

COMPARISON OF THE MANIFESTATION OF THE BAPTISM
IN THE HOLY SPIRIT WITH THE
SPIRITUAL TATTOO IN THAILAND

By Anattiphong Phanon

Introduction

Identification of the Issue

Tattoo is an “art” that has been a part of Thai culture for centuries. To the Thai people, tattoo not only is a mystic art of pattern, shape, and design, but it also reflects religious beliefs and traditions.

In Thailand, the “spiritual tattoo” is called *Sak-Yant*. In the Thai dictionary, *Sak* means to pierce the skin with a long needle to make a permanent picture or words.¹ *Yant* has a spiritual implication through the ‘sacred geometry’ that contains the alphabet and picture(s). Through rituals, spirits are transferred into the tattoo by shamans when they draw *Yant* on the skin, a cloth, or the surface of things. Thus, spiritual tattooing functions as the bridge or instrument that connects the tattoo wearer with gods or ‘wild spirits’ in the spiritual realm in order to help him/her.²

For the Thai, there are two kinds of spiritual tattoos—one, called *Meta Maha Saneh*, is for charming or prosperity; the other, called *Kong Krapan*, is for immortality.³ According to Thai culture, the spiritual tattoo is different from the “fashion tattoo” because it can become possessed by the wild spirits, which require the wearer to have strong

¹Robert Lawlor and Lindisfarne Association, *Sacred Geometry: Philosophy and Practice* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 5–6; L. R. Chawdhri, *Secrets of Yantra, Mantra & Tantra* (Sterling, n.d.), 3–4.

²Allan, and Blackwell, (translated by Anna Kardec), *The Spirits’ Book: The Principles of Spiritist Doctrine* (Lake-Libraria Allan Kardec Editora Ltda., n.d.), 69.

³“Traditional Thai Tattoos,” *Tattoo Thailand*, <http://www.tattoo-thailand.com/traditional-thai-tattoos.html>.

faith and belief. It is to be put not only onto the skin, but also on amulets, cloth, or other things in order to bless and protect the owners.⁴

Examples of the Issue's Prevalence

On August 22, 2011, at the New Hope International Church camp in Washington State, USA, the church's senior pastor, upon finishing his sermon, had an altar call. As he prayed, many young believers became overwhelmed with the presence of the Holy Spirit and reacted by crying, laughing, jumping, running and being "slain in the Spirit." Afterward, one of my Buddhist friends who believes in spiritual tattoo compared what she had just witnessed with spiritual tattoo manifestations.⁵

At another time during my research, I happened to interview at Bangkhae Church in Bangkok a female Christian who has been a devotee of Thai animism, especially the spiritual tattoo. She disclosed having experienced spiritual warfare the day she accepted Jesus Christ as her savior. Immediately after praying to receive Christ Jesus, she asked the pastor to pray for her back. As he and some elders were doing so, she fell down unconscious. Although she believed that she had been "slain in the Spirit," I learned that they had changed from praying for her back to casting out evil spirits.⁶ When I asked how her Christian life was since she accepted Jesus, she admitted to often having strange symptoms, such as screaming, body shaking, jumping, and trying to turn over wooden benches during a worship service. Surprisingly, she had never talked to her pastor about those frightening manifestations. I, of course, encouraged her to immediately do so.⁷

Purpose/Application of This Research

With *Sak-Yant* (i.e., spiritual tattoo) so popular among Thai Buddhists, many of them question the baptism in the Holy Spirit in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, since both share a similar "spiritual empowerment." This issue is also often raised by new Christians who have spiritual tattoos and who used to participate in the

⁴Chawdhri, *Secrets of Yantra, Mantra & Tantra*, 4.

⁵Tanya Suwan, interviewed by Anattiphong Phanon, Seattle, WA, August 22, 2011.

⁶See www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf5Gdxh27CE [at 1:38:00]

⁷Mimi-jaiko (pseudonym in www.pantip.com), The Spiritual Possession for Christian Who Has Spiritual Tattoo, September 25, 2014, <http://pantip.com/message/5422bc7d961fl252098b47d2> (under maxlife's account).

spiritual tattoo ritual, since demonic manifestations mirror their spiritual experiences and sensitivity.

