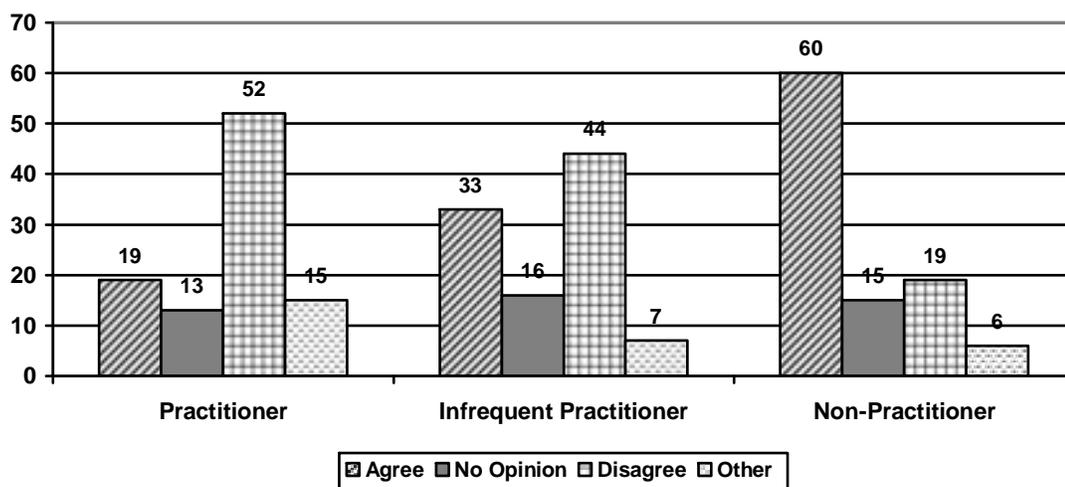


FIGURE 26

**STRING TYING RITUAL SHOULD BE REJECTED
BECAUSE IT IS CULTURAL COMPARED BY
PERCENTAGE**

What does String Tying Ritual Do for People?

If thirty-eight percent of the fifty-three nonpractitioners felt that meaning could be changed they must also believe that there could be positive results attached to or coming from CSTR. The comparison of these results is shown below in Figure 27.⁸

⁸ The category “problems solved” based on interviews was not chosen by any respondents.

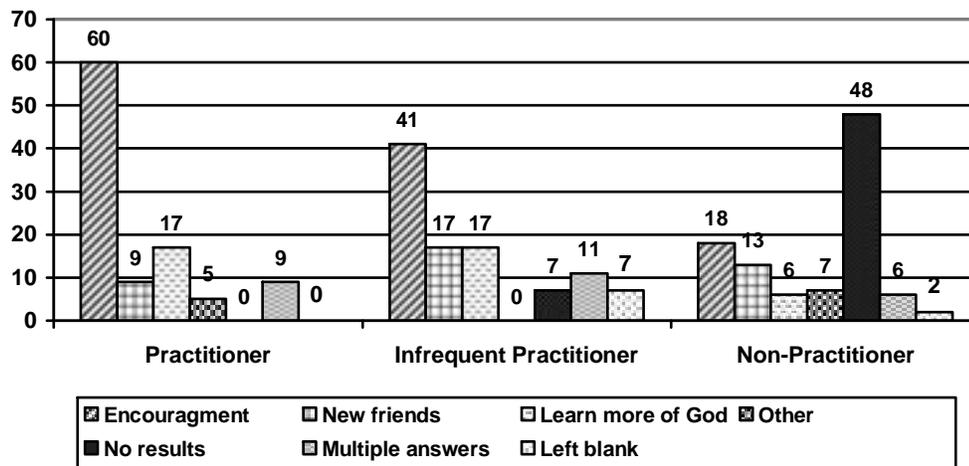


FIGURE 27

**RESULT OF CHRISTIAN STRING TYING RITUAL
COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE**

Thirty seven percent (twenty of the fifty-three) of nonpractitioners claimed that there would be some sort of positive benefit for the participant from using CSTR in the church from the first five options of answers. Eighteen percent (ten) of these said the positive benefit would be encouragement which was by far the most popular response among practitioners as well. This also confirms what most oral interviewees stated in many different ways. Thirteen percent (seven) nonpractitioners said that gaining new friends was a benefit from CSTR as compared to only four actual practitioners who saw this as a result among participants in their churches. Three nonpractitioners felt that it was possible for a participant to learn more of God compared to nine in the group of practitioners. Four nonpractitioners expressed in writing other results they believed would follow when using CSTR. One wrote that this might be a new perspective or belief from the leader. It was not clear from the comment whether this was to be interpreted as either a positive or a negative result and could certainly be interpreted

either way. Three others felt that the results of participating in string tying would result in doing something that was wrong, that it would be sinning, and that it would result in confusion.

Twenty-five nonpractitioners out of fifty-three felt that there would be absolutely no result whatsoever from participating in Christian string tying raising the question as to whether or not the ceremony is therefore primarily neutral or primarily negative. It is also not clear how nonpractitioners would be able to describe results from a Christian version of an Isaan string tying ceremony if they had never in fact witnessed such an event personally. Other than the three responses that described specific negative results the majority of nonpractitioners could be interpreted to be open to the possibility of using string tying ritual in the life of their Christian community if they actually felt it would lead to a deepening of their Christian life either in a cognitive or affective way or if some leader in whom they placed trust would explain it to them.

It is of interest to note that no respondent from any group felt that a result of a Christian string tying ceremony was to resolve problems as can be seen by the second option in each category which shows zero. This is informative in light of the fact that problem-solving was traditionally one of the main uses of string tying ritual within the Lao/Thai-Isaan community at large and may have been one of the major necessities for its original development. Among the Christian Isaan community today this is not seen as one of the results of the string tying ceremony at all, which has implications for its role and use in the process of discipleship of the Christian community. One wonders what methods are being used by Isaan people in general today to resolve problems and what answers the church has to offer in this regard.

Is there an Isaan Christian Identity?

Issues of identity had been raised during the interviews and the author wanted to pursue them further in the survey. The most pressing question was left until the last of the survey. The results of the final query on the affective perspective towards string tying ritual are shown below in Figure 28.

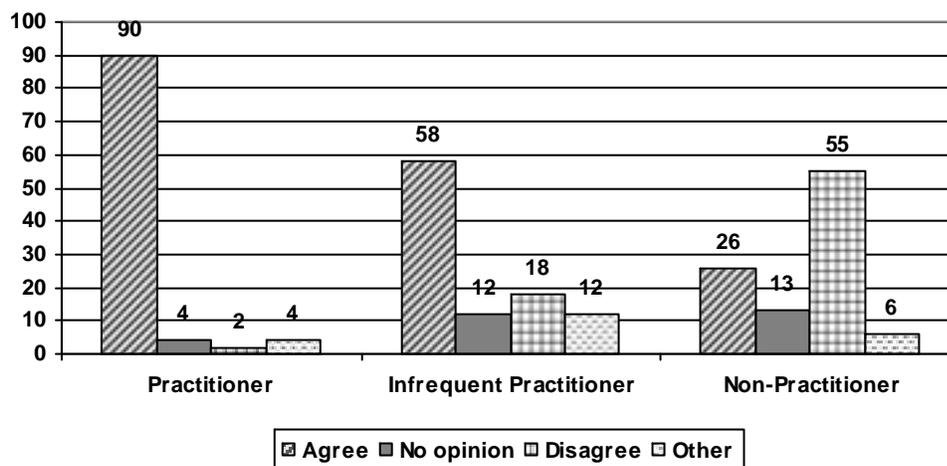


FIGURE 28

CHRISTIAN STRING TYING RITUAL HELPS ISAAN PEOPLE UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST AND BE THAI COMPARED BY PERCENTAGE

The author was interested in determining if any nonpractitioners would feel that a sense of being a Thai and being a follower of Christ needed to be brought together. This would be in conflict with a separatist worldview. For practitioners the answer is a clear indication that this is one of the functions of CSTR. Nearly a third of nonpractitioners as well felt that this understanding (which is placed here under affective intentionally) was a

reality for them. How many more would have agreed with this if they had actually experienced a CSTR in person?

Summary

It became evident from a review of the survey and the interview data that within the Isaan Christian community there are deeply held perspectives represented that are not merely different but seemingly opposite in outlook towards the use of string tying ritual. Similarly to the interview data this could be reflective of the two general perspectives towards religious aspects of worldview as suggested by McElhanon. It would appear from the data and the practiced described that each side of the two perspectives is committed to varying degrees to defending, preserving, and promoting its own worldview perspective. What was being demonstrated is the fact that within the Isaan Christian community there are actually two different sub-cultures or societies on this particular issue of the use of string tying ritual that are on opposite sides of a difficult issue. This is not a pleasant admission for the church of Jesus Christ but certainly an undeniable reality for the northeast of Thailand and possibly places elsewhere as well.

Findings from the Interview Data

From the data collected through interviews the author would conclude that there are two major perspectives of worldview among Isaan Christians. These could be stated as opposite ends of a scale with individual believers placing themselves at numerous points along the length of the spectrum. At one end of the spectrum are those Isaan believers who would feel that a complete and total separation from things cultural is necessary for Christian holiness and although it is unlikely any Isaan Christian would be willing to do so would feel it their duty to defend their Christian faith on the basis of the teachings and beliefs of their doctrinal interpretations. On the other end of the spectrum

would be those who feel that their cultural forms contain elements that can be used by God to speak out to those who are in their families and communities to reach them for him. Among those the author has observed during the research period and sixteen years of experience in Thailand, churches in between these two ends with a selective approach to Isaan culture are extremely rare. The two extremes found in the Isaan Christian community confirm McElhanon's description of Christian worldview.

Evangelical theologians generally present the Christian worldview as a systematic theology for the defense of the Christian faith or as an instrument to confront and dismantle opposing worldviews. In so doing they use philosophical and logical argumentation, and their approach is more corrective than interpretive. Those who adopt such an approach regard the contextualization of the gospel as a method for discovering the weaknesses of opposing worldviews and convincing their proponents of the superiority of the Christian faith.

On the other hand, many evangelical Christian missionaries who adopt cultural approaches begin with both the Bible and the language and culture of the people they wish to reach. Because a command of the language is the key to understanding a worldview, they learn the language, how the people use the language to categorize the things they regard as important, and how they use it to interpret their life experiences. Thus their approach is more interpretive than corrective. They 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).

Those Isaan Christians who had been raised in, to use McElhanon's terms, the evangelical theological perspective deeply hold loyalty to their own position and would question to certain degrees the interpretive perspective. This has been the historical position of Protestants throughout Thailand and is certainly the dominant Protestant Thai Christian worldview. Those at the other end of the spectrum could perceive their more conservative brethren too narrow. This is a very small minority among Christians and certainly viewed with suspicion among the Protestant Thai Christian majority. This interpretive position is closer to the Thai Catholic perspective which is precisely the reason that Thai Protestants would view the work of Catholics as accommodating rather than clearly and distinctly Christian in nature. From an evaluation of external practices it

would appear that one end of the spectrum focuses more on knowledge and the deliberate change of form while the other focuses on relationship and continuity of form. Could this perspective on worldview be why there are three Thai Catholics to every Thai Protestant in Isaan (Visser 2004)? Certainly it must be considered as a major contributing factor if not the singular factor.

Both perspectives exist within Isaan Christianity and both can be and are being used by God. Could it be possible within the same larger body of believers in northeast Thailand that both could exist side by side within Thai Protestant Christianity? Was there any possibility that each could encourage the other without the more traditional side overriding the fledgling movement attempting to work from within the Buddhist context? These questions led the author to do broader research than my own limited time and energy would allow through interviewing.

Findings from the Survey Data

What is perhaps most revealing to the author in reviewing the survey data is how apparently informed so many Isaan believers are about string tying ritual who come from churches that do not practice it at all. This can most likely be attributed to general Isaan worldview understandings that are communicated not formally but informally in numerous ways from birth perhaps in socialization patterns as mentioned earlier by Douglas. The author would also note a degree of openness to learning more about the subject by more than half of the non-participants in the survey population. One cannot conclude from this data that relationships are less important for nonpractitioners than for practitioners or from Isaan people at large but it is possible to conclude that somewhere non-practicing church members have accumulated both a separatist attitude from local culture and an understanding that they should place a high value on cognitive knowledge over issues of power, particularly biblical knowledge in order to live faithfully in the

midst of the spiritual complexities of Isaan life. Some practitioners also hold a very high value on biblical cognitive knowledge as well.

Deep Level Meaning of Christ-Centered String Tying

Meaning for Isaan Christians participating in CSTR is very different from that of outsiders (non-Isaan) or Isaan people who have never participated in it but the historical background of Isaan people in understanding the relational blessing communicated in string tying ritual sets a foundation upon which the depth of Christ's relationship with humanity can be built and clearly expressed. A new depth of spiritual meaning directed towards the creator God of the Bible can be added to the ceremony in the context of the Isaan Christian community which builds on the cultural meaning found in the worldview of Isaan people. This ritual adds new dimension to the worldview theme of relationships which is deeply embedded in the Isaan heritage. For those willing to explore this avenue of communication the survey data would indicate that practitioners believe that Christ-centered string tying ritual is a powerful and under-utilized God-given gift waiting to be presented to many.

Sustaining Changed Meaning in Christ-Centered String Tying

Keeping the radical heart of the message of the gospel of grace alive is a challenge in any approach. Simply relying upon methodologies that focus upon learning cognitive knowledge or the substitution of non-traditional forms for the traditional will not necessarily lead to a distinction of new meaning for the Isaan believer. When truth is expressed in relational ways through God's grace, not attached to the old cultural values of status or what can be personally gained from it, the meaning of the ritual can be understood as different from the traditional religious meaning whether that is popular Thai Buddhist or popular Thai Christian. When traditional forms are mixed with biblical

meaning they are often held in question by certain groups of Christians and can be seen as a troublesome “fusion of Christian and heathen concepts” (McElhanon 2000b:1033). Explanations based upon the perspective of the worldview found in God’s word will show that every cultural form is in need of God’s touch of transformation and only through the work of his power can deep level changes take place in the hearts and the external expressions of the followers. Practices accused of being godly or ungodly should be evaluated not upon an outsider’s own cultural perspective or agenda but upon the basis of what are the deep-level meanings that are being communicated not merely cognitively but also behaviorally and affectively in the hearts and the relationships of the participants. Is it moving people towards a relationship with Jesus Christ and with others or not?

PART IV

**MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ISAAN
CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON STRING TYING RITUAL**

CHAPTER 11

MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ISAAN CHRISTIANS' PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS STRING TYING RITUAL

The research data indicates that along with historical influences several other important sources of influence were determinative and at times even transformative in the development of the perspective of Isaan Christians towards string tying ritual and its application for use within the community of believers. Hiebert's model of worldview with concentric circles of evaluative, affective, and cognitive can be used to illustrate some of the influences in the inner core of Isaan worldview where the definition of what it means to be Isaan and to view the world in the Isaan way reside.¹ What goes on in this inner core of Isaan worldview deeply affects how different types of communication impact meaning of string tying ritual in the perspective of Isaan followers of Christ.

During interviews it was difficult for Isaan people to define the inner core of Isaan worldview, perhaps similarly to the reaction a fish might have when asked to define water. Usually responses to inquiries in this area would move quickly away from the inner realm of worldview to the outer behavioral realm, shown as the outer circle in Hiebert's model to include such topics as a description of the implements involved in string tying ritual, or the social status of the participants and the leaders, or the economic concerns of the host.² The external aspects of string tying ritual were not hard for most interviewees to describe because they were tangibly able to be compared to the ritual

¹ Hiebert's model of worldview is shown in Figure 3.

² It is not uncommon at string tying ceremonies for Isaan weddings to hear discussion about how much money was spent (IN11). More extravagance implies higher social status for the host and family.

practices of other cultures for ease in differentiation and definition. However, these descriptions did not address the deeper aspects of meaning, impact, and belief much less where or how such deeper issues arose within the personal worldview of the interviewee. These issues related to the inner aspects of the core of Isaan worldview appeared to be important when viewed as part of a receptor-oriented communication strategy of the gospel that has as its goal effecting a response from within and expressed out of the Isaan worldview context.

This study demonstrates through an examination of history, interviews, survey, and observations, that Isaan culture is highly relational and that Isaan people and their deepest worldview beliefs are significantly shaped by the numerous relational interactions that take place throughout a lifetime. Exploring these multiple points of impact upon the life of Isaan Christians today, and by learning their perspectives on string tying ritual, some insights can be drawn that will contribute to more effective and holistic forms of communication of the gospel. These insights can potentially effect a response towards the God of the Bible that is not merely on an external behavioral level but more importantly from the inner level of the beliefs and value systems of the heart.

Influences Affecting Worldview towards String Tying Ritual

Several sources of influences impacting the development of the inner implicit worldview beliefs and value systems of present day Isaan people appear to be linked to the region's lengthy cultural history and have been discussed in some detail in Chapters 3, 4, and 9. Specific to the missiological aspects of this study on the practice of string tying ritual among Isaan followers of Christ, it became important to determine who or what these influences were in the life of Isaan believers on a personal level as well the cultural historic level.

In Figure 29 the author uses Hiebert's model of worldview as a way of organizing the information given by respondents according to the degree of influence various sources of impact had upon them personally in molding and shaping their internal worldview perspective specific to string tying ritual. The outer ring represents the behavioral level. This includes the various perspectives found among Isaan Christians volitionally demonstrated in external activity for or a decision against participation in string tying ritual. The visible behavioral level of Isaan worldview will be discussed in detail in the second half of this chapter under the topic of perspectives towards string tying ritual. Inside the white ring that represents a separation between the visible from the invisible aspects of worldview, are four personal sources of influence upon Isaan Christian worldview. Listed from least to most influential these are influence from local church or denominational policy, influence from church leaders and missionaries, influence from family and friends and internal influences. Although there is a great deal of overlap between them these four major sources of influence appear to align themselves roughly with the cognitive, the affective, and the evaluative levels of Hiebert's diagram.

These personal sources of influence upon Isaan Christian worldview line up with Suntaree's adaptation of G. H. Mead's theory of symbolic interaction applicable to the general Isaan population. According to Suntaree, a person is conceived of having two selves—the "I" and the "Me." The "I" is the inner self-ego and the "Me" is the social self (1998:221). The typical Isaan can quickly compartmentalize to know which type of interaction is required based on the level of the relationship. The application of Hiebert's diagram and Suntaree's application of Mead will be discussed in more detail in the first half of this chapter. Figure 29 diagrams the levels of Isaan Christian worldview and in the block arrows lists the major influences upon each level of the inner core of worldview.

FIGURE 29
LEVELS OF INFLUENCE ON ISAAN CHRISTIAN
WORLDVIEW

Local Church or Denominational Policy

Beginning with the cognitive “Me” ring, the research data indicates that official policies of local church or denomination were one of the least influential factors affecting the perspective of Isaan Christians within the study population in regards to string tying ritual as practiced within the community of believers. These policies would be on the cognitive level as rules taught or preached at some time in the life of the Christian community. This would also appear to be the level where the Isaan social self would come to the fore in the context of interaction with other Christians. In the survey, church

policy was only alluded to once as a reason why respondents should not participate in string tying ritual. R54 stated that, as a rule, Christians do not use strings.³ In the interviews, however, several shared that it had been church policy in the past that those who participated in string tying ritual would be excommunicated (IN3, 4, 29). This confirms the historical record of Christian mission in the Khorat Plateau mentioned in Chapter 4. It appears that while some of these denominational and local church policies may indeed still be on the books, they do not appear to be frequently discussed, promoted, or enforced. The existence of such rules did not appear to prevent the majority of the members in the study population from churches where string tying practices were discouraged from participating in string tying ritual in certain contexts.