Thus, the intent of the research presented here is to compare the differences between the baptism in the Holy Spirit and the spiritual tattoo, particularly relative to the area of resulting manifestations between those associated with the Holy Spirit and those associated with the tattoo. It is hoped that “the truth of the matter” revealed by this research will help new Christians who had previously been under the influence of the spiritual tattoo ritual to avoid confusion and to seek release from its effects.

Historical Background

Origin of Spiritual Tattoo

The purpose of tattooing has varied from culture to culture and generation to generation throughout history. This section will address the background and arrival of the spiritual tattoo in Thailand and the elements involved.

The spiritual tattoo is an art that has a profound background mixed with integrated religious beliefs and practices.⁸ To trace that background, one needs to know first the roots of Brahmanism-Hinduism during the Vedic Period, and then the history of *Tantrism*, which is expressed in the concepts of *Tantra*, *Yantra*, and *Mantra*. *Tantrism* developed the sacred geometry that later became known in Thailand as spiritual tattoo.⁹ Indian black magic, with its spelling, rituals, and charms that were used in the spiritual tattoo, was developed by Brahmanism, which produced the rituals, doctrines, and numerous sacred texts and literature.¹⁰ These “sciences” were called *Tantric* and *Vajrayana*, which included *Yantra* and *Mantra*.¹¹

Spiritual tattooing, specifically, originated during the reign of the Khmer empire, which in the 9th to the 13th centuries encompassed Laos, Vietnam, and parts of Thailand. The sciences of *Tantric* were

⁸Prasert Chutindharo. 2008. “*An Analytical Study of the Occultism and Buddhism According to Phra Dhammapitaka*.” Master's thesis, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 2008, 15–16.

⁹Pisnupol Suwannaroopo. 2012. “*A Study of Buddha Dhamma and Value as Appeared in Lanna Yuntian: A Case Study of Amphur Muang, Lampang Province*.” Master's thesis, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 25.

¹⁰“Vedic Period,” *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, March 17, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Vedic_period&oldid=589943270.

¹¹Suwannaroopo, 20.

incorporated into Buddhism, folk religion, and shamanism. During World War II and the Vietnam conflict, Thai soldiers covered themselves with the spiritual tattoo and other amulets for protection.¹² Doing so purportedly guaranteed that the warriors would not receive any physical harm as long as they observed the proscribed taboos and rules, such as keeping the precepts of Buddhism in order to please the spirits.¹³ This practice continues to be popular today.

Aim and Objects of the *Tantric*

To understand spiritual tattooing in Thailand, *Sak-Yant* has to be divided into two parts. *Sak* in Thai means only the tattoo, which could be graphics and/or words. *Yant* is the sacred geometry connected to spirituality and religious beliefs. It is basically the science of *Tantric*, which consists of *Tantra*, *Mantra*, and *Yantra*.¹⁴ In the spiritual tattooing ceremony, *Tantric* is used by Brahmin or Buddhist monks to empower the tattoo, making *Tantra*, *Mantra*, and *Yantra* important to the comprehension of spiritual tattooing in Thailand.

Tantra

Tantra is the mystical formula necessary for the attainment of supernatural powers. The art of *Tantra* is the act used in the ritual involving *chakra* (meditation), which means inner force.¹⁵ *Tantra* is the method of being united with the universe through five elements—sense of smell, water with taste, fire with vision, air with touch, and ether with sound.¹⁶ The aim of *Tantra* is to realize the cosmos and the power of the spiritual being.¹⁷ It is the method by which one discovers and uses the hidden powers of various types in *Yantra*.

Before the tattooing ceremony, *Tantra* is used to increase the Brahmins' *chakra* to empower the spiritual tattoo and to protect the tattoo wearers from the wild spirit's harmful manipulation.¹⁸ During the

¹²Spencer Littlewood, "Sak Yant Buddhist Tattoos: Sacred Geometry, Magic Spells, Animal Possession," n.d., 7.

¹³Niels Mulder, *Inside Thai Society: An Interpretation of Everyday Life* (Bangkok, Thailand: Editions Duang Kamol : Chatchamnāi dōi Dūang Kamon Samai, 1990), 47.

¹⁴Suwannaroopo, 14; Chawdhri, 122.

¹⁵Chawdhri, 125.

¹⁶Ibid., 132.