Church Leaders and Missionaries

Still inside the ring labeled cognitive and yet slightly more influential than that of local church or denominational policy is the influence of church leaders and missionaries. Here there is first real personal, as opposed to institutional, interaction and as such the level of impact upon worldview is raised. The cognitive level is where the Isaan social self that Suntaree labels the “Me” is exhibited. Here the Isaan value for social harmony can be seen in what Suntaree calls “etiquettical relationships” that demand polite interaction and usually verbal assent especially with socially respected leaders such as pastors and missionaries (1998:222). According to research data, this is still considered primarily the cognitive level of worldview because it centers upon knowing correct responses whereas actual feelings, commitments, and evaluative convictions remain at deeper levels.

Fifty respondents of the survey population (or forty-two percent) stated that they held leadership positions within their churches. Fourteen of these fifty stated that they

³ He stated that non-Christians use sacral waters (blessed by Buddhist monks) to insure the blessing but Christians already have God who gives blessings.

had at one time been told not to participate in string tying ritual. Of these fourteen, four wrote that the person that had told them not to participate was either a pastor or a missionary. Opposition by church leadership did not prevent believers from seeking out such rituals elsewhere when it was felt necessary. Historical records among Protestant Christian groups indicate a disturbing number of believers who returned to animistic practices after a public decision to follow Christ, perhaps out of a sense of need for access to a more expedient source of power.

The category of the influence of church leaders includes both Isaan and expatriate missionaries even though no expatriate missionaries were invited to participate in the survey. Interviews with Isaan Christians over age sixty confirmed that in the past the number of expatriate missionary pastors was higher than it is today and nearly all of these in the past forbid participation in string tying ritual (IN2, 3, 29). In more recent cases missionaries have actually encouraged the use of string tying ritual as observed in the work of the Thailand Covenant in the northern provinces of Isaan. Observations by the author based on travels throughout Isaan would indicate that less than twenty-five percent of Isaan churches are pastored today by expatriate missionaries. However, a higher percentage of missionaries were involved in evangelism and church planting historically throughout mission history on the Khorat Plateau. According to the data therefore, the most widespread influence of church leaders upon Isaan Christians today regarding the use or avoidance of string tying ritual, at least among the survey population, is coming from Isaan or Thai church leaders rather than missionaries. That the numbers of excommunications from Isaan churches in the past was greater than is heard about today may be due more to the fact that missionaries are no longer in charge to support this type of direct confrontation, than from an actual decrease in dual allegiances.

Among the fifty Isaan Christian leaders in the survey population, thirty-four (sixty-eight percent) stated that they had participated in string tying ritual ten or more times recently, a figure that could be considered frequent. Only five (ten percent) stated

that they had never participated in a string tying ritual. The remaining eleven Isaan church leaders (twenty-two percent) stated that they had participated in string tying ritual recently less than ten times, a figure the author considers somewhat frequent.⁴ This is interesting in light of the fact that seventeen (thirty-four percent) of these Isaan Christian leaders come from churches that claim to never practice Isaan string tying ritual within their fellowships. This appears to indicate that less than one Isaan church leader in three that came from an Isaan church that specifically does not practice string tying ritual could claim to never attend such events personally. The remaining seventy-one percent of Isaan Christian leaders who lead churches that never practice STR stated that they do attend string tying events, presumably outside of their Christian fellowship, on a frequent or fairly frequent basis.⁵ It would appear to be a contradiction that three out of four Christian Isaan leaders who are teaching against the practice of string tying ritual in their own fellowships are attending such events somewhere themselves. Not surprisingly, that the number of church members from non-practicing Isaan churches who are attending STR somewhere outside the Christian community frequently to somewhat frequently is nearly identical to that of the leaders.

Family and Friends

Moving beyond the cognitive to the next level of increasing influence upon Isaan worldview is the affective level which will include the relational impact of family and friends. Isaan culture has historically viewed the home as the first place of learning for

⁴ The survey did not ask how many of these leaders had led the ceremony themselves or how many of the ceremonies had been held on their own behalf.

⁵ From the comparison of data from survey Questions 7, 30, and 11, only five out of seventeen Isaan Christian leaders from churches that never practiced STR claimed to never attend the ritual somewhere. In percentages this came to twenty-nine percent absolute non-participating Isaan Christian church leaders and seventy-one percent participants from non-practicing churches. The location of the STR attended was not asked in the survey. It would appear that since these church leaders came from Isaan churches that did not include string tying within the acceptable realm of Christian practice that the events attended were not Christian in orientation.

children even though few Isaan parents would ever consider themselves equal with *khun khru* or a teacher who instills facts and knowledge on the cognitive level to students. In reality, Isaan worldview values, not unlike that of most cultures, are learned from parents and other caregivers during the earliest years of childhood before any type of formal education on the cognitive level has begun. The data showed that the majority of Isaan worldview learning was acquired through non-formal affective training via daily interactions with parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles and older siblings.⁶ These were the people who taught them not only what to do and what to know cognitively, but more importantly how one should or should not feel towards others, towards oneself, and towards religious beliefs and practices including string tying ritual. Some interviewees remember being the focus of one of these ceremonies and being deeply moved by the recollection more than twenty years later (IN2, 6, 8, 10).

The influence of family and friends on how people should feel towards string tying ritual appears to have been greater than those who gave cognitive input. As is true for most popular Buddhism practiced in Isaan, seventy-one percent of respondents who stated they had been prevented from participating in string tying ritual stated that they had only received a very vague explanation of the meaning. Sixty-four percent stated that the person who had prevented them was either a family member or a friend basically because it was felt to be wrong. On the other hand, sixty percent of respondents (seventy-one people) stated that they first became interested in God on an affective level through the influence of either a close friend or a family member.⁷

Relationships at the affective level of Isaan worldview are much deeper than on the cognitive level where the social “Me” is exhibited. Here is where family and friends become interwoven into the *boonkhun* network that includes parents but may also include any who were primary caregivers during the early growing years or very close for a

⁶ These titles could include age equivalent non-blood relatives.

⁷ The Thai term used for interest in this question reflects the affective rather than the cognitive.

variety of reasons. According to Suntaree in the *boonkhun* level of relationships the “Me” and the “I” coincide (1998:221). For Isaan people these are not merely people that fed and bathed you as a child but at a deeper unconscious level they instilled in you your identity. They paved the way for you to be able to formulate your own evaluative understandings of the world and your place within it and therefore the recipient owes such persons everything. A *boonkhun* relationship requires a greater degree of sincerity, honesty, openness, and submissiveness (:221-222). According to the survey data, although string tying ritual did bring people together relationally, it did not enable one to automatically become part of another’s *boonkhun* network. Because of lifelong *boonkhun* obligation it became clear from respondents that a rejection of cultural practices such as string tying ritual for those raised by non-Christian caregivers was not merely an ideological or religious demonstration, but was in actuality a rejection of the most important people in life. To insult people within the *boonkhun* network can invoke some of the strongest public emotional demonstrations in Isaan society (:224). This may lend more perspective as to why so few Isaan Christians in churches that claim to prohibit string tying ritual continue to practice it. It is likely that the *boonkhun* relationship network demands it and, unlike local church policy, teachings of a pastor, or requests from distant relatives or acquaintances, it cannot be refused and still survive.

Internal Influences

The innermost core of Isaan worldview represented in Figure 29 is the evaluative level where the strongest internal influences lead to final decisions. Ultimately the decision of whether to participate in string tying ritual or not depends upon the individual Isaan believer. Personal internal influences on the evaluative level, as demonstrated by the research data, seem to be the greatest influence upon whether or not a person will participate in string tying ritual. All the cognitive and affective influences and input from

history, culture, church, pastor, family, friends, and even intimate *boonkhun* relationships, are merely foundational for the final evaluative decisions Isaan individuals make at the deepest levels of the “I.” Here is where the deepest essence of a personal Isaan identity, in the context of a corporate Isaan cultural identity, seems to lie. This study cannot fully explore the complexities of Isaan identity, however, the research data seems to confirm studies by Bailey, Banpote, and Suntaree,⁸ who state that the most influential worldview value for Isaan people is that of individualism and the pursuit of power. Individual power is not unique to Isaan people but what is attributed by Amara Pongsapich to central Thai culture is also evidence in Isaan: this is an ability to compartmentalize feelings and thoughts according to circumstance. “Their ‘public self’ exhibiting dependent traits as necessary to survive and progress in the hierarchical society while, at the same time, maintaining the integrity of the ‘ego self’ of independence and esteem” (1998:182-183).

In a society such as Isaan where what is said in public, where the “Me + I” interact, is as pleasingly polite as possible, string tying appears to be a strategic cultural attempt employing the liminal function of ritual to draw a line between ordinary social pleasantries and communication at a deeper level. String tying ritual offers an opportunity for a meaningful personal blessing that is highly appealing to most Isaan, even Christians, because it seems to come closer to touching the core of the inner person. It can be empowering individually and can be a powerful means of dealing with interpersonal difficulties as well. Observations by the author among Isaan Christian leaders particularly would confirm Suntaree’s comments that if for any reason the inner sense of self-esteem is violated the strong resultant emotional demonstration makes reconciliation extremely difficult if not impossible (1998:224). For Isaan people the

⁸ Bailey’s comments are in regards to the Lao of the PDR Lao and Suntaree’s in regards to the central Thai. Based on his own observation Nantachai states that ego orientation is the top priority for all Thai except for Isaan farmers who value fun and pleasure orientation over ego orientation (2004).

historic means of reconciliation after personal or communal violation has been the string tying ritual. Seventy-six respondents (sixty-four percent) in the survey stated that they believed that string tying ritual was useful for reconciling people together. The author has observed this personally among Isaan believers, but such reconciliation must be mutual for both parties and cannot be forced. String tying ritual used this way appears to be indicative of the intentional commitment of both parties to consider the goal of restitution, whether actualized yet or not, as a present reality sealed by this socially sanctioned ceremony. Understanding the evaluative inner influences upon personal worldview appears to be key in understanding Isaan Christians' perspective towards the practice or avoidance of string tying ritual.

Perspectives of Isaan Christians towards String Tying Ritual

The inner personal influences upon Isaan worldview towards string tying ritual produce the external demonstrations exhibited behaviorally in practice. A cursory observation among Isaan Christians would seem to indicate that either they practice string tying ritual in churches or they do not. In reality the behavioral realm is more complicated than that; it actually appears to be an outward expression of the inner perspective held by the individual or group towards local cultural worldview. McElhanon's two conceptual perspectives of worldview found among Christians, the corrective position and the interpretive position, appear to hold significance for the situation among believers in northeast Thailand (2000:1032-1033). These two perspectives differ substantially in how they perceive and apply the concept of worldview. The research data shows that both of the perspectives of worldview mentioned by McElhanon exist among Isaan Christians as demonstrated by their practices and reactions to string tying ritual. It also seems to indicate a third position inferred by McElhanon, but not specifically stated, is present among Isaan Christians in

the study population and beyond. The author would label this third perspective the accommodative position. These positions will be reviewed with descriptions of the strengths, areas of concern, and missiological implication of each.

Corrective Position

The first perspective mentioned by McElhanon would see worldview as a corrective concept. 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 theological structure, “evangelical theologians generally present the Christian worldview as a systematic theology for the defense of the Christian faith or as an instrument to confront and dismantle opposing worldviews. In doing so they use philosophical and logical argumentation” (2000:1032). 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.

A review of the data from this study seems to indicate that there are Isaan Christians who would hold to the corrective position to various degrees. This would be demonstrated by, among other things, their position against string tying ritual which they would consider, for the various reasons stated in Chapters 9 and 10, as unsuitable and inappropriate for use within the life of the Christian community. They see it as a continuation of allegiance to a non-Christian worldview value. Some interviewees stated that the Isaan worldview value that they saw in new Christians and in Isaan society in general that required ritual such as string-tying as part of coping with major transitions in life was something that should be changed. According to IN1 and 9 this was considered best accomplished by on-going discipleship through Christian education. Written

comments by nonpractitioners of string tying ritual also confirmed that some Isaan Christians strongly supported the corrective position (R37, 41, 54, 73, 84).

Strengths of the Corrective Position

The corrective position emphasizes biblical knowledge. Isaan believers holding strictly to the corrective position would feel that it is their task as Christians to teach an understandable message of the Bible in a systematic way that can be useful when sharing with people of other beliefs. Values and beliefs that conflict with or oppose those of the Bible must be confronted in love and changed through God's power.

Outward demonstration of the corrective position would be to appear as distinctly Christian in the context of the non-Christian world and would therefore stress separation from anything with the appearance of the former non-Christian ways. During interviews, Isaan believers from this position stated that it was their belief that using local religious and in some cases cultural forms such as string tying was a sign of spiritual or even moral weakness on the part of Isaan Christians. To them it was accommodating to the former Isaan worldview without challenging it with the heart of the gospel message. Because of this it was considered compromising to the Christian faith. Isaan Christians taking the corrective position would question whether the meaning for believers during CSTR had actually changed since such events demonstrated a serious lack of Christian distinctiveness for them.

The strength of this position is that it is seen as unambiguous and faithful to a particular interpretation of biblical truth. It was felt that those who are Christians no longer involve themselves with activities that are considered Buddhist, they now follow practices presumably Christian instead. Hughes mentions how Christian forms came to replace the old forms and the non-Christians ways permanently.

Christianity has been introduced [in Thailand] as a completely new way of life. It was intended to replace Buddhism and its ideology of karma and

merit. It was also intended to replace animism. It has been the general practice to discipline, sometimes with excommunication, any Christian who participated in animistic or (sic) Buddhist rites (1984a:324-325).

Isaan believers who hold strictly to a corrective position would view string tying ritual as one of the former ways that should be either discontinued or replaced for those Isaan who are now claiming to follow Jesus Christ.

Concerns within the Corrective Position

The very strength of the corrective position as stated by its adherents can also become its most urgent area of concern. In cultures where it is commonly accepted that groups of people enjoy deep philosophical discussions back and forth even to a degree that some might perceive as heated, the corrective approach serves an important function in assisting Christians in sharpening their Christian apologetic. Written material describing the Christian position on various important theological or eschatological issues, largely originating out of western contexts, are widely translated and available throughout Isaan as well as the rest of Thailand. Many of these give support in varying degrees to a corrective position towards local worldview. Isaan culture, for the most part, is not engaged at this level. Neither elite philosophical or popular Buddhism stress cognitive religious knowledge. The research data indicates that through the course of their lives Isaan people accrue, rather than formally learn, a cognitive understanding of the social expectations demanded of them in their practices of popular Buddhism rather than a body of religious belief.⁹ For most Isaan people, the understandings of religious practice cannot be separated from the cultural reality of being a member of Isaan society.

Religious cognitive knowledge is not merely unfamiliar to Isaan people, it can even be repellant. Isaan society values face-saving and conflict avoidance to such a high degree that difficult topics, such as religious issues, are intentionally avoided in public

⁹ This would include all rituals included under the rubric of popular Buddhism as practiced in Isaan included string tying and others.

discussion lest someone be offended. Hiebert describes certain cultures where telling people what they want to hear is more important than for them to know the truth (1985:47). A review of the research data, particularly from the interviews, would indicate that this is true within Isaan culture. It is not an overstatement to say that in Isaan culture social harmony is a greater value than truth. In light of this, the corrective position cannot successfully demonstrate itself openly on a dialogical level where decisions would be made based on debate or logical discussions. Instead, in Isaan culture it must, for the most part, be demonstrated through external behavior in what might be referred to as lifestyle witness. Interviewees reported that they were taught that as Christians they were required not merely to assent philosophically to a body of truth but to live out this truth tangibly through the choice of activities in which one did or did not participate (IN3, 4, 29). This shows evidence of a corrective position.¹⁰ From the Isaan perspective, a philosophical or religious disconnect is viewed relationally, not ideologically, and this is of major concern for the corrective position. The concern for social harmony by Isaan people would suggest that when following Christ appears to require (whether correctly or incorrectly perceived) the dissolution or rejection of relationships that are the support network of one's life with no substantial or secure substitute anticipated within the new community of Isaan Christians, a corrective position becomes unattractive for the established person.

A rigid corrective position is difficult for believers to maintain in Isaan culture. Isaan churches that do not practice 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 perhaps even the goal for most such churches. The reality, according to the interview and survey data, is that most Isaan Christians who are members of churches

¹⁰ "I was taught as a Christian that all addictions were wrong and therefore drinking and smoking were sinful. Out of fear I gave up smoking but I noticed that the missionaries were never able to give up drinking their coffee" (IN29 21 May 2004).

tending towards a corrective position and theoretically opposed to using rituals, such as string tying in their community, neither desire nor are attempting to maintain a disconnection socially from their families and friends. Seventy-five percent of those in the survey who come from churches that would take a strict position against using cultural forms such as string tying ritual admit to involvement in these rituals from time to time. This would reinforce the value that prioritizes social harmony over truth yet raises concerns regarding spiritual allegiance for those in the corrective position. Many of those interviewed considered societal opposition to their corrective position to be the norm for the life of the true Christian and used war metaphor to describe their experiences. They mentioned the strength of opposing forces and the importance for them to be able to stand firm for Christian values in a non-Christian world (IN1, 27, 29).

Isaan believers who tended towards a corrective position expressed a reaction to string-tying ritual, even as used within the context of believers, that appears very similar to that of certain first century Christians who were invited to partake of food offered to idols. This was something that they could not do with a clear conscience and therefore to them it was sin (1 Co. 8). These Isaan Christians would like other Isaan people in the wider society to know that they still love them, but that there were certain things in which they as Christians could no longer participate. Unfortunately the lack of participation, or use of meaningful cultural forms, seems to send a conflicting anti-relational message

Missiological Impact of the Corrective Position

Based on observations in Isaan churches, it appears that the corrective position is most popular among people in two categories. The first are those who for various reasons are dissatisfied with their own religious and/or cultural background. There appear to be a certain percentage in every Isaan community that fit this category with more in urban areas. Those within restricted or repressive environments may seek to find

new freedom by divorcing themselves completely from their past forms and identities and seek to forge a new identity in the Christian way. This can be seen from a review of mission work in the region of the Khorat Plateau and from interviews where it was noted that the segments of Isaan society most receptive to Christianity were the lepers who were dissatisfied with their status as outcasts and embraced a gospel that was taught by most Protestant evangelistic efforts at the time from a corrective position.¹¹

The second category of Isaan people attracted to the Christian corrective position on worldview that come from research data are those who are in transition in life and are seeking what is new. One group where this can be seen is the college and university age students, many of whom are living away from home for the first time. Numerous groups, primarily evangelical Protestants, are attracting young Isaan people to their gatherings, some on college campuses, where western music, instruments, and worship styles are translated into Thai with sometimes forty or more Isaan youth in attendance. In one urban Isaan church where the worship songs and parts of the service were conducted in both Thai and English the author was told by an Isaan Christian leader, "I feel closest to God when I pray in English." Another young Isaan Christian raised in a Christian context that used only Isaan language and local indigenous Isaan Christian music and instruments, shared how deeply moved she was when she was allowed to sing Christian songs with a guitar for the first time. The distinctiveness of a relationship with Jesus Christ as expressed through new Christian forms appears to be highly attractive to those in transition in life.