¹⁷Ibid., 125.

¹⁸Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche and Mark Dahlby, *Healing with Form, Energy, and Light: The Five Elements in Tibetan Shamanism, Tantra, and Dzogchen* (Snow Lion Publications, 2002), 83–84.

ceremony, the wearers will use the *Tantra* to meditate and to control their concentration.¹⁹ The more they meditate, the more the tattoo is empowered. However, if they lose their concentration during meditation, they can be harmed and manipulated by the wild spirit instead of controlling it.

Mantra

Mantra (also called *Kata* in Thailand) is a Sanskrit word meaning “prayer;” but it is also used as a chant or hymn to the deities in different combinations and contexts with *Tantra* and *Yantra*.²⁰ Hindus believe that chanting the right *Mantra* helps bring about good health or victory over enemies.²¹ The users have to learn how to pronounce *Mantras* properly as well as understand their meaning in order not to be afflicted. Without faith and belief, *Mantras* are to be avoided.²²

To practice *Mantra*, users must concentrate and meditate with pure thoughts but without any stress or strain on the brain or body.²³ This is one reason why Buddhism, which is to realize the meaning of life so that one can experience peace of mind, fits with *Tantric*, because Buddhism “paths” will attain peace of mind and reduce mental strain. Practicing *Mantra* is supposed to produce a peace and stillness that cannot be described. *Mantra* meditation, in depth, will let the user see and control the light, which Thai Buddhists call “soul,” in various forms, such as light ball or light beams.

Yantra

Yantra is an instrument, an apparatus, a talisman, or mystical diagrams that include geometry, signs, and writings. *Yantras* are drawn in different sacred geometric forms so as to connect with different deities and different *Mantras*.²⁴ The five basic element symbols of Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Sky are related to *Yantra* in order to control nature for one’s own advantage plus to remove evil’s effects and increase any beneficial aspects.²⁵ In general, to use *Yantra* is to draw a particular design on the surface of something. The sacred geometric lines for good luck and good purpose are drawn and/or written from

¹⁹Littlewood, 335–336.

²⁰Robert A Yelle, *Explaining Mantras: Rhetoric, the Dream of a Natural Language, and the Efficiency of Ritual* (New York; London: Routledge, 2003), 90.

²¹Chawdhri, 75.

²²*Ibid.*, 83.

²³Chutindharo, 24.

²⁴Chawdhri, 3.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 4.

east to west in the early morning, and the lines for harming are drawn and/or written from west to east in the evening.²⁶ *Mantra* and *Tantra* are inter-linked since they are expressed through the medium of Yantra. To connect with different deities, different *Yantras* are combined with different *Mantras*. The *Mantras* recited perfectly by the tattoo wearer will increase the effectiveness of the *Yantra*.²⁷

Yantra has six purposes—control a person or deity, cure diseases and ward off the evil spirits, protect from the evil spirits, make one attractive to others, distract the enemies and harm others (including killing them). To use *Yantra*, there are conditions, rules and taboos that the users have to follow without error; otherwise, they will pay for their mistakes with their lives.²⁸

Comparison and Analysis

Attributes of the Spirits in Spiritual Tattoo

The crucial question for Thai Christians is, How do the spirits possessed in the tattoo differ from the Holy Spirit? The spiritual tattoo wearers say there is no difference between the spiritual possession through tattoo and the baptism in the Holy Spirit. In response, it is important that we provide a comparison of the attributes of the Holy Spirit to those of other spirits in order to distinguish the differences.²⁹

Most spiritual tattoo wearers would agree with Littlewood that their tattoos are not only magical, but also empowered by both natural and wild spirits.³⁰ Jeff Watt provides a rather thorough general understanding of gods and deities (i.e., supernatural beings or forces) that live outside of normal reality and who have the power to interact for good or ill in personal reality through spiritual connection, ritual, or curses in a cause-effect relationship.³¹

In Thailand, animism emphasizes two kinds of spirits—domesticated and non-domesticated.³² “Domesticated spirits” (called *Saksit*) are vast invincible forces that can conform themselves to

²⁶Ibid., 10.

²⁷Ibid., 4–5.

²⁸Ibid., 12–13.

²⁹Tanya Suwan, interviewed by Anattiphong Phanon, Seattle, WA, August 22, 2011.