¹¹ Hughes noticed that "honour in society" tended to be rated lower in importance by Christians than Buddhists. He attributes this to the fact that Christians tend to be people marginal in Thai society. "The minority status of Christianity in society is expressed in this negative correlation for Christians of "religion" with "honour in society" (1984b:225-226).

Accommodative Position

In contrast to McElhanon's description of the corrective position, a review of the research data appears to indicate that not only is there the potential possibility of an opposite position to that of the corrective, it is in fact highly evident that such an opposite position in regards to string tying ritual as practiced by Isaan Christians is a reality. This position could be called the accommodative position. In the accommodative position string tying ritual is accepted for the most part at face value as an important Isaan ritual and it is given affirmation from a Christian source. It is the polar opposite of the corrective position in that while the corrective position would seek to logically convince and replace what was seen as an opposing worldview in order to maintain Christian faithfulness, the accommodative position would embrace almost everything from the former practices under the rubric of Christian. A diagram of these two positions on a spectrum might look something like the following:

Accommodative Position	Corrective Position
Popular Buddhist World	Popular Christian World
Non-selective engagement with local worldview expressions	Deliberate distancing from local worldview expressions

FIGURE 30

ACCOMODATIVE AND CORRECTIVE POSITIONS

In the accommodative position string tying ritual might be practiced within a Christian context but without any particular explanation of Christian meaning given to the event. This was done at the welcome ceremony described in Chapter 9 for new

students at a large Christian university in Thailand. Unlike the corrective position, the communication of meaning in the accommodative position is not considered a priority. When an Isaan Catholic asks his priest to bless the strings with holy water and then uses them for a string tying blessing in a ceremony in his home or community, the former understanding of the empowerment of the strings remains as it was in the popular Buddhist context with the strings as the means of effecting the blessing. For the Christian however, the source of that blessing has been changed. It would appear that in this position rather than trying to change or correct the meaning of the string tying ceremony, the goal was to adapt or adopt certain popular Buddhist practices into Christianity in order to accommodate local cultural understandings and worldview values.

Strengths of the Accommodative Position

The accommodative position strongly desires to be non-confrontational. Preservation of good relationships is a key. This position would seem to acknowledge that from within their worldview Isaan people have certain values and felt needs that are important and should be addressed. String tying ritual is acknowledged as holding a significant place and is retained in order to meet some of these values and cultural felt needs. From the interviews it appears that definitive explanation of the meaning of the ceremony is kept to a minimum among Isaan Christians who would tend towards an accommodative position on worldview. An assumption is made that meaning is already culturally understood and that the previous meaning is adequate in terms of the needs of the recipient (communication and ritual effects) and of all the practitioners.

Adaptation of string tying ritual is not difficult in this approach if the local priest or respected Christian leader is willing to give his or her affirmation. In some cases this is not even required. The important thing is that relational felt needs are met whether

those be spiritual with God or dealing with the spirit world, or on the human level with one another.

Concerns within the Accommodative Position

Opponents of the accommodative position would state that it embraces almost all that is old and communicates almost nothing that is new, and that it does not appear to be consistent with biblical teaching (IN22, 29). Within the accommodative position there appears to be little or no questioning of Isaan worldview values and needs as they are. Difficult issues such as how Isaan worldview needs can be addressed from within the cultural context and still communicate the need for a response in the direction of the God of the Bible appear to be downplayed. 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, one of the major concerns of the use of ritual as described in Chapter 7. In the perspective of some Christians certain Catholic groups go too far in allowing unchallenged worldview values to dictate what should and should not be done. At times there appears to be a willingness to provide whatever is necessary to accommodate to the felt need for power.

Missiological Impact of the Accommodative Position

The relational aspect of the accommodative approach presents something that is new but not foreign. Catholic missionary effort capitalized on the worldview needs of Isaan people and made available, from the beginning, the resources in Jesus Christ to free people from spiritual bondage. The response to this approach of Christian communication has resulted in more respondents than that of other approaches in the history of missions on the Khorat Plateau. Were numbers the only criterion it would

appear that the accommodative approach has engendered the most significant missiological success. It would be incorrect to state that all Catholics in Isaan hold an accommodative or strictly accommodative position on worldview. The survey and interview population, however, indicates that this is the tendency for the greater number of Isaan Catholics and their churches today.

Like the corrective position, the accommodative position also appealed to those who were in transition or to those who desired release from bondage whether that be spiritual, ideological, or physical. The fact that there are now three Isaan Catholics for every one Isaan Protestant believer seems to indicate that something, perhaps the relational focus on felt-needs, from within the accommodative position appeals to Isaan people. This may also be partially explained by the willingness of Isaan Catholicism (however conscious or not) to adapt itself to the primal religious system of practices of Isaan people that easily accommodated (and continues to accommodate) various beliefs into one.

Interpretive Position

McElhanon describes a second conceptual position towards worldview that is used by some Christian missionaries which begins with both the Bible and the language and culture of the people they wish to reach (2000:1032). This is a cultural and relational approach that prioritizes people as they encounter the truth of the Bible from within their own contextual worldview framework that McElhanon labels an interpretive approach. 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” (:1032). A number of Isaan Christians stated that encountering the truth of God and his message of love in a cultural experience that was understood through the media of string tying ritual was important to them (IN2, 3, 10, 12,

15, 17, 22, 24). The high percentage of favorable respondents to survey questions on this issue also indicate that to a number of Isaan believers, the interpretive approach to worldview as seen through string tying ritual was important to them.

The interpretive position stands between the corrective position and the accommodative position in an evaluative way. It is something of both and also something of neither as diagrammed in Figure 31.

Accommodative Position	Interpretative Position	Corrective Position
Popular Buddhist World		Popular Christian World
Non-selective engagement with local worldview expressions	Selective involvement critical engagement with meaning and expressions	Deliberate distancing from local worldview expressions

FIGURE 31

INTERPRETIVE POSITION

Strengths of the Interpretive Position

The interpretive position attempts to bring a faithful communication of the gospel into the core of Isaan worldview in an evaluative way. Isaan believers holding the interpretive position would view 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 string tying ritual, but they would also embrace the use of local music, language, instruments, dance, and any 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 biblical truth in the viewpoint of 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, 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 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 attempting to press down on the brake pedal. Other Isaan believers have shared incidents of spiritual exorcism, physical and mental healing, freedom from addictions, and restitutions because of the power of God

expressed in the context of CSTR in which believers gathered in prayer celebrating the pre-existent reality of God's power in their midst.

Concerns within the Interpretive Position

Of the three positions, the interpretive position is the most difficult which may explain why it appears least among Isaan believers. It requires a high level of biblical understanding and deep cultural insight brought together with critical thinking. Since this position relies on careful evaluation it is the least natural for Isaan people. It requires skill and sensitivity to be able to lead a discussion about issues that are not clearly black or white. This position may require the support and encouragement of outsiders, such as cross-cultural missionaries fluent in the local language and culture, in order to facilitate the discussion process beforehand in order to promote meaningful reception of the concepts. The author has witnessed the lack of this with unfortunate results. This approach requires the ability of sensitive visionary and prophetic leaders who know the worldview of their audience to encourage Isaan followers of Christ to stand firm in their decisions to follow what they understand is Isaan Christianity faithful to the God of the scripture using their own contextual media such as string tying ritual in communication, for it will most certainly raise issues of concern from other Isaan Christian groups coming from differing positions on cultural worldview.

Missiological Impact of the Interpretive Position

The interpretive position can allow local worldview values to be engaged with the gospel message in culturally appropriate ways that encourage transformation without emphasizing social disconnection yet are not merely accommodating 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.

A summary of the three positions on practices of string tying ritual (STR) found within Isaan Christianity as suggested by the research data is shown in Table 6. These positions are viewed through the categories found in Hiebert's worldview diagram, shown in Figure 2, of the affective realm (how people feel about string tying ritual), the cognitive realm (what people believe about string tying ritual), and the behavioral (what people do with string tying ritual).

TABLE 6
ISAAK CHRISTIAN POSITIONS ON CHRISTIAN STRING TYING RITUAL

	Accommodative Position	Interpretive Position	Corrective Position
Affective: How do they feel about STR?	Uncritical, accepting, positive	Open, cautious, positive	Negative, fearful, disapproving
Cognitive: What do they believe about STR?	Strings are powerful in the name of Jesus, the ritual can be used for any occasion as needed	Jesus is the source of power, STR unites people in him, meaning can be deepened	Tying is good but the ritual is unbiblical, un-Christian, unacceptable, meaning cannot be changed
Behavioral: What do they do with STR?	Add Jesus to it, use it basically unchanged, usually with very little explanation	Use it with careful explanation as a part of Christian worship	Most avoid it, don't talk about it, some cases seek a cultural replacement

Missiological Implications of the Positions

The three positions described above provide a beginning framework from which to view Isaan Christian perspectives towards string tying ritual within the selective sample population but beyond this there is also a suggestion of deeper and broader implications as well. It would appear from the data that the external actions or reactions of Isaan Christians in the research population towards string tying ritual demonstrates a

deeper theological or Christian sub-cultural position in one of three ways towards Isaan worldview in general, whether it is corrective, accommodative, or interpretive. The existence of these three positions towards Isaan worldview may most likely extend beyond the sample population to the general population of Isaan Christians throughout the region. Table 7 below outlines the three positions of Isaan Christians towards Isaan worldview as viewed in three major categories of Hiebert's model of worldview, the affective, the cognitive, and the behavioral levels.

TABLE 7
ISAAN CHRISTIAN POSITIONS ON WORLDVIEW

	Areas of application	Accommodative Position	Interpretive Position	Corrective Position
Affective	Satisfaction with local worldview	Fully satisfied	Satisfied	Highly dissatisfied
	Degree of worldview change desired	No desire to change local worldview	Change worldviews incompatible with scripture	High desire to change local worldview
	Identity in relationship to local worldview	Identifies closely with local worldview	Relates as closely as possible with local cultural identity as long as it does not compromise faith	Identity not tied with worldview; desires to separate from and to remove others from non-Christian identity
Cognitive	Scriptural Truth	Used to affirm existing worldview	Used to engage local worldview	Used to dismantle opposing worldviews
	Christian faith	To add to existing worldview	Expressed culturally through local worldview	To be defended from local worldview
	Religious beliefs in worldview	Acceptable as-is	In need of transformation	In need of complete replacement
Behavioral	Communication approach	Use local worldview as filter for what Christian truth should be said and when	Express Christian faith through biblically compatible culturally appropriate concepts in local worldview	Discover weaknesses of opposing worldviews in order to correct them through a systematic theological approach:
	Use of Cultural forms (such as string tying)	Non-selective use of and participation in all that is legal	Interactive when not compromising; Selective in use for Christian purposes	Avoidance of anything appearing non-Christian
	Desired response to Christian gospel message	Assent without radical worldview change	Allegiance changed, new relationships transforming worldview perspective	Spiritual conviction through logic and philosophical argument, worldview replacement

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 towards forms that externally appear to be Buddhist is extremely important. This would be attractive to those who are unfulfilled with their own way of life, or perhaps have experienced severe disappointment or frustration with the culture and are seeking a way out. 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 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 highly identity-conscious society of Isaan (and most of Thailand) it would appear that the percentage desiring this 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* network, other family members, friends, livelihood, and society. An example of this in Isaan history occurred during the period when the Thai policy of enforced centralization was being imposed and the use of the Lao language and cultural expressions were actively repressed. This created a strong undercurrent reaction with outward demonstrations of loyalty to those deeply held values and expressions that were perceived as being under threat. A church in this situation that identified itself with the oppressed and encouraged the use of language and cultural forms mushroomed in the Udon Thani region in the 1980s.¹² Groups of Isaan people newly arrived from the rural area to Bangkok also give evidence of this. They are attracted to groups (churches) that promise a sense of community with the language, food, humor,

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

and values of their own minority culture in the midst of the dominant central Thai culture. As mentioned earlier, Isaan people prize the *boonkhun* relationships above all others. 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 the Isaan worldview held by most Isaan people.

Some of the ritual expressions used by communities of followers of Christ with the interpretive perspective on worldview (such as CSTR) do not fit the paradigm of the dominant majority of Thai and Isaan churches. The reverse is also true; the expressions used by Christians in the corrective position do not fit the paradigm of Christians from the interpretive position. The author would posit, however, that both are necessary for the expansion of the kingdom of God into unreached parts of Isaan and the rest of the world today. As McElhanon states, “It is important to recognize that the worldviews of different cultural groups need not be regarded as in opposition to a Christian worldview; rather they can become vehicles to express biblical truth just as did the classical Hebrew and Greek worldviews” (2000b:1033).

The preceding discussion of the three positions of Isaan Christians in the survey population towards 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 churches in northeast Thailand today. 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. It appears to be a reality that each of these positions exists within the churches, groups and individuals who gather in various ways and denominations in Isaan and throughout Thailand, and there is movement happening back and forth at all levels and in all directions. 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. There are those who profess to

never have been involved in string tying yet secretly are; on the other hand there are Isaan Christians who practice string tying regularly but would not want to be labeled accommodative either. These two categories run the risk of being pejorative and are therefore unhelpful when considering communication strategies within the Isaan context. It is perhaps more helpful to think of tendencies or directions rather than concrete categories.

Extrapolating from the research data can provide a rough estimate of the number of Isaan believers who tend towards each of the three positions discussed. Those holding a corrective position towards string tying ritual and Isaan worldview most of the time would range roughly between ten and twenty percent of all Christians in northeast Thailand (somewhere between 10,000 and 25,000 believers) with the majority of these usually from Protestant groups. Likewise, the data would point to a rough estimate of the number of Isaan believers who tend to hold an accommodative position towards string tying ritual and worldview most of the time would range from fifty to eighty percent (somewhere between 60,000 and 90,000 believers) with the majority of these from Catholic groups. The data also seems to indicate that the number of Isaan believers who tend to hold an interpretive position towards string tying ritual and worldview most of the time range from five to ten percent of all Isaan believers (approximately between five and fifteen thousand practitioners) with an equal number from both Catholic and Protestant groups.

Respondents from non-practicing churches indicated that they would be interested in learning more about an interpretive approach regarding the use of string tying ritual if someone would only teach them. There is an apparent need for further dialogue to see how each position can enrich the other, either in blessing or in evaluation, in order to reach the majority of Isaan who as yet do not appear to show interest in the message of the God of the Bible or to be engaged by the predominant Christian communication methods used in its presentation.

CHAPTER 12

MISSIOLOGICAL INSIGHTS FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNICATION

The purpose of this research is to present missiological insights from a study of the deep level meaning and communication effects of string tying ritual as practiced by Isaan followers of Jesus applicable in the context of popular Buddhism in the northeast of Thailand and the rest of the country. These insights are derived from a descriptive analysis of Isaan string tying ritual viewed from the historic perspective, the biblical and theological perspectives, observations, interviews, and survey data. Missiological insights gained from this study point to several issues related to the communication of the gospel and response to that message within Isaan society that vary widely according to positions held by communicators and by receptors. A consideration of these insights can contribute to a wider missiological application for other cultural contexts as well.

Worldview Priorities in Communicating Christ

String tying ritual can be seen as the visible tip of the larger Isaan cultural worldview iceberg that reaches deep into the unseen realm of beliefs, values, assumptions, and thought processes.¹ The decision by Isaan believers to communicate or respond to the gospel through the retention or rejection of string tying ritual appears indicative of a number of internal factors in this unseen realm. First, it seems to be indicative of the believer's position towards worldview whether corrective, accommodative, or interpretive. If it is corrective it will be demonstrated by a desire to

¹ The author is indebted to David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken for their concept of the culture iceberg shown as Figure 2.

separate from expressions originating from former religious practices since those in this position feel that such practices represent an opposing belief system. If it is accommodative it will be demonstrated by a desire to be non-critical towards expressions from other religious belief systems. If it is interpretive it will be demonstrated by a desire to see Christ reflected in and communicated through meaningful cultural expressions regardless of origin. These positions towards worldview are not unique to followers of Christ in northeast Thailand but can be seen in Christians from other cultures as well.

Along with positions towards worldview, another internal factor indicated by the retention or rejection of string tying ritual are the internal realms within Isaan worldview which are, to use Hiebert's concentric model, the cognitive, affective, and evaluative. The cognitive level focuses upon knowledge. At the cognitive level of worldview the retention or rejection of string tying ritual appears indicative of the beliefs and level of understanding of the cultural meaning of string tying ritual, of biblical perspectives towards ritual, and of the message of the gospel in the context of Isaan culture. The affective level focuses upon feelings, and these are often expressed relationally. At the affective level the retention or rejection of string tying ritual appears indicative of feelings held regarding the appropriate expressions of spiritual relationships for Isaan believers with God in worship and discipleship, and of human relationships within the community of faith, with the *boonkhun* network, and with general Isaan society. The innermost evaluative level of worldview focuses upon decisions, and it is the empowering core of worldview. At the evaluative level the retention or rejection of string tying ritual appears indicative of the power behind decisions about what is right and what is wrong for followers of Christ in thought, word, and deed.

The accommodative, interpretive, and corrective positions of Isaan Christians towards worldview outwardly express in behavior the internal core levels of the

cognitive, the affective, and the evaluative.² As a generalization, it can be stated that while each position includes all parts of the internal core, each position also has a tendency to prioritize or focus upon one particular core level of worldview over the others. These generalizations are shown in Table 8.

TABLE 8
PRIORITIES FOR POSITIONS ON WORLDVIEW

	Accommodative Position	Interpretive Position	Corrective Position
Cognitive level (Knowledge)	Lower priority	Lower priority	Higher priority
Affective level (Relationships)	Higher priority	Lower priority	Lower priority
Evaluative level (Decisions at Core)	Lower priority	Higher priority	Lower priority

The corrective position tends to prioritize the cognitive level of correct knowledge over its concern for relationships and power. The accommodative position tends to prioritize the affective level of relationships over its concern for knowledge and power. The interpretive position tends to prioritize the evaluative level of decision making power over its concern for relationships and knowledge. None of the three discount completely concerns for knowledge, relationships, or power found in the inner core of worldview but each tends to focus on one over the other. All three positions are concerned for the spiritually lost of the world, but only the accommodative and interpretive positions would embrace local ritual as appropriate for use in Christian worship and witness. The interpretive position is primarily concerned with communication that addresses core

² These three levels of the inner core also closely align with Kraft's three areas of concern in Christian contextualization of knowledge, relationship, and power (1999).

values and is the most difficult to pursue. Perhaps this is the reason it is the least prevalent method of Christian communication found in Isaan and in other cultures.

Christ Cognitively Communicated and Understood

Perhaps the most succinct summary of the religious expectations upon Isaan people can be found in the popular law of karma which states, “Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil” (Hughes 1984a:316). There is a need for the gospel to penetrate the core of cognitive knowledge of Isaan Christian worldview as it relates to the law of karma. Efforts at communication of Christian knowledge into the Isaan cultural context are not new. There has been a resurged interest in the production of tracts in Isaan, Bible drawings using Isaan scenes and figures, comic books with Isaan drawings and script, Isaan Christian music on cassette, movies with biblical messages in Isaan on CD, radio programs in Isaan, the release of the Jesus movie in Isaan, and an on-going project to translate the complete Bible into Isaan. Each of these media hold potential for certain audiences and can contribute to the growth of the kingdom of God in northeast Thailand. Some of these media come from a corrective perspective that will engage that percentage of the Isaan population who are seeking knowledge presented in a systematic way. It should be considered, however, that within Isaan culture important information is shared relationally and usually only when the timing is right. Certain Isaan social events provide the appropriate setting wherein significant information can be presented and responded to on many levels including, but not exclusively, on the cognitive level. This type of setting is what occurs at certain Isaan ritual celebrations that have a distinctive communicational function such as string tying ceremonies.