³⁰Littlewood, 117–123.

³¹Jeff Watt, “Himalayan Buddhist Art 101: Gods and Deities in *Tantric* Buddhism,” Tricycle Foundation, <http://www.tricycle.com/blog/himalayan-buddhist-art-101-gods-and-deities-Tantric-buddhism>, May 9, 2012.

³²Mulder, 41.

objects or places in order to fulfill personal interests, such as guardian spirits for protection or blessing.³³ According to Mulder, their power is limited to a specific territory, such as a spirit house.³⁴ “Non-domesticated spirits” appear as wild spirits, Mulder defining them as being unpredictable and essentially malevolent.³⁵ He further explains that the larger ones influence the smaller ones and the good ones overwhelm the bad; also they have their own interest and volition, such as to cause harm, illness, death, or destruction.³⁶

Both domesticated and non-domesticated spirits are considered as “wind;” they can, however, be controlled by using the larger forces of the cosmos through the science of *Tantric*.³⁷ Although both can possess objects through the *Tantric*, the ones possessed in tattoos are most likely non-domesticated because the ritual used for spiritual tattoos is different than the ritual used for domesticated spirits. This is why spiritual tattoo wearers who cover themselves with wild spirits have to pay homage to them lest the wearers be harmed by their negligent behavior.³⁸

Attributes of the Holy Spirit (Pneumatology)

Although the *Tantric*'s sacred texts and Thai documents about spiritual tattoo barely mention the attributes of the spirits that are spelled in sacred geometries, most Thais recognize them as being wild spirits.³⁹ The Bible, on the other hand, has much to say about the attributes of the Holy Spirit, who is a Divine Person, being one with the Father and the Son. So how should the concept of the Holy Spirit be understood? His personhood does not relate to physical appearance, for as R. A. Torrey explains, “The marks of personality are knowledge, feeling, and will, and any being who knows, thinks, feels, and wills is a person whether he has a body or not.”⁴⁰ Craig Keener suggests that the Bible revealed the personality (and thus, attributes) of the Holy Spirit through Jesus, who portrayed Him as being “another Counselor” (Jn.

³³Ibid., 23–24.

³⁴Ibid., 43.

³⁵Ibid., 47.

³⁶Ibid., 47–48.

³⁷Chutindharo, 20–21.

³⁸Mulder, 47–48.

³⁹Wirat Chantako. 2008. “*An Analytical Study of Aesthetic Values in the Art of Tattoos*.” Master's thesis, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, 27–29.

⁴⁰Reuben Archer Torrey, *The Person and Work of The Holy Spirit* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 16–17.

14:16-17);⁴¹ while, according to Gordon Fee, the apostle Paul explored the personality of the Spirit in many verses, including 1 Corinthians 2:10-13, 3:16; Romans 8:11; and Galatians 4:6; 5:18).⁴²

The equality that exists within the Trinity (or Godhead) further suggests the Spirit's divine attribute. Can one be three and three be one? Keener presents the concept of the Trinity whereby Christians today recognize God in the different aspects via the process of salvation.⁴³ In salvation, the Holy Spirit reveals Christ in believers, to know Christ is to know the Spirit (Jn. 16:14; Rom. 8:9), and to know the Father is to know Christ (1 Jn. 2:23).⁴⁴ If the Holy Spirit is described as the Third Person of the Trinity, does this indicate inferior status? John Rae notes that both Matthews 28:19 and John 16:9 draw a distinction among the three Persons as being separate personalities; so there is no question that the Spirit is divine and an equal part of the Trinity (Isa. 40:13, 48:16, 63:10-11).⁴⁵

Stanley Horton reminds us that the Holy Spirit is associated with God's creative activity (Gen. 1:1-2).⁴⁶ Other Bible passages also make mention of the Spirit's divine characteristics, such as the One who knows the thoughts of God, who is able to instruct people (1 Cor. 2:10, Jn. 14:26), and who performs the works and miracles that God initiates (Ps. 104:30, Matt. 12:28). Rea distinguishes the Spirit's personal supremacy, superior knowledge, and spiritual insight as being manifestly different from other purported spirits and forces, and that He shares the same feelings and emotions as human beings (Isa. 63:10; Eph. 4:30).⁴⁷

Roles of the "Tattoo Spirits" Versus the Holy Spirit in Human Life

Comparison of the attributes and manifestations of the spirits in the spiritual tattoo and those of the Holy Spirit in the life of humans shows their roles to be vastly different. The spiritual tattoo is anthropocentric,

⁴¹Craig S Keener, *Gift & Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 20.

⁴²Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, Reprint edition (Baker Academic, 1995), 27.

⁴³Keener, 19–20.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 22–23.

⁴⁵John Rea, *The Holy Spirit in the Bible: All the Major Passages About the Spirit : a Commentary* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Creation House, 1990), 20.

⁴⁶Stanley M. Horton, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit: Revised Edition*, Revised edition (Gospel Publishing House, 2012), 17.

⁴⁷Rea, *The Holy Spirit in the Bible*, 20.

which means that it is rooted in the belief that mankind, not God or animals, is the central element of existence. Thai Buddhist monk Chantako says that the sacred tattoo is to be “valued” by people based on its functional use;⁴⁸ Marie Tania agrees, saying that the tattoo is utilized “in the way we choose.”⁴⁹ Although many devotees insist the primary reason for having a spiritual tattoo is to maintain one’s spiritual life through rules and taboos, Chutindharo (another Buddhist monk) tends to disagree. He depicts the science of spirituality and superstition in Thailand as the act of faith without logical comprehension regarding the original belief.⁵⁰ The implication is that people look at spiritual tattooing as a means of fulfilling their personal wants, without considering spiritual values.

The role of the wild spirits in the tattoo is normally viewed as providing the desires of the wearers, with no love and mercy being involved. However, the wearers must please these spirits by offerings and/or keeping rules and taboos, otherwise, they will pay for their “unfaithfulness” via non-diagnostic sicknesses or accidents.⁵¹ Since the spirits can cause either good or evil, there is no sense of morality involved.⁵²

In what way, then, does the above compare to the attributes and thus role of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the Scriptures? The Bible declares that God is the center of all. But does he want to be that center because of dictatorship, domination, or self-centeredness? Genesis 1:26-31 reads, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”...“And God saw everything that he had made, it was very good,” which shows that He created man to be unique and different from the other creatures he created and gave man not only authority over those creatures, but also the ability to have a relationship with him. But because of Adam’s sin, that relationship was disconnected, and human beings fell from God’s glory. Although the sin is from one person, God’s grace and justice are prepared for all (1 Cor. 15:12-28). John 3:16-17 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

⁴⁸Chantako, 83–84.

⁴⁹Tania Marie, *Spiritual Skin - Sacred Tattoos: More than Skin Deep*, 389–390, Kindle.

⁵⁰Chutindharo, 15–16.

⁵¹Pierce C. Salguero, *Spiritual Healing of Traditional Thailand* (Findhorn: Findhorn Press, 2006), 78.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 78–79.

Why this passage is so significant is because it reveals the characteristics of God in contrast to those of the spirit of tattoo. It describes God's role in people's lives as one of caring about and loving them, the ultimate expression of that love, of course, being God the Son dying for us "while we were yet sinners" (Rom. 5:6-8).⁵³ He further proved his care and love by giving us the Holy Spirit to help and be with us (Rom. 5:5; Eph. 3:16-19). Keener emphasizes, "The Holy Spirit has come into our hearts and now points to the cross, assuring us with his love."⁵⁴ Therefore, we can be reconciled in our relationship with God through Jesus (Jn. 14:6; Rom. 5:8), whose resurrected life confirms that we are his children (Jn. 1:12).

The Holy Spirit's priority concern is about restoration and reconciliation of the relationship of God with humans. In the Old Testament, we see God's re-creating and restoring work toward mankind illustrated in the interrelatedness of his forgiveness and the return of his people (the Jews) from exile (Isa. 40:1-2; Jer. 31:31-40; Ezek. 36:24-28, 37:21-23; Dan. 9:16-19). In the New Testament, to receive the Holy Spirit is to be empowered for mission, just as the Father had anointed the Son with the Spirit for mission (Lk. 4:18; cf. Acts 10:38). Colossians 1:16 says, "All things had been created by him and for him," indicating that Jesus is the center because all things are created through his power and ability *for* him,⁵⁵ and Revelation 1:8 further declaring, "I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 that believers are the temple of God where he can live in us forever and continue in intimate relationship with us.⁵⁶ Moreover, his love toward humans is eternal. John 14:15-17 reads, "If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you." This significant passage is the promise Jesus gave to believers that he would send a "helper" to be with them forever. It indicates that, after they accept Jesus as their savior, believers belong to the Holy Spirit, who will be with them and

⁵³Keener, 26–27.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (New American Commentary)* (Holman Reference, 1991), 182.