An additional cultural insight, that has implications for cognitive communication of the gospel message in northeastern Thai society, is the high value Isaan people place on interactive and entertaining participation. They like to have fun! Isaan rituals are not

meant to be private and somber, they are celebratory and so are those of Isaan followers of Christ who recognize this as a God-pleasing worldview value. In string tying ritual of Isaan believers, lively music is played and often there is dancing as an expression of the joyful hearts of the followers of God. The knowledge that is shared in traditional string tying ritual is chanted in a clever way that Isaan people enjoy listening to; followers of Christ can and are doing the same in their string tying ritual with a focus on God. The biblical message contained within the lyrics sung at these string tying events reinforces the purpose and encourages a response. The author recalls hearing villagers, believers and non-believers, repeating these lyrics for days following a well-sung lesson at a string tying ritual.

Cognitive knowledge can be communicated in many ways, some of which are more effective than others with certain audiences. For Isaan people, both urban and rural, the sense of ceremony makes receptivity to and expectation towards the spoken word especially high. During a string tying ritual the moment when the strings are raised a sudden hush falls upon the crowd as every eye is watching and every ear is tuned to what will happen next. This is an Isaan teachable moment. Many shared with the author that they can remember the actual words spoken to them at those significant times years afterwards. A certain message was successfully conveyed into the heart of the receptors.

As with any form of communication, string tying ritual, even done in the context of followers of Christ, can become routine and methodical. In order to save time an Isaan church leader may not invest much thought beforehand into consideration of the specific situation or for those who will attend. He or she may not rework the wording of the ceremony to become even more specific for the recipients or may not give much explanation of the meaning of the ceremony at all. He or she may have been told by a church member, such as a spouse, not to preach too long. All of these may contribute to a failure to explain meaning in more than a perfunctory way. When using string tying ritual in the context of believers, the data shows that Christian meaning cannot be

assumed simply because it is a familiar cultural form. The meaning that occurs in the receptors during a non-explained string tying ceremony, (here specifically as used in Christian worship), can potentially be one that accommodates or reinforces beliefs that may not be in the direction of the God of the Bible. Respondents to the survey strongly agreed that a clear explanation of the meaning should be given at each use of Christian string tying.³ From observations and interactions with participants and leaders, the most effective use of string tying ritual among Isaan believers was when the leader spent time beforehand in preparation and took the time to explain the meaning to those in attendance in a way that was engaging, relevant, and fun. In this way, according to survey respondents, when combined as part of worship within the believing community knowledge of God was cognitively increased.

Christians with positions towards worldview that do not allow the use of local cultural forms run the risk of rejecting a means of communication of the gospel that may find receptivity within a large portion of the population. However, care must be given that the means used in Christian communication does not overwhelm the message being communicated. The perspective of the receptors must also be considered. Local Christian leadership may feel hesitant to explore the use of cultural forms not traditionally associated with Christian witness and worship. Søggaard suggests culturally-sensitive mutual encouragement in this area as an important role for expatriates (1993:197). When used with careful explanation, local ritual that has an inner meaning consistent with the biblical message can be useful in a cognitive presentation of the gospel in many cultural contexts.

³ Sixty-six percent of respondents (seventy-eight people) felt this was necessary.

Communicating Christ Relationally

The affective level of worldview can be most readily observed in social relationships. One recurring theme throughout this study is the highly relational nature of Isaan people and their culture. This is not to say that Isaan people are without social problems. An undercurrent of unresolved relational disharmony lies closely beneath the friendly surface not only throughout the general population but, it must also be admitted, throughout the community of believers where the cultural value of conflict avoidance is just as strongly adhered to as elsewhere, if not even more so. As in every culture, relationships in Isaan are in need of God's transformation both on a human and on a spiritual level. A biblical review reveals that God does not desire the mere communication of facts about himself to people; he is actually desirous of building meaningful relationships with people in every culture. Through this spiritual relationship he desires to enable transformed people to be able to be a source of transformation in their human relationships even to the deeper affective level of their feelings as well.

Elite Buddhism does not speak of a personal God, but spiritual relationships are not unknown to Isaan people. Generally the feeling associated with these relationships is fear. The middle zone of popular Isaan Buddhist worldview does not separate the world of the living from the world of the dead; the belief in spirits abounds. The interaction of the human world with the spirit world is a favorite frightening theme found in many of the most popular movies and television shows viewed in Isaan and all of Thailand. There is a strong belief in the influence of the spirit world upon humans, and this belief does not appear to change radically or rapidly in Isaan people who have chosen to follow Christ. One Isaan believer admitted that all of the Christians in her village were afraid of evil spirits. She then added that while they knew that the source of victory over the spirits was Jesus Christ, they felt this reality more clearly and personally through Christian ritual.⁴ String tying ritual focused upon God gave her community a means of dealing

⁴ Interview comments from IN14.

with their real fears as well as a tangible relational way to celebrate the unseen cognitive reality of Christ's victory over the spirits.

The affective level is where the obligations of the social "Me" and the concerns of the inner "I" meet. The traditional place in Isaan society where the feelings associated with this meeting of "Me" and "I" can be acceptably communicated in public is during ritual. People can cry at a ritual and people can dance at a ritual. String tying ritual is one of these communal social events in Isaan culture where the affective comes to the fore in ways that are expected and accepted.⁵

The Christian use of string tying ritual also communicates on the affective level but, if well explained and understood, goes beyond the expression of personal feelings and normal relationships found in Isaan society, though it may include these. Coming together in a string tying ritual can be viewed as an act of obedience to God, as mentioned in 1 John 4:19-21, when one shows his or her love for a brother or sister in Christ. This public demonstration of committing to human relationships in Christ's love without expectation of personal benefit is also a proclamation of the Isaan believers' commitment to a relationship with God himself. This is cognitive but must also include the affective expressed behaviorally. Jesus claimed that the visible demonstration of loving relationships among believers was the primary witness to others that such people were indeed his followers, evidently even more so than cognitive facts about himself (Jn. 13:35). String tying ritual is one opportunity to communicate that type of witness in word and deed into the relational realm of Isaan worldview understanding.

When the limitations of local cultural rituals are recognized, they can have significant potential for Christian communication on the relational level. For Isaan believers, they do not replace the deepest pre-existing relational commitments.⁶ No

⁵ The function of ritual as a social release valve is discussed by Driver (1999:155), Kertzer (1988:144-150), and Muir (2003:93-114). STR in Isaan society can serve in this role at times.

⁶ Even among Isaan believers with a strictly corrective position it does not appear that anything changes the *boonkhun* network of relationships except death.

Christian ritual can become a replacement for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ; if it becomes so then it has become accommodative to idolatrous loyalties and must be corrected. At times Christian cultural ritual points to a commitment of a reality or a desired communal goal relationally on the affective feeling level in the heart long before the cognitive level of knowledge in the head has understood it. For this reason on-going explanation before and after Christian ceremony continues to be an important part of discipleship. Christian cultural ritual has been observed to be meaningful on an affective level beyond language barriers even when all of the correct social obligations required of the “Me” are yet unknown by the “I.” For believers these ritual experiences can begin to demonstrate in a tangible celebrative way the present and future reality of God’s ultimate relational ideal on both the human and the spiritual levels.

Communicating Christ at the Evaluative Level

The center of the Isaan worldview is the most powerful evaluative “I”. Data from interviews and observations would support the writings of Bailey for the Lao,⁷ Mulder⁸ and Sumet⁹ for the central Thai, and Banpote¹⁰ for northeastern Thai, that for Isaan people the primary motivation within the central core of the evaluative level of Isaan worldview is the pursuit of personal power. This is the power from which final decisions are made. String tying ritual as traditionally used within the context of Isaan popular Buddhism has been one method whereby people have gained a sense of empowerment

⁷ The Lao are in search of power for living. The concern for coherent, logical truth is minimal. On a daily basis, Lao Christians and non-Christians are far more concerned with accessing power to solve relational, economic, and political problems than they are with whether or not the gospel is presented in traditional Lao forms and in logically coherent ways (Bailey 2002:330).

⁸ “Power is the most spectacular, beguiling, and central manifestation of Thai life; its cognitive elaborations and the way power is accommodated reveal the essentially animistic substratum of Thai mentality” (2000:25).

⁹ Sumet Tantivejkul states that the first most serious madness inflicting Thai society today is what he calls “power madness” (2004:1,5).

¹⁰ “The foundational beliefs important to Isaan people are the belief in powers greater than nature, namely that of the spirit world, and the belief in religion, primarily Buddhism and Brahmanism” (1986:19).

through communal and spiritual blessing. The personal pursuit of self-centric power deep within the worldview of Isaan is a value that counters the message and model of Jesus (Mt. 18:104; Mk. 9:35; Lk. 22:24-27; Jn. 13:5-15). According to J. Andrew Kirk, “the gospel presents a reversal of the common view of power” (2000:196). The use of string tying ritual becomes most troublesome for Christians when it is associated with the making of alliances with sources of ungodly power. However, disapproval of the sources of power conveniently avoids dealing with the more difficult issue of the central evaluative worldview core value, found in Christians and non-Christians alike, that prioritizes the pursuit of personal power above all else.

A definition of personal power for Isaan people comes through their cultural religious understanding. As a people that has never been the dominant culture in the region, and unlike many western ideals, Isaan people do not have visions of grandeur that seek power to someday raise themselves far above others in wealth or position. Power for many is an issue of survival, and the most convenient sources of power for the underprivileged, laboring, village class are not found through education, hard work, or hope for economic advancement¹¹ but in spiritual sources. A review of the cultural history of Isaan shows that spiritual power has traditionally been sought through primal religious practices. Applying Hiebert’s religious systems model to Isaan culture, popular Buddhism as it is practiced in Isaan, and the worldview concerns that feed into it, fit into the middle category of folk religion between the realm of pure philosophical Buddhism and the realm of modern science and technology. It is here in the middle zone that most Isaan people seek their spiritual connections for power and guidance from local gods and goddesses, spirits, and all the sacred powers.¹² Isaan people recognize that spirits are capricious and treat people at their own whims, yet they are considered serious forces to

¹¹ This, in spite of a widespread hope for economic advancement at all lottery ticket sales.

¹² An invocation to all the sacred powers is done each time a promise, prayer, or blessing is made within popular Buddhism as practiced in Isaan. The source, nature, and location of these powers are unquestioned and generally unknown.

be reckoned with. Primal religious practices are not limited to the uneducated rural Isaan but are becoming increasingly evident among the urban educated (Sanitsuda 2001:192-194; Suntaree 1998:219-220). The reason that folk or popular religious practices have remained so predominant is that they appear to provide quick and advantageous solutions to the critical issues of daily life in the world. In a word, they provide people with power. Isaan people who have aligned themselves with spiritual powers do so at great personal price and testify to the physical and mental ailments and oppression that accompany this empowerment.

As noted, early Catholic missionaries in the Khorat Plateau accommodated this worldview value and met spiritual bondage head-on with exorcisms in the name of Christ. Today some Catholic communities continue to use cultural forms such as string tying empowered with holy water blessed by priests to free believers from fear and the power of spirits in their lives. Strings are empowered in a Christian way and used with little or no explanation for the same purposes as they were traditionally; the strings themselves acting as agents of protection against evil or lack of power. Although this approach raises serious concerns about dual allegiances, a large number of Isaan Christians, primarily among the Catholic community, are receptive to this accommodative methodology and continue to use it in their pursuit of power.

Protestant missionaries sought to correct the power seeking worldview value by systematic teaching but initially it was medicine that proved more powerful than the cognitive message. When it was seen that malaria, leprosy, and other serious diseases could be healed with medicine brought from the west there was an initial receptiveness to the missionary's message (Ford 1982:8-9; Hughes 1984a:327-328). Heightened awareness of modern medicine, however, has not lessened a belief in the power of the spirit world upon humans in Isaan. The rise in animistic activities amongst the urban educated shows this. At another time technology was also considered an innovative way to counter ungodly worldview pursuits of power. One Isaan evangelist shared how he

was actually converted as a youth through viewing his first airplane. Upon discovering that the designers of this fantastic invention were people from the Christian west he determined that the god of the foreigners must be more powerful than anything known in Isaan and decided to follow him (IN4).

Some Isaan church leaders are convinced that a corrective approach to worldview is the only answer to correcting ungodly values such as the self-centric seeking of power. In this approach, the reality of the power of God is explained systematically in a cognitive manner intended to replace worldview values that are opposed to the teachings of the Bible. Traditional forms such as STR would tend to be rejected due to their non-Christian associations. According to the statistics of the number of Christians in Isaan churches that follow the corrective approach, a small percentage of the Isaan population is receptive to this communication methodology.

A final approach to dealing with the core Isaan worldview value of the pursuit of power was to seek to communicate the message of the power of God in an interpretive approach that would use local cultural forms as a means to build receptivity to the message in the receptors, while remaining faithful to biblical standards. Here string tying ritual has been used not as a means to address the outwards symptom of providing apparent power, but as a way to address the inner cultural value that exists in the middle zone of Isaan worldview that prioritizes the pursuit of personal power. The explanation given during string tying ritual used in the interpretive approach points to God's power as clearly as possible in order to avoid association with idolatrous allegiances, yet the use of white strings is retained because it represents a tangible media familiar to the Isaan participants that conveys a message of blessing that is interpreted as from God. The liminal function of ritual sets the moment apart so that all involved are in a posture of anticipation to learn, listen, and to experience God if he so chooses to move at that moment. Many Isaan Christians would see the interpretive approach as ideal because it uses culturally appropriate forms of communication in its attempts to remain faithful to

the biblical message, but there are few who are able or willing, for reasons described in Chapters 9 and 10, to follow it in practice. Isaan followers of Christ who fit into the category of the interpretive position represent the smallest percentage of Christians in Thailand's northeast.

Cultural ritual with a central focus upon God does not manipulate God nor can it force him to demonstrate his power.¹³ If God's power is demonstrated it is because it has always been there and the participants have finally acknowledged it as a reality in their own corporate or personal lives. It is not magic or idolatry. During ritual, the community of believers sets themselves in a position wherein God can demonstrate the reality of his power in a culturally appropriate setting if he chooses. He is anticipated so it is not a surprise if this happens as it does from time to time. It does not disturb the order of worship as it might in other settings, in fact, it eclipses the human activity and the focus becomes God as experienced among his people.

The number of Isaan Christians who claim to be involved in non-Christian ritual practices seems to affirm the existence of an excluded middle zone within Isaan Christianity today. The rise in animistic religions in the west would seem to point to a similar exclusion in other cultures as well. The deepest value and need for power in the central core of worldview within many cultures has not changed but has merely been modernized.¹⁴ Believers of all worldview positions must constantly reflect on the direction of their own evaluative core of worldview value as it relates to the pursuit of self-centric power. Restoring the presentation of the mystery of God's power through Christian ritual can communicate Christ at a level too long ignored within Protestantism.

¹³ Data from survey Question 41.

¹⁴ The rise in Kuan Yin cultic worship among middle-class businesspeople throughout all of Thailand has been cited by Sanitsuda Ekachai as due to the failure of traditional animism to address the felt needs of today's urban environment (2001:194). In other words, animism is contextualizing with the times.

Moving Beyond Metaphor when Communicating Christ

Most leaders of Isaan churches regardless of position towards worldview felt that the metaphoric imagery of being tied together as brothers and sisters in Christ was clearly expressed through the use of string tying ritual, and that culturally this was a very important message to communicate particularly to new believers.¹⁵ Even leaders of those churches who discouraged the use of string tying ritual in their churches recognized the importance of acknowledging the relational priority of Isaan worldview. They could see that this was clearly demonstrated in Isaan STR and some of them were struggling to find appropriate Christian substitutes.¹⁶ One Old Testament passage that the author has heard used more than once during CSTR appears to have particular cultural relevance in view of the number of threads used in CSTR. It is found in the book of Ecclesiastes:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: if one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken (Ecc. 4:9-12 NIV).

From this passage and others there appears to be biblical precedent for the use of the tying metaphor as representative of one important aspect of God's desire for the body of Christ. The implications of this metaphor speak of unity, mutual edification, strength, and fulfillment through the coming together of separate individuals to form one new body. Together they become something greater than they were before, a transformation that gives glory to God and is to be a source of encouragement to each member as this translation of Colossians would indicate, "Get your joy from being tied to the rest of the family by the Father's love (Co. 2:2 *Letters to Street Christians*).

This important metaphor of being tied together in Christ, particularly as expressed in string tying ritual used in Isaan churches, seems to raise more questions as to the

¹⁵ Data from interviews and survey Question 39.

¹⁶ Data from interviews and survey Question 16.

degree of application of this joining together of Isaan believers.¹⁷ Sixty-four percent of Isaan Christians in the survey population stated that they felt it was within the realm of possibility for CSTR to make two parties into one and that the ceremony could reconcile people together.¹⁸ Interviews confirmed that this had in fact occurred in some cases (IN2, 4, 5, 25). Sixty-one percent of the survey population responded that CSTR could make strangers into friends.¹⁹ According to the interviews, CSTR was a powerful emotional experience for those who had personally been the recipients of such events, particularly the first time, and in several cases resulted in the recipient's desire to go and tie other people.

There is an important element in the Christian use of string tying ritual that often seems to be missing or downplayed. This may be due to the fact that the tying metaphor found in string tying ritual can overshadow its deepest, truest, and according to the historical research, its original meaning. It should be considered that something that ties may also be defined as, "a thing that unites or restricts persons; a bond or obligation" (Abate 1996:1598-1599). At times it may occur that string tying ritual may create a sense of mutual obligation wherein the metaphor of tying becomes predominant over the actual meaning of the ritual which is to bless. To receive a blessing through an experiential understanding of God's power in the relational context of his worshipping community can serve not merely as an encouragement on the cognitive or affective level for believers but even more importantly as an inner conviction on the evaluative level. It can lead to a motivation to communicate and physically demonstrate the deeper missiological truth on the behavioral level that Christians are called to be channels of God's blessing to the world. In the traditional setting, string tying ritual enabled individuals, couples, and even

¹⁷ The author is indebted to Donald Miller for the concept of metaphorical analysis as an area of concern in Christian ministry. In his book *Blue Like Jazz* Miller describes the transformation that took place in his own thinking regarding relationships after hearing a lecture by communications professor Greg Spencer on the topic of the power of metaphor (2003:217-218).

¹⁸ Data from survey Question 32 and 39.

¹⁹ Data from survey Question 36.

communities, through the reassurance of the reality of the relationships that were now affirmed, that they were now free to face the next phase of life in the power of the communal and cosmic blessing. When practiced by the community of followers of Christ several Isaan participants in string tying ritual have been compelled to share what has happened in their lives with others. Some have asked afterwards if they might take some of the strings home so as to tie and bless their friends and families in the love of God. In this way string tying potentially becomes a motivation for a missional communication of the gospel that extends beyond the original group of participants in a way to which most Isaan people are receptive on many levels. The Christian use of cultural ritual as a part of worship becomes most effective as a communicational tool when viewed from its outward focus.

Communicating Christ through Non-Christian Media

God used secular rituals and cultural forms to communicate his messages to people throughout biblical history. In each case it can be seen that his goal was not cultural accommodation but to lead his people deeper into a relational awareness of their position as his followers. God presented the cognitive knowledge of his message from within the context of affective feelings and commitments of loyalty to him, and required that spiritual inward understandings be demonstrated by outward behavior. God did not affirm all the values of local worldview in his 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 towards 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 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 sub-cultures 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, well-explained cultural ritual, particularly those not traditionally considered part of the Christian sub-culture, can provide a powerful means of bridging the division between 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.

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONS USED IN MODIFIED LIFE STORY INTERVIEWS

Family Background

What is your full name and age?

Where were you born?

How long have you lived here in this village?

Stories of family origin (if known)

Experience with String Tying Ritual

What was the first string tying ceremony that you remember?

What was the first string tying ceremony that was done for you?

What was the context? What happened? What did it mean?

Results? For whom did the ceremony have most effect?

What other string tying ceremonies have you been part of? What did they look like? What happened? What did the ceremonies mean to you?

Experience with CSTR

Have you seen string tying ceremonies for believers?

What do they mean for the believers? What do they mean for you?

Is there something in the string tying ceremonies practiced by Isaan believers that needs to change? If so, what is it and how should it change?

What other string tying ceremonies have you participated in?

Which string tying ceremony has been most useful in your life?

APPENDIX B

THAI LANGUAGE QUESTIONNAIRE

ใบสำรวจความคิดเห็นลูกพระเจ้าอัสาน¹ วันที่ _____
ช่วยลง ✓ ในช่องที่เป็นความจริงสำหรับคุณเอง เลือกข้อละหนึ่งช่อง
)เพื่อให้เป็นความลับสำหรับผู้ให้ข้อมูล ไม่ควรลงชื่อ(

1. ในวัยเด็ก การร่วมพิธีกรรมต่าง ๆ ทางศาสนาและ
สังคมของครอบครัวคุณเป็นอย่างไร

1.1. _____ ร่วมทุกงาน

1.2. _____ ร่วมเป็นบางครั้ง

2. ประวัตินี้ของพ่อแม่

2.1. _____ เป็นคนอัสานแต่กำเนิด

2.2. _____ เป็นคนภาคอื่น(ระบุ) _____

3. ศาสนาประจำครอบครัวในวัยเด็ก

3.1. _____ พุทธศาสนา

3.2. _____ คริสตศาสนา

3.3. _____ อื่น ๆ ระบุ _____

4. ในวัยเด็กถึงวัยโต ใครเป็นผู้อธิบายความหมาย
ของพิธีที่ใช้ฝ้ายผูกแขน

4.1. _____ พ่อแม่

4.2. _____ ปู่ ย่า ตา ยาย

4.3. _____ พระ

4.4. _____ ผู้อื่น ระบุ _____

4.5. _____ ไม่มีใครอธิบายความหมาย

5. ได้ฟังการอธิบายความหมายของพิธีที่ใช้ฝ้ายผูก
แขนในวัยเด็กถึงวัยโต เป็นอย่างไร

5.1. _____ คนอธิบายอย่างละเอียด

5.2. _____ คนอธิบายอย่างคร่าว ๆ

5.3. _____ ไม่มีใครอธิบาย

5.4. _____ ไม่เคยร่วมพิธีผูกแขน

6. เคยมีคนห้ามไม่ให้ร่วมพิธีผูกแขนหรือไม่

6.1. _____ ไม่เคย

6.2. _____ เคย ขอรระบุเป็น

ใคร: _____

6.3. เหตุที่ห้าม _____

7. ตั้งแต่เด็กเคยร่วมงานพิธีที่ใช้ฝ้ายผูกแขนกี่ครั้ง

7.1. _____ มากกว่าสิบครั้ง

7.2. _____ น้อยกว่าสิบครั้ง

7.3. _____ ไม่เคย

8. ความหมายของพิธีที่ใช้ฝ้ายผูกแขนคืออะไร

8.1. _____ เป็นเรื่องของผี

8.2. _____ เป็นเรื่องเกี่ยวกับขวัญ

8.3. _____ เป็นการอวยพร

8.4. _____ อื่น ระบุ _____

8.5. _____ ไม่ทราบความหมาย

8.6. _____ ไม่เคยร่วมพิธีผูกแขน

9. คิดว่าพิธีที่ใช้ฝ้ายผูกแขน

9.1. _____ เป็นเรื่องศาสนามากกว่าวัฒนธรรม

9.2. _____ เป็นเรื่องวัฒนธรรมมากกว่าศาสนา

¹ Font size has been reduced here to fit the required template. In actuality 18 point Cordia font was used.

10. ท่าทีของผู้ที่อยู่ในพระเจ้าต่อเรื่องพิธีผูกแขน ควรจะเป็นอย่างไร

- 10.1. ___ คนใหม่ควรละทิ้งของเก่าทั้งสิ้น
- 10.2. ___ คนใหม่ต้องคิดใหม่
- 10.3. ___ คนใหม่ร่วมได้เป็นบางอย่าง
- 10.4. ___ คนใหม่ร่วมได้ทุกอย่างเหมือนเดิม
- 10.5. ___ ไม่ทราบ
- 10.6. ___ อื่น ๆ ระบุ _____

11. มีคริสเตียนบางกลุ่มประกอบพิธีที่ใช้ฝ้ายผูกแขนในทางของพระเจ้า คริสตจักรของคุณเคยใช้พิธีนี้หรือไม่

- 11.1. ___ เคยใช้มากกว่าสิบครั้ง
- 11.2. ___ เคยใช้บ้าง
- 11.3. ___ ไม่เคยใช้

12. ถ้าคริสตจักรของคุณไม่เคยใช้พิธีผูกแขนในทางของพระเจ้าเป็นเพราะเหตุใด

- 12.1. ___ ไม่เคยมีผู้มาสอน
- 12.2. ___ คิดว่าพิธีนี้ไม่ถูกต้องตามพระคัมภีร์
- 12.3. ___ เกรงว่าการทำพิธีนี้อาจจะทำให้ผู้เชื่อใหม่สับสน หรือสะดุด
- 12.4. ___ ไม่ได้ใช้เพราะไม่สนใจ
- 12.5. ___ คริสตจักรเราเคยใช้พิธีนี้
- 12.6. ___ อื่น ๆ _____

13. คิดว่าความหมายของพิธีผูกแขนเปลี่ยนใหม่ในทางของพระเจ้าได้หรือไม่

- 13.1. ___ เปลี่ยนใหม่ทั้งหมดได้
- 13.2. ___ เปลี่ยนใหม่ได้ เป็นบางอย่าง
- 13.3. ___ เปลี่ยนใหม่ไม่ได้แต่เพิ่มความหมายเข้าไปได้
- 13.4. ___ เปลี่ยนใหม่ไม่ได้

14. สำหรับกลุ่มคริสเตียนที่ใช้พิธีผูกแขนในทางของพระเจ้า คิดว่าการเข้าใจความหมายใหม่ . . .

- 14.1. ___ ขึ้นอยู่กับการอธิบาย
- 14.2. ___ ขึ้นอยู่กับความเชื่อของผู้ร่วม
- 14.3. ___ ขึ้นอยู่กับการเปลี่ยนสิ่งที่ใช้ในการประกอบพิธี

15. สำหรับผู้ที่ร่วมพิธีผูกแขนในทางของพระเจ้า คิดว่าเขาจะรับผลอย่างไร

- 15.1. ___ เขาจะรับกำลังใจ
- 15.2. ___ เขาจะรับการแก้ปัญหา
- 15.3. ___ เขาจะรับเพื่อนใหม่
- 15.4. ___ เขาจะรับความรู้เรื่องพระเจ้า
- 15.5. ___ เขาจะรับอย่างอื่น ระบุ _____
- 15.6. ___ ไม่มีผลใดๆ

16. เมื่อมีคนเกิดใหม่ในพระเจ้า คริสตจักรของคุณทำอะไรสำหรับคนนั้น

- 16.1. ___ ทำพิธีต้อนรับเขาทันที
- 16.2. ___ ให้คนนั้นรับบัพติศมาทันที
- 16.3. ___ แนะนำให้พี่น้องในคริสตจักรรู้จัก
- 16.4. ___ ไม่ได้ทำอะไร
- 16.5. ___ อื่น ๆ ระบุ _____

17. คนอิสานที่รับเชื่อพระเจ้ารู้สึกอย่างไรระหว่างพิธีที่ใช้ฝ้ายผูกแขนกับพิธีบัพติศมา

- 17.1. ___ การร่วมพิธีผูกแขนในทางของพระเจ้ามีความหมายลึกซึ้งกว่าการรับพิธีบัพติศมา
- 17.2. ___ การรับพิธีบัพติศมามีความหมายลึกซึ้งกว่าการร่วมพิธีผูกแขนในทางของพระเจ้า

เพื่อเป็นการเข้าใจยิ่งขึ้น กรุณาบันทึก
ข้อมูลส่วนตัวต่อไปนี้ด้วยนะครับ

ขอขอบคุณมาก

18. เพศ

18.1. _____ ชาย

18.2. _____ หญิง

19. อายุ

19.1. _____ **0-18**

19.2. _____ **18-30**

19.3. _____ **30-45**

19.4. _____ **45-60**

19.5. _____ **60+**

20. สถานภาพ

20.1. _____ โสด

20.2. _____ แต่งงาน

20.3. _____ หย่าร้าง

20.4. _____ ม่าย

21. ถิ่นกำเนิด

21.1. _____ ชนบท

21.2. _____ ในเมือง

21.3. _____ ภาคอื่นๆ

22. จบการศึกษา

22.1. _____ ประถม

22.2. _____ มัธยม

22.3. _____ ปริญญาขึ้นไป

23. อาชีพหลักในปัจจุบัน

23.1. _____ เกษตรกร

23.2. _____ รับจ้าง

23.3. _____ ค้าขาย

23.4. _____ เรียนหนังสือ

23.5. _____ อื่นๆ ระบุ _____

24. ศาสนา

24.1. _____ พุทธศาสนา

24.2. _____ คริสตศาสนา

24.3. _____ อื่นๆ

ระบุ _____

25. ภาษาที่ใช้ใน

ครอบครัว

25.1. _____ ท้องถิ่นอีสาน

25.2. _____ ไทยกลาง

25.3. _____ อื่นๆ

ระบุ _____

26. คุณติดตามพระเยซู

มาแล้ว

26.1. _____ น้อยกว่า 5 ปี

26.2. _____ **5-15 ปี**

26.3. _____ มากกว่า **15 ปี**

ระบุ _____

27. ทำไมสนใจเรื่องพระเจ้า

27.1. _____ มีคนที่ใกล้
ชิดพูดให้ฟัง

27.2. _____ ศึกษาส่วนตัว

27.3. _____ ฟังจากวิทยุ
เทป โทรทัศน์ ฯลฯ

27.4. _____ อื่นๆ ระบุ

28. ภาษาที่ใช้ในการ
นมัสการพระเจ้าใน
คริสตจักรของคุณ

28.1. _____ ท้องถิ่นอีสาน

28.2. _____ ไทยกลาง

28.3. _____ อื่นๆ ระบุ

29. เป็นสมาชิกของ
คริสตจักร

30. ตำแหน่งในคริสตจักร

30.1. _____ ผู้รับใช้

30.2. _____ สมาชิก

31. คริสตจักรอยู่ในพื้นที่

31.1. _____ ชนบท

31.2. _____ ในเมือง

31.3. _____ ภาคอื่นๆ

ความรู้สึกเกี่ยวกับสิ่งที่ได้รับจากพิธีที่ใช้ฝ่ายผูกแขนในทางของพระเจ้า
โปรดทำเครื่องหมาย ✓ ในช่องที่เห็นด้วยที่สุด เลือกข้อละหนึ่งช่อง

1. เห็น 2. เห็น 3. ไม่มี 4. ไม่ 5. ไม่

ด้วย ความ คอย เห็น

พิธีที่ใช้ฝ่ายผูกแขนในทางของพระเจ้า...

คิดเห็น

มาก ๆ

ด้วย เลย

32. ทำให้คนคืนดีกันได้

33. ทำให้คนโตขึ้นฝ่ายวิญญาณได้

34. อาจสร้างปัญหากับชาวพุทธได้

35. ทำให้คนเข้าใจเรื่องพระเจ้ามากขึ้นได้

36. ทำให้คนแปลกหน้าเป็นเพื่อนกันได้

37. ถ้าคนเชื่อใหม่เห็น อาจจะทำให้เขาสงสัย

38. ทำให้คนเป็นหนี้บุญคุณกันได้
39. ทำให้สองฝ่ายเป็นฝ่ายเดียวกันได้
40. ควรหลีกเลี่ยงเพราะมาจากสังคมเก่า
41. ทำให้คนที่ร่วมพิธีมีอำนาจมาจากพระเจ้าในชีวิตมากขึ้นได้
42. ทำให้คริสตจักรเจริญมั่นคงขึ้นได้
43. ควรเปลี่ยนสีของฝ่าย
44. ควรมีการอธิบายความหมายทุกครั้ง
45. อธิบายเท่าไร ความหมายเดิมยังอยู่
46. มีความหมายคล้ายกับพิธีบัพติศมา
47. ทำให้เปลี่ยนวิถีชีวิตคนได้
48. ทำให้คนเปลี่ยนจากความเชื่อเดิมได้
49. ทำให้คนอิสานเข้าใจความหมายของการเป็นลูกพระเจ้า และความเป็นไทย ได้

ขอขอบคุณทุกท่านที่ช่วยให้คนอื่นเข้าใจการเป็นลูกของพระเจ้าในอิสาน
ขอให้พระเจ้าผู้เป็นเจ้าของเรา ได้เป็นที่พึ่งใหม่ของชาวอิสานทั้งหลาย

APPENDIX C

ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THAI LANGUAGE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. During your childhood did you participate in religious and social rituals?

- 1.1. _____ All the time
1.2. _____ Occasionally

2. Parental background

- 2.1. _____ Born in Isaan
2.2. _____ Born elsewhere (explain) _____

3. Family religion during childhood

- 3.1. _____ Buddhist
3.2. _____ Christian
3.3. _____ Other (explain) _____

4. During your youth did anyone ever explain the meaning of string tying to you?

- 4.1. _____ Parents
4.2. _____ Grandparents
4.3. _____ Monk
4.4. _____ Other (explain) _____
4.5. _____ No one ever explained meaning

5. How did you understand the explanation of the string tying ritual ?

- 5.1. _____ It was clearly explained to me
5.2. _____ It was vaguely explained to me
5.3. _____ No one ever explained the meaning to me
5.4. _____ I've never participated in a string tying ceremony

6. Did anyone ever forbid you from participating in a string-tying ceremony?

- 6.1. _____ No
6.2. _____ Yes, whom? _____
6.3. _____ Reason for forbidding it:

7. Since childhood how many times have you participated in a string-tying ritual?

- 7.1. _____ More than ten times
7.2. _____ Fewer than ten times
7.3. _____ Never

8. What is the meaning of the string tying ritual?

- 8.1. _____ It is about evil spirits
8.2. _____ It is about *khwan*
8.3. _____ It is giving a blessing
8.4. _____ Other (explain) _____
8.5. _____ I don't know
8.6. _____ I have never participated in a string tying ritual

9. Do you feel that string tying ritual . . . ?

- 9.1. _____ Is more about religion than culture
9.2. _____ Is more about culture than religion

10. What should be the appropriate attitude of Christians towards string tying ritual?

- 10.1. _____ New people should forsake all from the old ways completely
- 10.2. _____ New people should think anew
- 10.3. _____ New people can participate in some of the old ways
- 10.4. _____ New people can continue to participate in everything as they previously did
- 10.5. _____ I don't know
- 10.6. _____ Other (explain) _____

11. There are some Christian groups that use string tying rituals in a way that honors God. Has your church done this or not?

- 11.1. _____ Yes, more than ten times
- 11.2. _____ Yes, fewer than ten times
- 11.3. _____ Never

12. If your church has never used string tying ritual in this way what is the reason behind this decision?

- 12.1. _____ No one has ever taught us
- 12.2. _____ This ritual is unbiblical
- 12.3. _____ It may cause a new believer to question or stumble
- 12.4. _____ Not interested
- 12.5. _____ We have used it
- 12.6. _____ Other _____

13. Do you believe that the meaning of string tying ritual can be changed in a God-honoring way or not?

- 13.1. _____ Yes, completely
- 13.2. _____ Yes, some meaning can be changed
- 13.3. _____ No, meaning cannot be changed but it can be added to
- 13.4. _____ No, it is impossible to change

14. For those Christian groups who do practice string tying, what conveys the new meaning?

- 14.1. _____ It is the explanation
- 14.2. _____ It is the belief of the participants
- 14.3. _____ Changing the physical elements used in the ceremony itself

15. What will be the results for those who participate in a Christian string tying ritual?

- 15.1. _____ They'll receive encouragement
- 15.2. _____ They'll have problems solved
- 15.3. _____ They'll get new friends
- 15.4. _____ They'll learn more of God
- 15.5. _____ Other (explain) _____
- 15.6. _____ They will receive nothing

16. What does your church do when a new person becomes a believer?

- 16.1. _____ Performs a welcome ceremony immediately
 - 16.2. _____ Baptizes them immediately
 - 16.3. _____ Introduces them to congregation
 - 16.4. _____ Nothing
 - 16.5. _____ Other (explain) _____
-

17. How do you think Isaan believers feel regarding string tying and baptism?

- 17.1. _____ Christian string tying has a deeper meaning than baptism
- 17.2. _____ Baptism has a deeper meaning than Christian string tying

18. Gender

- 18.1. _____ Male
18.2. _____ Female

19. Age

- 19.1. _____ 0-18
19.2. _____ 18-30
19.3. _____ 30-45
19.4. _____ 45-60
19.5. _____ 60+

20. Marital status

- 20.1. _____ Single
20.2. _____ Married
20.3. _____ Divorced
20.4. _____ Widowed

21. Place of birth

- 21.1. _____ Rural
21.2. _____ Urban
21.3. _____ Other region

22. Education

- 22.1. _____ Primary
22.2. _____ Secondary
22.3. _____ College and above

23. Present occupation

- 23.1. _____ Agriculturalist
23.2. _____ Hired
23.3. _____ Sales
23.4. _____ Student
23.5. _____ Other (explain)

24. Religion

- 24.1. _____ Buddhist
24.2. _____ Christian
24.3. _____ Other (explain)

25. Language used within your family at home

- 25.1. _____ Regional Isaan
25.2. _____ Central Thai
25.3. _____ Other (explain)

26. How many years have you followed Christ?

- 26.1. _____ Less than 5
26.2. _____ 5-15 years
26.3. _____ More than 15 (explain) _____

27. What made you interested in God?

- 27.1. _____ Someone close to me shared
27.2. _____ Self taught
27.3. _____ Radio, tape, or TV broadcast
27.4. _____ other (explain)

28. Language used in your church's worship service

- 28.1. _____ Regional Isaan
28.2. _____ Central Thai
28.3. _____ Other (explain)

29. Membership in what church? _____

30. Position in the church

- 30.1. _____ Servant leader
30.2. _____ Member

31. Location of church

- 31.1. _____ Rural
31.2. _____ Urban
31.3. _____ Other region

	1.Strongly	2.Some	3. No	4. Some	5.Strongly
Christian string tying ceremonies .	agree	what	opinion	what	disagree
..		agree		disagree	
32. Can reconcile people together					
33. Can promote spiritual growth					
34. Can be a problem with Buddhists					
35. Increase knowledge of God					
36. Make strangers into friends					
37. If seen by new believers may cause them to be confused or to stumble spiritually					
38. Can build a debt of <i>boonkhun</i>					
39. Make two parties into one					
40. Should be avoided because they come from the old society					
41. Can increase the power of God in participants' lives					
42. Can help the church to grow in maturity					
43. Should change the color of the strings					
44. Should include an explanation of meaning each time they are done					
45. Can be explained as much as possible but the old meanings can never be					

changed

46. Have a similar meaning to baptism
47. Can change the course of people's lives
48. Can change people's beliefs
49. Can help Isaan people gain a new understanding of the meaning of being a follower of Christ and also being a Thai