⁵⁶Keener, 30.

love them forever. God is immutable, and his love has been upon humans since the beginning and will be until the end (2 Tim. 1:9; Eph. 1:4).

The aim of abiding in the Holy Spirit is to encourage believers that they belong to God, again, forever—"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29). Whereas, for the spiritual tattoo wearer, the presence of those spirits is only temporary—i.e., for as long as the devotees keep the rules. The purpose of baptism in the Holy Spirit is to give, to receive, and to deposit the gift of the Spirit in believers through faith until the Lord's second coming, when they will be taken up to their permanent residence (Jn. 14:16, 16:12-13).⁵⁷ Unlike the tattoo spirits, the Holy Spirit's role is to interact with and point persons to Christ. Therefore, to grow in their relationship with God, believers are to cooperate with the Spirit, who dwells them and cultivates that relationship. He will guide believers into God's ways through faith and obedience, not through intellectual knowledge (1 Jn. 4:7-10).

Aims of the Spiritual Manifestation

A significant issue among many Christians in Thailand with regard to spiritual tattooing is the matter of *Wai Kru*, which is a ritual that involves the exhibiting of manifestations when spirits enter the tattoo through incantations of the monks. Originally, *Wai Kru* was an annual ceremony in Thai schools where students showed appreciation and respect to their teachers by presenting them with flowers and prostrating themselves at the teachers' feet.⁵⁸ An *Ajarn* (or guru) adopted the *Wai Kru* so spiritual tattoo wearers would show their respect to those masters who tattooed them.⁵⁹

⁵⁷*The baptism of the Holy Spirit* is part of the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to His disciple (Acts 1:5, 11:15-16). It is the basis of the filling of the Holy Spirit – The ministries of the Holy Spirit. Merrill F. Unger, *The Baptism and Gifts of the Holy Spirit*, New Edition edition (Moody Publishers, 1974), 153–154.

⁵⁸*Sak-Yant Thai Temple Tattoos, "Wai Kroo Festival,"* <http://sak-yant.com/samnak-sak-yant/wat-bang-phra/wai-kroo-festival/#.Uvj-aUKSxCM>.

⁵⁹To show the respect to the master is one of the rules for devotees to maintain the power of the spirits possessed in tattoos.

During the ceremony, sometimes spirits manifest themselves (i.e., *Khong Khuen*)⁶⁰ in the tattoo wearers, especially in those who keep their lives in a way that's pleasing to the spirits. *Khong Khuen* is a phenomenon that remains unexplained to the day. Upon hearing the chant of *Mantra* from the *Ajarn*, the wearers enter a trance state, which expresses itself in various ways, depending on the spirits.⁶¹ Commonly, the expressions seem to be imitations of a Himapant animal (from Brahmanism legend) or a divine being, such as an ancient hermit.⁶² These often-violent manifestations include thrashing, jumping, running, and screaming with hands outstretched clawing at the air like a tiger, squealing like a wild boar, or slithering on the floor like a snake or alligator. The possessed person is completely unable to control what is happening.⁶³

Sadly, the response of too many Christians (including Pentecostals) to the *Wai Kru* and the *Khong Khuen* is that they see little, if any, difference between spiritual tattoo possession and the baptism in the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ Some devotees claim that the concept of *Khong Khuen* is similar to Holy Spirit baptism. For Pentecostals, it is critical that this issue be clarified and the differences explained.

Contrast of Spiritual Empowerments

Devotees of spiritual tattoo believe that *Khong Khuen* is a way to initially empower—and later “recharge”—spirits, to maintain the wearers' faith in their tattoos, to encourage them to bear witness to the tattoo's power, and to prove an *Ajarn's* spiritual power and magical ability.⁶⁵ Sometime, the *Ajarn* speaks in a godly language and prophecies during the *Khong Khuen* ceremony.⁶⁶ Can these phenomena be considered similar to the signs and wonders in Pentecostal perspective?