APPENDIX D

STRING TYING PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION EXPERIENCES

<u>Date</u>	<u>Name of Event</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Subject</u>
10 Oct 03	Blessing	Our house, CM	Mr. Goal taking Police exam
21 Oct 03	<i>Prap Khwan</i>	Our house, CM	Special prayer for Mr. Thai
16 Jan 04	Send off	Udon Yth Ctr	End of Hmong training mtg.
3 Feb 04	<i>Wan Pope Yaht</i>	Chayapon, NK	Sudcha family gathering
8 Feb 04	Devotional	Phu Kham, CM	SEANET meeting
3 Mar 04	Wedding Reception	Roi Et Farm	For Siem and Maew
31 Mar 04	Tu's Funeral	Khok Kong, Udon	Funeral of IDF President
1 Apr 04	<i>Sukhwan</i>	Pa Daek, CM	Welcome to Karen village
13 Apr 04	<i>Songkran</i>	Anan's, CM	Blessing from elderly
5 August 04	Miss Phin	Cornerstone, CM	Blessing new Christian
9 August 04	Send off	Bangkok airport	Blessing for travel safety

APPENDIX E

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Date	Name	Gender	Age	Lgth	Subject
28 Aug 03	Jadet Khampangsee	M	24	.25 hr	Rom 14, CPM Mtg 101
24 Oct 03	Hongsa Interaprasert	M	38	.5 hr	Beginning of life story
11 Sep 03	Banpote Wetchgama	M	58	.5 hr	New Buddhism
12 Sep 03	Tongpan Phrommedda	M	62	1 hr	Buddhist prophecies of Christ
13 Sep 03	Grandma Daeng	F	77	1 hr	Life story
30 Sep 03	Sangwian Phrommsopha	M	27	1 hr	Life story
27 Nov 03	Thongpan Phrommedda	M	62	2 hrs	Life story
27 Nov 03	Buason Chaosurin	M	33	1 hr	Life story
28 Nov 03	Banpote Wetchgama	M	58	.5 hr	Naga history
7 Jan 04	Khampan Sudcha	M	38	2 hr	Life story
9 Jan 04	Tongchai Phimpanut	M	54	2 hrs	Rituals in his life story
9 Jan 04	Dusit Donkhan	M	56	1 hr	Life story
15 Jan 04	Prik Interapresert	M	14	.5 hr	Ritual in his life story
15 Jan 04	Yupin Wheeler	F	40	1 hr	Ritual in her life story
15-6Jan04	Petchsamon	F	30	1 hr	Ritual in her life story
16 Jan 04	Hongsa Interapresert	M	38	1 hr	Ritual in his life story
4 Feb 04	Prayong and Songkran	F	47, 44	1 hr	Ritual in their life stories
4 Feb 04	Buddee Domwiengkham	M	78	1 hr	Ritual in his life story
12 Feb 04	David Wyatt	M	67	1 hr+	Observations on Thai history
3 Mar 04	Wajuppa Tossa	F	50	.5 hr	History, role of strings for her
22 Apr 04	Prakop Phrommedda	F	54	1 hr	Meaning of strings for her
27 Apr 04	Ruth Srisuwan	F	54	1 hr	Meaning of strings for her
29 Apr 04	Banpote Wetchgama	M	58	.5 hr	Origin of string tying in TCC
19 May 04	Tipawan Sudcha	F	30	.5 hr	Experiences of string tying
19 May 04	Jadet Khampangsee	M	24	1 hr	Life story focusing on strings
19 May 04	Pat Houmphan	M	40	1.5 hr	Life story focusing on strings
20 May 04	Banpote Wetchgama	M	58	1 hr	Msnry experiences
21 May 04	Maitri Singkhampom	M	62	1.5 hr	Life story serving in Isaan

APPENDIX F

LIST OF CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RITUAL

Date	Name	Gender	Age	Subject
20 Aug 03	Ketty Søggaard	F	63	Wearing strings in public
9 Dec 03	Bkk Taxi Driver from Surin	M	55	Meaning of string tying.
21 Feb 04	Alice Shah	F	65	STR at Lao weddings in US
26 Feb 04	Chris Flanders over Lunch	M	40	Farang engagem't ceremony
19 Mar 04	Isaan Taxi Driver in Bkk	M	38+	Meaning of string he wore
17 Apr 04	Old Man in CM Market	M	84	Sacred charms, tied author.
23 Apr 04	Suriya Lekchan in CM	M	33	Strings on Thai soldiers.
18 May 04	Banya Soisenah	M	20	Meaning of strings
18 May 04	Anan Tingtaow	M	21	Meaning of strings
18 May 04	Somchat Takmoh	M	17	Meaning of strings
18 May 04	Aran Sudcha	M	16	Meaning of strings
20 May 04	Banpote Wetchgama	M	59	Substituting <i>pakama</i> /strings
30 May 04	Ginny Bellamy	F	59	Changing church practices
29 June 04	Pastor Thanom	M	28	STR in church & community

APPENDIX G

DATA FROM ALL SURVEY RECORDS

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15
R1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	3	2	4	1	1	1	3	1
R2	2	2	2	4	1	1	1	3	2	3	1	1	2	1	1
R3	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	3	2	3	1	1	3	1	1
R4	2	1	1	5	3	1	1	3	2	2	1	5	2	1	1
R5	2	1	1	5	3	1	1	7	2	4	1	7	1	1	7
R6	2	1	1	2	3	1	1	3	1	5	1	3	1	1	3
R7	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	3	1	7	2	1	1
R8	2	3	1	6	2	1	1	3	2	3	3	2	1	3	6
R9	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	3	2	3	1	1	4
R10	2	1	1	4	1	1	2	3	2	6	2	4	4	1	1
R11	2	1	1	5	3	1	1	5	2	6	3	6	4	4	6
R12	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	3	3	3	1	3	4
R13	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	3	2	2	3	5	4	1	1
R14	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	7	1	1	3	2	4	1	6
R15	2	1	1	5	3	1	1	3	2	3	2	8	5	4	7
R16	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	3	3	3	1	2	1
R17	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	3	2	7	3	3	3	1	4
R18	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	3	2	4	2	3	2	2	1
R19	2	1	2	2	1	1	1	3	2	4	1	5	2	1	1
R20	1	1	2	4	2	1	1	2	2	4	1	5	3	2	1
R21	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	6	3	6	2	2	5
R22	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	4	1	5	1	3	1
R23	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	3	2	4	1	5	2	1	1
R24	2	1	2	4	2	1	1	2	2	4	3	3	2	2	6
R25	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	3	2	4	2	5	3	1	1
R26	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	4	3	1	3	1	1
R27	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	3	2	4	2	1	3	1	1
R28	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	1	3	2	3	3	3
R29	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	7	1	1	3	8	3	4	3
R30	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	3	2	3	3	3	4	2	6
R31	1	1	2	1	4	1	3	6	2	2	3	5	2	2	4
R32	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	7	3	2	1	2	6
R33	2	1	2	5	5	3	3	3	2	1	3	8	4	1	6
R34	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	3	1	1	3	3	4	1	5
R35	2	1	1	6	2	1	1	7	2	2	3	8	3	2	1
R36	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	3	1	5	3	1	1	3	3
R37	2	2	2	4	3	1	2	2	1	1	3	2	1	2	5
R38	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	3	1	1	3	2	1	2	1

All the collected data from the survey is presented here for referencing. R refers to record number. Records read from left to right across four pages following the headings of the forty nine questions (Q) in the order they appeared on the survey (Appendix B and C). A list of the sources of the 118 survey records is found in Appendix H.

	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25	Q26	Q26	Q28
R1	1	1	1	5	2	1	1	2	2	1	3	2	1
R2	3	2	1	3	3	4	2	2	2	1	3	4	1
R3	1	1	2	3	2	2	2	5	2	3	2	1	4
R4	1	2	1	3	2	1	4	2	2	1	2	1	1
R5	6	1	1	4	2	2	3	2	2	1	3	1	1
R6	3	1	1	2	1	1	2	4	2	1	2	2	1
R7	6	2	1	3	2	1	2	2	2	1	3	1	1
R8	1	2	2	4	2	2	1	3	2	1	3	1	4
R9	1	2	1	4	2	1	2	5	2	2	3	1	2
R10	3	2	1	3	2	1	2	6	2	1	2	1	4
R11	5	2	2	3	4	2	3	5	2	2	1	5	2
R12	3	2	2	3	2	1	3	5	2	2	2	1	2
R13	3	2	1	3	2	1	2	5	2	1	2	2	2
R14	3	2	1	4	2	1	1	6	2	1	2	1	4
R15	3	2	1	2	1	1	3	5	2	1	2	5	4
R16	3	2	1	3	2	1	2	2	2	1	2	5	4
R17	3	2	2	3	2	1	2	1	2	1	3	1	4
R18	3	1	1	4	2	1	2	1	2	1	3	2	1
R19	1	2	1	5	2	1	2	2	2	1	3	2	2
R20	2	2	2	2	2	1	3	2	2	1	3	4	2
R21	2	3	1	3	2	1	2	5	2	1	3	4	2
R22	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	4	2	1	3	4	2
R23	3	2	1	4	2	1	1	2	2	1	3	2	2
R24	5	2	2	4	2	1	2	5	2	1	3	4	2
R25	1	2	2	4	4	1	1	5	2	1	3	5	1
R26	1	2	2	4	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	2
R27	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	4	2	1	3	1	2
R28	4	2	2	2	1	1	2	4	2	1	1	1	2
R29	3	2	2	2	1	1	2	5	2	1	2	1	2
R30	3	2	1	2	1	1	2	4	2	1	1	1	4
R31	3	2	1	2	1	1	2	4	2	1	3	1	2
R32	3	2	1	3	2	1	2	4	2	1	2	1	4
R33	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	4	2	1	2	4	4
R34	5	2	2	2	1	2	2	5	2	1	1	4	2
R35	6	2	1	2	1	1	2	3	2	1	2	5	1
R36	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	4	2	1	2	2	2
R37	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	4	2	3	3	2	3
R38	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	4	2	3	3	2	3

	Q29	Q30	Q31	Q32	Q33	Q34	Q35	Q36	Q37	Q38	Q39	Q40	Q41
R1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	5	5	1	5	1
R2		1	2	2	3	4	2	3	4	5	2	5	2
R3		2	2	2	2	5	2	1	1	5	2	5	1
R4		1	4	1	1	2	1	2	3	2	2	4	5
R5		1	2	1	2	4	1	1	4	2	1	4	1
R6		2	1	1	2	3	5	2	2	5	2	3	3
R7		1	1	1	2	4	2	1	2	4	1	4	2
R8		2	4	1	1	7	1	7	1	7	7	1	7
R9		2	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	1	2	5
R10		2	1	2	5	5	5	1	1	2	1	5	5
R11		1	2	5	5	1	5	5	1	5	5	1	5
R12		1	2	3	3	3	3	3	1	4	3	4	5
R13		2	2	2	4	5	5	3	1	2	3	1	5
R14		2	2	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
R15		1	2	4	3	2	2	4	1	5	2	3	5
R16		2	1	5	4	3	4	3	1	3	2	1	4
R17		2	1	4	4	2	4	4	1	2	4	1	4
R18		2	1	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
R19		1	1	1	2	2	1	1	5	5	1	5	5
R20		2	1	2	3	4	3	2	2	4	2	5	3
R21		2	1	1	1	3	1	2	2	2	2	5	3
R22		2	1	2	2	5	3	1	5	5	1	5	1
R23		1	1	2	2	4	2	2	4	4	4	4	2
R24		2	1	5	5	5	5	1	5	5	2	5	5
R25		2	1	2	2	4	5	1	1	5	2	5	5
R26		2	1	2	3	4	3	2	7	2	2	4	2
R27		1	1	1	2	5	2	3	2	5	1	5	3
R28		1	2	5	5	2	5	4	7	5	4	3	3
R29		1	2	2	4	3	3	4	2	3	3	2	2
R30		1	2	4	4	3	4	3	2	3	2	2	4
R31		2	1	2	3	3	3	2	2	3	2	3	3
R32		2	2	6	4	2	4	2	4	2	2	1	5
R33		1	1	4	5	3	5	3	1	3	3	2	5
R34		1	2	5	5	4	5	2	1	5	2	3	5
R35		1	2	4	5	2	5	5	1	2	5	1	5
R36		2	1	4	4	2	5	4	3	3	3	4	2
R37		1	1	5	5	3	5	5	1	2	5	1	1
R38		1	1	5	5	3	5	5	1	2	5	1	1

	Q42	Q43	Q44	Q45	Q46	Q47	Q48	Q49
R1	1	5	1	5	1	1	1	1
R2	2	5	1	5	5	2	2	1
R3	1	5	1	1	3	1	2	1
R4	2	2	1	3	2	2	2	1
R5	2	5	1	5	2	2	1	1
R6	4	3	1	3	3	3	2	1
R7	2	4	1	5	2	2	2	1
R8	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7
R9	2	3	1	1	5	2	3	2
R10	5	5	2	3	5	5	5	5
R11	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
R12	3	3	1	4	5	3	3	2
R13	5	3	3	1	3	3	4	4
R14	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
R15	5	3	1	1	5	3	3	2
R16	3	3	1	3	3	4	4	5
R17	4	3	4	3	4	5	5	5
R18	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
R19	1	5	7	1	1	2	2	1
R20	3	5	2	4	4	3	3	3
R21	1	2	1	1	1	5	2	1
R22	2	5	1	5	2	2	3	1
R23	4	4	1	1	4	4	4	2
R24	5	5	1	1	2	5	2	1
R25	5	5	1	1	5	5	2	5
R26	3	4	2	2	4	7	4	2
R27	3	5	3	2	3	4	5	1
R28	5	3	3	2	3	3	3	3
R29	4	4	1	4	4	4	4	4
R30	4	3	3	2	4	4	4	4
R31	2	3	2	2	2	3	2	2
R32	5	5	5	5	5	3	5	5
R33	5	3	3	2	5	5	5	5
R34	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2
R35	5	5	5	2	5	5	5	5
R36	4	3	3	4	2	3	2	3
R37	5	5	3	1	5	5	5	5
R38	5	5	3	1	5	5	5	5

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13	Q14	Q15
R39	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	3	2	1	2	8
R40	1	2	2	5	3	1	3	3	2	1	3	1	2	3	1
R41	2	1	5	5	2	2	2	3	2	1	3	2	4	1	5
R42	2	2	2	5	4	2	3	8	2	6	3	3	1	3	6
R43	2	2	2	4	2	2	3	2	2	1	3	5	4	3	6
R44	2	1	2	5	2	1	2	5	2	1	2	5	2	1	3
R45	2	2	2	1	5	4	3	6	1	2	3	2	4	1	6
R46	1	1	4	2	2	4	1	3	1	1	3	8	2	2	7
R47	2	1	1	5	3	1	2	2	2	1	3	3	4	1	6
R48	2	2	2	4	2	2	3	4	2	6	3	8	4	4	6
R49	2	1	1	5	2	1	1	3	2	6	3	2	1	3	3
R50	2	2	2	5	3	1	3	5	1	1	3	5	4	3	3
R51	2	1	1	5	4	1	3	4	1	1	3	3	4	2	3
R52	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	7	2	3	3	3	4	2	6
R53	2	1	1	6	2	1	1	7	2	7	3	5	4	1	6
R54	2	1	2	1	2	2	3	8	2	7	3	8	4	5	3
R55	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	7	1	2	2	2	1	2	6
R56	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	5	1	1	1
R57	2	1	1	5	3	1	2	5	2	3	1	5	2	1	1
R58	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	3	2	1	1	5	4	2	5
R59	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	3	2	1	1	5	4	2	4
R60	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	3	2	1	1	5	4	2	5
R61	2	1	1	6	2	1	1	2	2	7	1	1	5	1	7
R62	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	3	2	1	1	5	1	3	3
R63	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	3	2	2	1	5	2	1	1
R64	1	3	1	5	3	1	1	3	2	3	1	5	1	1	1
R65	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	3	2	1	2	3	3	2	4
R66	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	3	2	1	1	5	3	2	4
R67	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	6	1	5	2	3	1
R68	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	3	2	5	3	3	4	1	6
R69	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	5	1	5	2	1	1
R70	1	1	1	6	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	4	1	1	3
R71	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	4	2	3	4	2	8
R72	1	1	2	2	1	1	4	3	2	8	3	3	2	1	1
R73	2	1	2	5	4	2	3	6	2	6	3	8	4	2	6
R74	2	1	1	4	3	1	1	3	2	5	3	3	1	1	1
R75	1	1	2	5	4	1	3	6	2	6	3	6	4	1	6
R76	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	3	2	5	3	8	3	4	6
R77	1	1	2	5	3	1	2	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	6
R78	2	1	1	6	2	1	1	2	2	4	2	3	3	1	3
R79	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	6	3	2	4	3	6
R80	2	1	2	7	2	2	1	8	1	1	3	8	4	1	6
R81	3	1	2	1	2	2	1	8	1	8	3	8	4	4	7
R82	2	1	2	1	2	2	1	8	1	7	3	8	5	2	7
R83	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	8	1	3	3	8	2	1	6
R84	1	1	1	1	2	4	4	3	2	6	4	3	6	5	6

	Q16	Q17	Q18	Q19	Q20	Q21	Q22	Q23	Q24	Q25	Q26	Q26	Q28
R39	3	2	1	2	1	3	2	3	2	3	2	1	2
R40	3	2	2	2	1	2	3	4	2	1	1	1	2
R41	3	2	1	2	1	3	2	4	2	2	3	4	2
R42	3	2	2	2	1	1	2	4	2	3	2	2	2
R43	3	2	2	2	1	3	2	2	2	3	2	4	3
R44	3	2	2	2	1	3	2	5	2	3	2	1	2
R45	3	2	1	2	1	1	2	4	2	1	2	2	3
R46	3	3	2	2	1	1	2	4	2	3	3	4	3
R47	3	2	2	2	1	1	2	4	5	1	1	5	2
R48	3	2	1	3	2	1	2	4	2	1	3	3	2
R49	6	3	1	2	1	3	2	5	2	2	2	5	2
R50	6	3	1	3	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	2
R51	3	2	1	2	1	4	2	4	2	4	2	1	2
R52	3	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	2	2	2	1	2
R53	3	2	1	2	1	1	2	4	2	1	1	1	2
R54	3	2	1	3	2	1	2	5	1	1	2	1	4
R55	3	2	1	2	1	1	2	4	2	1	3	2	1
R56	3	1	1	1	1	2	2	4	2	4	1	4	2
R57	3	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	3	1	1
R58	5	2	1	2	2	1	2	5	2	1	2	1	1
R59	3	2	2	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1
R60	3	2	1	4	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	1
R61	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	4	2	1	2	1	1
R52	6	2	1	4	2	1	1	6	2	1	2	1	1
R63	3	2	2	4	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1
R64	3	1	2	3	2	1	2	1	2	1	3	1	1
R65	1	2	2	3	2	1	2	2	2	1	3	1	1
R66	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	4	2	1	2	1	1
R67	3	2	2	2	2	1	2	3	2	1	2	1	1
R68	1	3	2	2	1	1	3	2	2	1	1	1	1
R69	3	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	1
R70	3	2	1	1	1	1	2	4	2	1	3	1	1
R71	4	2	2	3	2	2	2	3	5	4	1	1	2
R72	3	2	1	4	2	1	3	2	2	1	2	1	2
R73	3	2	2	2	1	2	3	7	2	2	2	4	2
R74	3	2	2	4	2	1	3	5	2	4	3	4	3
R75	3	2	2	4	2	1	3	5	2	4	3	4	2
R76	3	2	2	3	1	3	3	2	2	2	3	4	2
R77	5	2	2	3	2	2	3	2	2	1	2	4	2
R78	3	2	2	2	2	1	4	2	2	1	3	2	1
R79	1	2	1	4	2	1	3	2	2	1	3	2	1
R80	3	2	1	4	2	1	2	2	2	2	3	1	2
R81	6	2	3	6	5	4	4	7	4	5	4	6	5
R82	3	2	1	3	2	1	2	5	2	1	3	5	4
R83	3	2	2	3	2	1	2	5	2	4	3	5	1
R84	3	2	2	4	1	1	3	5	2	4	3	1	1

	Q29	Q30	Q31	Q32	Q33	Q34	Q35	Q36	Q37	Q38	Q39	Q40	Q41
R39		2	1	5	5	4	5	1	4	5	5	1	7
R40		2	2	5	5	1	5	7	1	3	5	5	5
R41		2	1	2	5	2	4	4	2	4	3	4	4
R42		1	2	4	5	1	5	5	1	5	5	1	1
R43		2	1	5	5	3	5	5	1	3	5	1	5
R44		1	2	4	5	3	5	5	5	5	5	1	5
R45		2	1	2	3	2	4	2	1	5	1	3	2
R46		2	1	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
R47		2	1	1	1	3	1	2	2	3	2	3	2
R48		3	2	5	5	2	5	5	1	5	1	1	5
R49		1	2	5	5	3	5	5	1	5	5	1	5
R50		2	2	5	5	5	5	1	5	5	5	5	5
R51		2	5	5	5	1	5	5	1	5	1	1	5
R52		2	2	4	5	3	5	5	1	5	4	1	5
R53		2	2	5	5	2	5	5	1	5	3	1	5
R54		2	2	3	3	3	3	7	1	4	7	1	4
R55		1	2	1	5	1	5	1	1	3	3	1	5
R56		1	2	3	5	1	2	2	5	2	2	1	3
R57		1	1	2	4	4	2	1	1	5	2	5	2
R58		1	2	2	2	4	4	1	2	5	2	5	5
R59		1	1	1	1	3	1	1	3	7	1	7	1
R60		1	1	1	1	3	1	1	3	1	1	1	1
R61		1	1	1	6	7	1	3	1	3	1	1	2
R52		1	1	1	2	7	7	2	7	2	1	7	1
R63		1	1	1	1	7	1	7	7	7	1	1	2
R64		1	1	1	2	2	1	7	4	5	2	2	6
R65		1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	1
R66		1	1	2	1	3	1	2	2	3	2	3	2
R67		1	1	1	4	5	1	1	2	5	1	1	5
R68		1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	4	2	3	4
R69		2	1	2	3	5	4	4	1	5	3	4	4
R70		2	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	4	3
R71		2	2	1	3	2	3	1	3	7	2	3	3
R72		3	2	2	3	2	3	1	2	7	1	2	4
R73		2	2	3	3	3	3	7	2	4	2	3	3
R74		2	2	5	5	5	5	5	1	6	2	1	5
R75		2	2	2	5	4	5	1	4	5	2	3	5
R76		2	2	5	5	1	5	5	2	5	5	5	5
R77		2	2	5	5	2	4	4	1	5	4	3	5
R78		2	1	2	4	5	4	3	2	5	2	2	5
R79		1	2	2	2	3	2	1	1	3	1	2	3
R80		1	1	5	5	5	5	2	1	5	5	1	5
R81		3	4	2	5	2	5	3	1	5	4	1	5
R82		4	2	2	5	2	5	4	1	2	2	2	5
R83		4	2	2	5	1	5	2	1	5	2	1	4
R84		1	1	5	5	3	5	5	2	3	5	1	5
		2	1	5	5	7	5	2	2	5	4	3	5

	Q42	Q43	Q44	Q45	Q46	Q47	Q48	Q49
R39	3	2	4	4	3	5	5	5
R40	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
R41	4	3	1	4	5	4	3	3
R42	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
R43	5	3	3	1	5	5	5	5
R44	5	5	5	1	5	5	5	5
R45	3	1	1	4	4	4	3	3
R46	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
R47	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	1
R48	5	5	1	1	5	5	5	5
R49	5	3	2	3	5	5	5	2
R50	5	5	1	5	5	5	5	5
R51	5	5	1	1	5	5	1	1
R52	4	5	1	1	5	4	4	4
R53	5	3	3	1	5	5	5	5
R54	4	3	3	3	4	5	5	4
R55	5	5	3	1	5	3	5	3
R56	3	3	1	5	3	3	3	3
R57	2	5	1	1	5	4	4	2
R58	5	5	1	5	4	4	2	2
R59	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1
R60	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1
R61	1	4	1	2	1	1	4	1
R62	1	5	1	2	5	2	2	1
R63	1	7	1	1	1	1	1	1
R64	2	5	1	2	4	5	4	2
R65	2	4	1	4	4	1	4	1
R66	1	3	2	3	2	1	1	2
R67	1	5	1	1	2	1	1	1
R68	2	2	2	2	4	2	3	2
R69	4	3	2	3	5	5	2	2
R70	3	4	1	3	2	3	3	1
R71	3	3	3	4	3	3	4	4
R72	4	5	2	2	3	3	3	4
R73	4	3	2	3	5	5	4	3
R74	5	5	5	3	5	5	5	5
R75	5	3	2	2	5	5	5	5
R76	5	7	7	7	7	5	5	5
R77	5	5	3	3	3	4	4	3
R78	5	3	1	5	4	5	3	3
R79	3	7	2	2	2	3	3	2
R80	5	7	1	5	5	5	5	5
R81	5	5	3	1	5	5	5	5
R82	5	3	4	1	5	5	7	4
R83	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	5
R84	5	5	3	1	5	5	5	5

Q1 Q2 Q3 Q4 Q5 Q6 Q7 Q8 Q9 Q10 Q11 Q12 Q13 Q14 Q15

R85	2	1	1	6	2	2	1	8	2	7	3	7	4	5	6
R86	2	1	1	7	2	1	2	8	2	7	3	2	4	5	6
R87	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	8	2	7	3	8	4	1	6
R88	2	1	1	7	2	1	1	8	2	7	3	2	4	5	6
R89	2	2	1	5	3	1	2	3	2	6	3	1	6	1	1
R90	2	1	1	4	3	1	1	8	2	2	1	5	3	1	1
R91	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	3	2	3	1	1	2	1	1
R92	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	3	2	3	1	3	2	1	1
R93	1	1	1	3	2	1	1	3	2	4	2	5	3	1	1
R94	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	3	2	3	1	1	3	1	1
R95	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	3	2	4	1	5	1	3	4
R96	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	3	1	1	3	1	1
R97	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	3	2	2	2	1	3	1	1
R98	1	1	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	1	1
R99	3	1	2	7	5	4	1	8	3	7	2	5	1	2	7
R100	2	1	2	1	6	1	1	3	2	2	2	1	1	2	4
R101	2	4	2	1	6	1	1	3	2	3	1	5	3	1	1
R102	2	1	2	1	1	2	1	3	1	3	2	3	2	2	3
R103	2	1	2	1	3	1	1	2	2	2	1	3	3	1	1
R104	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	3	2	3	1	5	3	1	4
R105	2	1	1	4	2	1	3	3	1	1	1	5	2	1	4
R106	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	3	2	1	1	2	2	1	1
R107	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	3	1	2	1	5	1	2	4
R108	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	4	1	2	2	1	3
R109	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	3	1	1	1	5	1	1	4
R110	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	3	1	3	2	1	4
R111	2	1	2	2	1	1	1	3	1	2	1	5	2	1	1
R112	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	4	1	5	3	2	1
R113	1	1	1	1	5	1	1	8	4	7	1	5	5	4	7
R114	1	4	1	1	1	1	1	8	2	4	1	5	2	1	1
R115	2	1	1	2	3	1	1	3	2	4	1	5	2	1	1
R116	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	2	2	5	3	1	1
R117	1	1	4	6	1	1	1	7	4	4	1	5	3	5	7
R118	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	1	1	1	1

Q16 Q17 Q18 Q19 Q20 Q21 Q22 Q23 Q24 Q25 Q26 Q26 Q28

R85	6	2	1	4	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	1
R86	6	2	1	4	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	3	1
R87	6	2	2	4	3	1	3	5	2	4	1	4	1
R88	6	2	2	3	4	1	1	2	2	1	1	4	1
R89	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	5	2	2	2	5	2
R90	5	1	1	3	2	1	3	2	2	1	3	1	3
R91	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	4	3	1	4
R92	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	4	3	1	4
R93	1	1	2	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1
R94	3	2	1	1	1	2	2	4	2	4	2	1	4
R95	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	2	4	3	1	1
R96	3	2	2	3	2	2	2	5	2	3	2	1	3
R97	1	1	2	4	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	1
R98	1	1	2	5	4	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	1
R99	6	1	2	4	5	4	1	2	2	1	3	1	1
R100	1	2	2	4	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	1
R101	1	2	2	6	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	1
R102	3	2	1	3	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	2	1
R103	1	1	2	5	3	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	1
R104	1	2	2	6	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	1
R105	3	2	1	5	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	1	1
R106	3	3	1	4	4	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	1
R107	2	2	1	4	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	1
R108	3	2	1	1	1	2	2	4	2	1	2	1	1
R109	3	2	2	4	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	1
R110	3	2	1	1	1	2	2	4	2	1	2	1	3
R111	1	1	2	2	2	1	3	3	2	1	2	1	1
R112	1	1	2	5	2	1	1	3	2	1	3	1	1
R113	6	2	1	5	4	1	1	1	2	1	4	1	1
R114	1	1	2	5	4	1	1	5	2	1	3	1	1
R115	3	2	2	4	4	1	2	1	2	1	3	1	1
R116	3	1	2	3	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	1
R117	6	4	2	4	4	1	1	2	2	1	2	1	1
R118	1	4	1	3	2	1	4	1	2	1	2	2	1

Q29 Q30 Q31 Q32 Q33 Q34 Q35 Q36 Q37 Q38 Q39 Q40 Q41

R85	2	1	5	5	7	5	2	2	5	4	3	5
R86	2	2	2	5	3	5	2	5	5	4	5	5
R87	2	2	2	5	3	5	2	5	5	4	3	5
R88	2	2	5	5	2	5	5	1	5	2	1	5
R89	2	2	2	5	3	5	2	1	5	3	2	5
R90	1	2	1	5	5	1	1	3	5	3	7	5
R91	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	5	1
R92	2	2	2	2	5	2	2	2	5	2	5	1
R93	2	2	2	2	5	2	2	2	5	2	5	1
R94	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	4	1
R95	2	2	2	1	5	2	2	1	5	3	5	2
R96	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	5	2	3	2
R97	2	2	2	2	5	2	2	2	5	2	5	5
R98	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	3	1
R99	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	6	1	7	1	1
R100	1	1	2	2	5	2	2	2	5	4	5	1
R101	1	1	1	1	7	1	1	1	7	7	1	1
R102	1	1	1	7	7	1	1	7	5	1	7	7
R103	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	4	4	1	4	1
R104	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	4	1	4	1
R105	1	1	2	7	7	1	1	5	7	1	7	7
R106	1	1	2	4	1	1	2	2	4	2	4	2
R107	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7	5	2	5	1
R108	1	1	7	1	7	1	7	7	7	7	7	1
R109	2	2	2	2	3	2	1	2	5	3	5	3
R110	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	2	1
R111	2	2	3	3	4	2	1	2	5	2	5	3
R112	2	1	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
R113	2	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	3	2	3	2
R114	2	1	7	7	7	7	1	7	7	1	7	1
R115	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
R116	1	1	1	4	4	4	2	2	5	1	5	5
R117	1	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	5	1
R118	1	2	1	1	7	1	1	2	7	1	3	2
	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

	Q42	Q43	Q44	Q45	Q46	Q47	Q48	Q49
R85	5	5	5	3	5	5	5	5
R86	5	5	5	3	5	5	5	5
R87	5	5	5	1	5	5	5	5
R88	1	3	1	3	1	2	3	2
R89	2	2	1	5	5	2	5	1
R90	1	5	1	5	1	2	3	1
R91	2	5	1	1	4	2	2	1
R92	3	5	1	1	3	2	2	2
R93	1	5	1	2	1	2	2	1
R94	2	5	1	1	4	2	3	1
R95	2	3	1	3	3	4	2	1
R96	2	5	1	1	3	2	2	1
R97	1	5	1	2	1	2	2	1
R98	1	7	1	7	1	2	2	1
R99	2	5	1	1	4	2	5	1
R100	1	7	7	1	7	1	1	1
R101	1	5	1	7	1	1	1	1
R102	1	1	5	1	5	1	1	6
R103	1	5	1	2	1	2	2	1
R104	1	5	1	7	1	1	7	1
R105	2	5	1	1	1	2	5	1
R106	2	5	1	1	4	2	5	1
R107	7	7	1	7	1	7	7	7
R108	3	3	7	3	3	3	3	3
R109	1	5	1	1	1	1	1	1
R110	3	5	1	1	5	3	3	2
R111	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
R112	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
R113	1	7	1	7	1	7	1	1
R114	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
R115	2	5	1	5	5	4	4	1
R116	1	5	1	2	1	2	2	1
R117	1	4	2	1	1	2	1	2
R118	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1

APPENDIX H
SURVEY SOURCES

The following record numbers (R) correspond with those found in Appendix G.

Record Number	Name	Province	Comments
R1-5, R R 9 0 - 1 1 8	Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD)	Udon Thani	Works with house churches in Udon Thani and Nong Khai provinces.
R6-7, R56-69	Lower Isaan Foundation for Enablement (LIFE)	Roi Et	Works with house churches in Roi Et province.
R8-17	Prakittikhun Church	Nakorn Phanom	EFT Affiliated Church
R18-27	St. Joseph's Catholic Church	Udon Thani, Nong Khai	Diocese of Nong Khai

R28-55	Northeastern Bible Seminary	Khon Kaen	Includes students from all over Isaan, Laos and northern Thailand
R70-79	Prasertphon Church	Udon Thani	CCT Affiliated Church
R80-88	Living Water Church of Borabur	Maharakham	EFT Affiliated Church
R89	Central Thai pastor formerly in Isaan	Chaiyaphum	Daughter work of Mahaphon Church in Bangkok
118		7 provinces	

APPENDIX I

A TIMELINE OF EVENTS ON THE KHORAT PLATEAU

- 3,500 BC Ban Chiang established
2,000 BC Tung Kula civilization established
50 A.D. Funan Kingdom established
550 That Phanom established by Chenla Kingdom¹
802 Foundation of Imperial *mandala* of Angkor established²
1130 Extensive Khmer building projects begin from Khorat to Vientiane³
1359 Introduction of Buddhism to Lan Sang⁴
1373 First major migration of Lao into Khorat Plateau⁵
1600 Century of Lan Sang's Golden Age⁶
1707 Luang Phrabang separated from Vientiane⁷
1713 Champasak broke away from Luang Phrabang and Vientiane⁸
1767 Burmese troops sack Ayutthaya, Siam's capital, Prince Anouwong born.
1775 Lao flee Vientiane and Champasak and settle in Khorat Plateau⁹
1778-9 Siamese forces dominate Champasak and Vientiane¹⁰ and cowed Luang Phrabang into unequal alliance with Siam. Hundreds of Lao families were resettled in Saraburi.¹¹ The Emerald Buddha and Phra-Bang image taken to Bangkok. 10,000 Lao families resettled in Saraburi, Lao royalty (including Prince Anou) taken from Vientiane to Bangkok¹² and raised in the Thai court for fourteen years.¹³ The three Lao kingdoms (Luang Phrabang, Vientiane and Champasak) become vassal states to Siam.¹⁴
1781 Vassal ruler Nanthasen established in Vientiane, Phrabang image returned.¹⁵

¹ Srisakara 2546:240

² Stuart-Fox 1998:18

³ Masuhara 2546:86-87

⁴ Sila 1964:37

⁵ Srisakara 2546:269

⁶ Masuhara 2546:192

⁷ Manich 2000:145

⁸ Manich 2000:145

⁹ Paitoon 1984:54

¹⁰ Manich 2000:172.

¹¹ Wyatt 1984:143.

¹² Sila 1964:103, Wyatt 1984:157..

¹³ Manich 2000:181.

¹⁴ Sila 1964:109.

¹⁵ Sila 1964:109.

- 1782 (April 6) Taksin ousted and replaced by Rama I, start of new dynasty in Siam¹⁶. Lao prince Nanthasen (raised in royal court in Bangkok since 1779) sent back to rule as vassal king in Vientiane, Rama I sends the Phrabang image with him since it is considered bad luck for Bangkok.¹⁷
- 1787 Prince Phrachao Nangklaao (later Rama III) born.¹⁸
- 1789 Nanthasen attacks Luang Phrabang. Tens of thousands of Lao sent to Bangkok to dig canals; most do not survive.¹⁹
- 1792 Nanthasen convinces ex-queen Taenkam of Luang Phrabang to give up the city to Vientiane (vassal of Siam). She does and the royalty all go to the court in Bangkok.²⁰
- 1793 Prince Anou of Vientiane allowed to leave Thai court of Bangkok.²¹
- 1794 Nanthasen to Bangkok for conspiring w/ Nakhon Phanom against Siam.
- 1795 Nanthasen dies in Bangkok, his brother Inthavong ascends throne of Vientiane.²²
- 1798 Inthavong sends his brother Anouwong as field commander from Vientiane to fight Burmese with Siam.
- 1803 Siamese Prince Chesada suggests Anou replace his brother as next king of Vientiane after death of Anou's brother Intawong because of his bravery in battle for Siam.²³
- 1804 Death of Inthavong, Anouwong ascends the throne of Vientiane.²⁴ Birth of Chao Fah Chai Mongkut (later Rama IV).²⁵ Eldest daughter of Inthavong popular w/ Rama I in Siamese palace.²⁶
- 1821 Anouwong requests Siam's Rama II for appointment of his son Yo to rule Champasak. He enlists help of Prince Chesadabodin later Rama III²⁷ Approved²⁸
- 1824 Death of Rama II (July 21) Ascension of older son, Rama III (age 36)²⁹ Mongkut takes the Buddhist robe³⁰. Anouwong and his son are insulted before, during, and after the funeral.³¹

¹⁶ Wyatt 1984:145, 313.

¹⁷ Bamphen Na Ubon 2542:2999; Wyatt 1984:157.

¹⁸ Mayoury and Pheuiphanh 1998:18.

¹⁹ Sila 1964:110.

²⁰ Manich 2000:181.

²¹ Manich 2000:181.

²² Sila 1964:110.

²³ Manich 2000:182.

²⁴ Sila 1964:111.

²⁵ Sethuan 2544:1

²⁶ Sila 1964:111.

²⁷ Manich 2000:179.

²⁸ Sila 1964:111.

²⁹ Wyatt 1984:167,313.

³⁰ Some suggest that Mongkut became a monk in order to avoid bowing before Rama III, whom he considered a usurper (Mayoury and Pheuiphanh 1998:137). According to the diary of Emilie Bradley, this seems to have been the attitude prevalent among the missionary community in Bangkok as well (1836:170).

³¹ Sila 1964:113-114.

- 1827 (Feb) Anou begins attack on Bangkok.³² Siamese armies ransack Vientiane³³
- 1828 (Oct) Siamese completely demolish Vientiane, relocate inhabitants to Bangkok.³⁴
- 1829 (Feb) Tortured death of Anouwong age 62 in Bangkok. Massive relocation of Lao from Vientiane into Bangkok and northeast begins (the bulk of the inhabitants of Thailand³⁵)
- 1834 Two-year resettlement of Lao from Vientiane to Khorat Plateau as buffer zone against Vietnamese
- 1834-1847 Thai-Vietnamese War
- 1835 (July 18) Dr. Don Beach Bradley arrives in Bangkok, Siam³⁶
- 1850 Bowring Treaty (Siam w/ England)
- 1851 Death of Rama III, Ascension of brother Mongkut, Rama IV to Siam's throne³⁷
- 1865 *Khaen* Prohibition in Bangkok area³⁸
- 1868 (Oct 1) Death of Rama IV, Ascension of son Rama V³⁹
- 1874 King Chulalongkorn's decree on the progressive elimination of slavery⁴⁰
- 1883 Aymonier begins his six-month survey of the Khorat Plateau⁴¹
- 1884 Bangkok decree forbidding the capture and selling of Kha slaves⁴²
- 1890 Lao *Hua Muiang* grouped into three *monthon* Lao Lum, Lao Klang, Lao Tung⁴³
- 1892 Three *monthon* renamed Nakhon Ratchasima, Udon Thani, and Isaan⁴⁴
- 1893 Franco-Siamese Treaty (Oct 3). Siam withdraws from left bank of Mekong northeast under Siamese political control, France controls Laos.⁴⁵
- 1899 System of tribute payment replaced with taxation of four-baht⁴⁶
- 1900 Railroad line to Khorat from Bangkok completed⁴⁷
- 1902 April 3 Three hundred followers of *Phu Mi Bun* killed by Thai troops in Ubon⁴⁸
- 1910 (Oct. 23) Death of Rama V, Ascension of son Rama VI⁴⁹
- 1922 Name *Phaak Isaan* imposed upon northeast region of Thailand⁵⁰
- 1928 Railroad line to Ubon Ratchathani completed⁵¹

³² Sila 1964:116.

³³ Sila 1964:122.

³⁴ Sila 1964:134.

³⁵ Sila 1964:135.

³⁶ Lord 1969:66.

³⁷ Wyatt 1984:313.

³⁸ Boonlert 2531:26.

³⁹ Wyatt 1984:313.

⁴⁰ Murdoch 1974:52.

⁴¹ Aymonier 2000:273

⁴² Murdoch 1974:52

⁴³ Wyatt 1967:16

⁴⁴ Somchai 2002:107

⁴⁵ Hall 1970:696.

⁴⁶ Murdoch 1974:53

⁴⁷ Wyatt 1967:18

⁴⁸ Murdoch 1974:59

⁴⁹ Wyatt 1984:313.

⁵⁰ Somchai 2002:107

⁵¹ Wyatt 1967:18

- 1928-1930 Ho Chi Minh (alias Thau Chin) works in Udon and Sakon Nakhon⁵²
- 1932 Dissolution of Siamese absolute monarchy
- 1933 Railroad line to Khon Kaen completed⁵³
- 1936 Name of Siam changed to Thailand
- 1949 Kilo 11 Incident⁵⁴
- 1955 Railroad line to Nong Khai completed⁵⁵
- 1965 Permission to build five airfields given to US Gov't : Khorat, Khon Kaen, Ubon, Udon, Nakhon Pathom. Eight years of bombing Laos begins⁵⁶
- 1975 End of Lao Monarchy. End of Vietnam conflict.
- 1982 Thai government general amnesty for Communists proclaimed December 1st⁵⁷
- 1995 Friendship Bridge across the Mekong River in Nong Khai completed.

⁵² Wyatt 1967:19

⁵³ Wyatt 1967:18-19

⁵⁴ Wyatt 1967:34 Not mentioned in this study but important historically.

⁵⁵ Tdem 2546:420

⁵⁶ Fry 2002:27

⁵⁷ Char 1995 Not mentioned in this study but important historically.

APPENDIX J

CHRONOLOGICAL SYSTEMS USED BY THE SIAMESE

Throughout recorded history the ruling powers over the Khorat Plateau have used a variety of systems to keep track of the passage of years. Until the reign of the Siamese most localities would merely count by the twelve-year Chinese cycle. With the advent of Siamese control over the region this was continued in combination with the systems described below. In an attempt to clarify the various abbreviations found in the literature the following explanations are given in sequential order.

- C.E. (จ.ศ.) *Chulasakarat* (“Little” Era). This system was first developed by King Popsa Sawrahan of Burma (613-640 A.D.) who was an astrological genius. As a highly respected figure he sought to purify his country and proclaimed the first year of his new numbering system in the year 639 A.D. The initials for this era should not be confused with the abbreviation for the Common Era used in anthropological writings today. Siam adopted the Burmese system of C.E. during the Sukothai period.
- R.E. (ร.ศ.) *Ratanakosinarat* (Ratanakosin Era). The fifth king of the present dynasty, Chulalongkorn replaced the *Chulasakarat* system to commemorate the founding of Bangkok (Ratanakosin) in 1782 A.D. and numbers from that date. He first implemented it in 1888 A.D. as the year 106 R.E.
- B.E. (พ.ศ.) *Phuttasakarat* (Buddhist Era). In 1912 A.D. Rama VI reinstated the ancient use of the Buddhist Era which had been in use before C.E. This dates 543 years before Anno Domini (A.D.) to the year of Buddha’s death or his achievement of Nirvana. The system of Buddhist Era has been in use in Thailand since 1912 A.D. (Tdem 2546:558-559).

APPENDIX K

THE MEANING OF *PHRA SEE AHN*

Context: Mr. Khampan Sudcha (K), age thirty-eight, is an Isaan evangelist working for the Lower Isaan Foundation for Enablement (LIFE) in Roi Et, Thailand. This interview was conducted at the LIFE farm outside of Khan Hak Village on January 7, 2004. The conversation in the Isaan language was taped and translated by Paul DeNeui (P).

P: I want to ask about the Buddhist prophecy of *Phra See Ahn*. Is there is anything in this prophecy about the one who was going to be born?

K: Yes. But I understand that this legend is for those who are now elderly. For young people today this story is not meaningful anymore. The story is still told in some places; I myself heard it from my elders and from the *maw lom* singing when I was growing up.

P: Do you believe that this prophecy is referring to Jesus?

K: Yes, it is about Jesus. It started in the Buddhist era since some parts of it still remain to be fulfilled. [In Isaan culture] there is the Buddhist teaching and there is the oral teaching. The oral teaching refers to the legends that have been passed down from generation to generation; these are prophecies that have to do with Buddhism.

P: After people listen are there some who make a decision of faith?

K: Yes, there are several who have believed because of this prophecy, for example, Father Lee. Many of the elderly generation who have become God's children¹ in Roi Et have believed because of having this prophecy explained to them. I can say that hundreds of these people are children of God. They have come to know God because of the prophecy of *Phra See Ahn*, the one they were anticipating.

P: Are you are saying that this anticipation has prepared them to receive God?

K: Yes, many are waiting for *Phra See An* but in reality they are waiting for Jesus.

P: What about the younger generation? Do they know about *Phra See An*?

K: The way to present the gospel to the younger generation is not simply to talk to them. We have to present the gospel in ways that young people can connect with personally.

¹ The preferred term for followers of Christ within the LIFE network.

Those who have found God can now share what God has done for them in their lives. You can see results in their lives; they have gone very far already—as far as the sun! Their life has changed radically through their experience of God. This experience with God is what convinces young people today that God is real. Young people are experiencing things all the time now especially through the media. They see things on television, they see the President [of the United States]; they see many, many things that are relevant to their world today.

If we talk about heaven or hell to young people today, it has no relevance to them because to them these things (if exist at all) are off in the far distance. I share about things that are related to today, the events that hit us in our daily lives. This is the method I use in sharing with young people today because these things are easy to talk about. This doesn't make young people sleepy.

P: So you're saying you don't need to teach about *Phra See Ahn* with youth?

K: No. This is not necessary. They don't know anything about it. There is a song that I lead them in singing and it builds interest. These are popular tunes and I use them frequently now.

P: Is there anything else that I should know about the *Phra See Ahn* prophecy?

K: Can you explain the meaning of *Phra See Ahn* or [as it is fully said] *Phra See Arriyah Meht Tri Yoh*? Do you know what it means?

P: No. Can you tell me about it?

K: You have to translate back to the root words of *Phra See Arriyah Meht Tri Yoh*. Start with the word *see*.² The word *see* comes from the root *seeri* which means excellent.

See toh ko tang (Pali)
Jah dai kert ben dee (Thai)
Born to be the best

When *Phra See Ahn* comes they also say,

Man jah raahb bai ben muan nah kong fai (Thai)
All will be equal just as fire evens everything in its path

I can translate all of this. This means that even if you are a wealthy millionaire living on the fifth floor of a tall building and you drive a Mercedes-Benz, or if you are simply a poor farmer riding on the buffalo's back all will one day be equal because all who have Jesus will be equally saved. The way I translate it fits perfectly with the proverb. This is an explanation really speaks to the heart of the poor! God says, "It is

² Khamphan starts with the second word in the title because the first word, *Phra*, is familiar to any who have learned title. Is the sacred honorific for any person or article of religious or royal connection.

me! Come on in!” People listen carefully to all of this. When I speak with elderly people they especially become very interested.

So put this together with the first pronoun, *Phra* and you have *Phra See*. This means the most glorious Holy One. But the Bible says that all people have sinned and are “utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us” [Rom. 3:23 The Message]. But when Jesus came he, “became human and lived here on earth among us. . . We have seen his glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father [Jn. 1:13a, 14 NLT]. This word “glory” is the same root word for Thai people found in the term for “excellent.” We don’t try to force our own meaning on these words but we are trying to understand what the heart meaning is of the words in the scripture and the words that people are using. In Buddhism this word is translated this same way.

The next phrase, *arriyah*, means the great, or the all-powerful. For example, when we say the Thai word *arriyaprathet* this means a large, powerful country; or the word *arriyahtham* which means a “great, powerful teaching.” Another word is *arriyasatsee* which means “the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.” But the term *Phra See Arriyah* means the great and powerful one. And who could be greater or more powerful than the one who created the heavens and the earth? All other religious leaders were born after the creation of the world but Jesus was the Word who existed with the Father and was the Father before the creation of the world. People who hear this get excited. They start to see that what they have been waiting for in the *Phra See Arriyah Meht Tri*. If the terms are explained word by word they can understand.

The next word *meht* comes from the word *mehtta*. This means merciful and kind. Therefore when put these words together *Phra See Arriyah Meht Tri* means the Great and powerful one who is kind and merciful, the one without sin. Jesus did not have a wife nor did he father any children therefore, in the Thai way of thinking, he did not have sin. But if an ordinary person fathers children he has sin³.

However when the one who is to come arrives all will be without sin. For example, even an old grandmother, out in her field, will be able to go to heaven because someone can read the Bible to her and she can understand it herself and go to heaven. I explain that Jesus is this merciful and kind one who is to come.

See toh ko tang
Jah dai kert ben dee
Born to be the best

What this proverb means is that those who were born in the poorest and lowest levels of society will be reborn in sinless excellence. They will find God before others. I give the example of the poor villagers. Who in the village finds God first? It is the poorest of the poor, when they experience the mercy and kindness of God in their lives. When they understand the Bible teaching that God loved them so much that he was even willing to die for them they see that there is only one willing to do that. This is Jesus.

I tell people that if they don’t believe to go ahead and study it for themselves and see if the root meaning of this name is what I am explaining or not. Buddha is not the

³One definition of sin, in the Thai way of thinking, revolves around the understanding that the sexual urge and its fulfillment, even in the context of marriage, is giving in to the lower nature and therefore sinful.

merciful one because if any person is not born with all thirty-two parts⁴ then that person cannot become a monk. Also that person must be male.

The word *tri* means three. This is the same as the Thai flag that has three colors and is known as the *tritrong* (three-colored flag). For Isaan people the “three” part of this title refers to heaven, earth, and hell. The Great One has a love that reaches into all three places. We understand that heaven is the place of God. The earth is the place God created. Hell is the dwelling place of Satan and his demons. God is greater than all three of these places; he takes care of all three levels. Buddha is not able to do this. Opening to the beginning of the Bible people can read about the God who created the earth and is the owner of the heavens and the earth. This is the meaning of the Great One of Three. Old people hear this and have to admit that it is the truth.

The final syllable is *yo* from *yowah*. This comes from the word that means wind. This points to the Holy Spirit who is described as the wind. He is not referred to in physical terms but can be experienced.

All of this has to do with faith. People will look for and wait for the one who is to come all of their life and never find him if people don't understand the meaning. All of these older traditions have an origin and a purpose. This is what I do when speaking with older people.

P: Should missionaries use this method with older Thai people?

K: I think using this with elder people brings results because they have a background in Buddhism.

P: All Buddhists from all of Thailand?

K: Yes. All older Thai people are familiar with this. They are still waiting for *Phra See Ahn* to arrive.

P: Do you think this should be translated for other missionaries to understand?

K: That is up to you if you want to do it.

P: I think it would be helpful but it must be used with a specific age group.

K: I once bought a book about *Phra See Ahn*. It explained some of the meanings that I have described but not in much detail. It said that when *Phra See Ahn* really comes he would be like Buddha. He will be born in a heavenly place and live with all the thousands of female angelic beings. He will have a wife and will not be born into this world. The author of this book was not teaching the complete story.

If we look at this as followers of Jesus we can see the meanings in these prophecies. There are three things in these prophecies and three in our beliefs. We have the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. For Buddhist they have three: The Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. All religions have a basis of three that do not disagree with

⁴ Thirty-two signifies a complete person at birth. To have any less than thirty-two is to be either mentally or physically handicapped and therefore incomplete. Such a person would be disqualified from becoming a Buddhist monk.

each other. If I were to suggest studying Buddhism as it conflicts with Christianity then you should get ready to run. This is because we need to respect Buddhism; it was here before we were. People have become deeply attached to their cultural beliefs. What Buddha taught was true. I ask people, “Do you know what Buddha taught?”

Haak wah than mah tung leaw khon buah nai
When he comes people will not accept him

They won't accept him and they won't welcome him. If Jesus did not want people to follow him why did he come to die for everyone? I ask the person listening to me is this true? Grandpa is listening to me and says, “It's true!” I ask him, “Did Jesus come and tell you off? Has he done something to wrong you? If not, why do people hate him? “*Houay!*” he says, “I haven't got the faintest idea. All I know is that when I hear the name 'Jesus' I get furious.” So I say to Grandpa, do you see that what the Buddha said is true? He says, “Yes, I see that now.”

When the Buddha said that the one to come would be rejected he spoke the truth. People who are listening are starting to pay serious attention at this point. What else did Buddha teach? He taught that those who go to heaven are like the horns of a cow, but those who go to hell are as numerous as the hairs on the hide. So I ask Grandpa, “Which are more on the cow—the horns or the hairs? Most people say the horns are fewer. So I ask, “Grandpa, in your village how many people are following Jesus?” He says, “Not very many.” So I summarize by sharing that even Buddha himself taught that only a few would follow the one to come. I ask him, “Did Buddha lie to us?” No, he will say. Buddha did not lie. So I ask him, “If you don't believe yet, why don't you consider what you are saying?”

We are trying to encourage the use of the beliefs that people already have so that they can see that what they believe in is really the truth. I tried to write this up once but writing it out and speaking it in dialogue with people is very different. I must say that any specific method is not going to work in every situation. It is only a principle or a foundation from which to build. Actually putting these ideas into practice is a completely different story. In reality, all of this is the work of the Holy Spirit who is working in the heart of the person with whom we are speaking.

GLOSSARY OF THAI WORDS

<i>boonkhun</i>	A lifetime emotional indebtedness to someone, usually parents
<i>farang</i>	The term for big-nosed white-skinned Caucasian foreigners
<i>khwan</i>	Life-essence, spirit, soul
<i>müiang</i>	City or urban
<i>pakama</i>	Light cotton wrap-around cloth used by men as loin cloth, belt, hat, and hammock.
<i>phii</i>	Spirit, usual malicious.
<i>phuk siew</i>	Tying ceremony to become blood-brothers or blood-sisters
<i>sanuk</i>	An attitude and ability that mixes pleasure with work and infuses uncomfortable situations with humor. Broader than simply fun, it is an essential element in every relationship and every successful <i>tiow</i>
<i>sing saksit</i>	Sacred and protective objects when properly appeased able to benefit humans. Refers usually to empowered objects or angelic spiritual beings or the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.
<i>sirimongkhon</i>	powerful, auspicious, helpful, sacred
<i>sukhwan</i>	A ceremony for the <i>khwan</i>
<i>tambon</i>	Sub-district

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VITA

Paul Henry DeNeui was born in Inglewood, California to Henry and Eleanor (Wilson) DeNeui on August 5, 1959. Paul's father was an Internal Auditor and his mother worked in secretarial positions. Both were active in their church's music ministry for many years. Church involvement was a vital part of family life during Paul's childhood. Along with his three younger siblings, Paul was exposed to the life of the Christian community and to world mission regularly.

Paul graduated with a B.S. in Ornamental Horticulture, concentration Landscape Design, from California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo in 1982. In August of 1982 he married Gretchen Marie Strickland whom he had met at the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship on their college campus. From 1982 to 1985 they both worked full-time while attending Fuller Theological Seminary (FTS) extension classes in Menlo Park, CA. In 1985, they attended North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois in preparation for missionary service with the Evangelical Covenant Church of America (ECCA). In 1986, they returned to California where both attended FTS full-time. Paul graduated with his Master of Divinity in Cross-cultural studies in June of 1987. Their first son, Joseph, was born during finals week of that month. Two weeks later they were commissioned as missionaries to Thailand with the ECCA. In September they began two years of Thai language and culture training in Bangkok. On their first home assignment in 1991, Paul was ordained as minister in the ECCA.

From 1987 to 2005, Paul and Gretchen worked with the ministry of the Evangelical Covenant Church Thailand Mission (ECCTM) in Bangkok, Udon Thani, Roi Et, Khon Kaen and Chiang Mai, Thailand in a variety of holistic development ministries, including integrated agriculture, handicrafts, ministry to the HIV positive, youth and adult church leadership training, and prison ministry. While living in Thailand three more children were added to their family: Anna (1990), Andrew (1993), and Jeannette (1995). In April 2000, Paul and Gretchen were asked by the director of the ECCA's department of World Mission to become resource people in the area of contextualized church planting for the ECCA's work in world mission. This also included an encouragement to pursue further studies.

From 2001 to 2003 Paul was given a two-year study assignment during which time he completed the Master of Theology in Missiology (Th.M) degree and his first year of Ph.D studies on the Pasadena campus of FTS. During a two year term in Thailand he completed his PhD fieldwork and dissertation writing. In the fall of 2005 the family will move to Chicago where Paul will serve a three year position as associate professor of world mission at North Park Theological Seminary.

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