⁶⁰*Khong Khuen* is an unexplainable event which occurs with devotees of *Sak Yant* tattooing. The word *Khong Khuen* refers to magical and mysterious forces arising through the devotee entering trance. Littlewood, 28.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 29.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 28.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁴Tanya Suwan, interviewed by Anattiphong Phanon, Seattle, WA, August 22, 2011.

⁶⁵Littlewood, 28–30.

⁶⁶The reason of using the term “godly languages” is because devotees and *Ajarn* intend to communicate with deities by speaking in the inapprehensible languages, which they claim those are the deities' languages.

Robert Menzies defines the soteriology that embodies believers in Christ (1 Cor. 12:13) and the missiology that empowers believers for service (Acts 1:8) as the theology of the baptism in the Holy Spirit.⁶⁷ Therefore, the differences between spiritual empowerment evidenced in spiritual tattoo and the Holy Spirit baptism are substantial. The aim of the latter is to empower believers to reach out to the world, not for their sake but for Christ's; whereas the empowerment of spiritual tattoo is both narcissistic and temporary. The Bible thus warns us, "Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for the heart is to be strengthened by grace, not by food" (Heb. 13:7-9). F.F. Bruce suggests the need to focus on the spiritual world, not on the physical world, and on eternity, not temporality.⁶⁸

From a Pentecostal perspective, the baptism in the Holy Spirit "serves as a sign that the calling and power of the apostolic church are valid for contemporary believers."⁶⁹ The aim of signs and wonders indicates the mission is to declare salvation in Christ alone to all nations. The Holy Spirit is the source of the spiritual empowerment in believers to be effective witnesses.⁷⁰ The manifestation of the Spirit through the signs and wonders is endorsed in believers' hearts as power evangelism, which emphasizes fearless and bold witness of Christ in the face of difficulties (Lk.12:8-12; Acts 4:31).⁷¹ Stephen is a good example of such a fearless and bold witness, even though he was accused of being a blasphemer of God. Acts 6:8-10 says:

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

⁶⁷Robert Menzies, *Pentecost: This Story Is Our Story* (GPH, 2013), 893–894, Kindle.

⁶⁸F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Revised edition (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 680.

⁶⁹Menzies, 998.

⁷⁰William W. Menzies and Robert P. Menzies, *Spirit and Power* (Zondervan, 2011), 3080–3081, Kindle.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 3264–3266.

Stephen knew that the Holy Spirit was with him, not only because of the performance of wonders and signs, but also because of the Spirit's leading. He was aware that what he had said was through the wisdom that the Spirit had provided, although he was overwhelmed by fear.

The Holy Spirit not only empowers believers to have a bold witness, but also enables them to "declare the wonders of God" via a language that they had never learned.⁷² In 1 Corinthians 12:7, Paul introduces the gifts of the Spirit and their purpose thusly—"The manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." Fee comments, "Thus each 'gift' is a 'manifestation,' a disclosure of the Spirit's activity in their midst."⁷³ Further, Paul emphasizes that these gifts are for building the community up as a whole, not for the individual's benefit (1 Cor. 12:13-14), that the Holy Spirit joins all believers as one body with Christ as the head (Eph. 1:22-23; 1 Co. 12:12-27),⁷⁴ and yet the Spirit uses believers individually according to his will for his ministries (Rom. 12:3-8).

Keener says, "The process of transformation does not depend on our self-discipline as much as it depends on our willingness to embrace God's help."⁷⁵ The Holy Spirit's role in believers is not to keep an eye on us, but to help us (1 Cor. 12:7-11; Jn. 14:16, 26, 15:26). He transforms us into new creations in God's image (Eph. 4:24; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15); thereby believers receive God's holy nature, which includes morality and character. One "consequence" of being a new creature in God is to have confidence while living in this world. Peter and John before the Sanhedrin is a good example. When told to stop speaking and teaching about Jesus, Peter did not exhibit his former cowardly characteristic of running away and denying Christ (Matt. 26:69-75). Rather, the Sanhedrin saw a new Peter, sealed and transformed by the Holy Spirit not only via the signs and wonders he performed, but also because of the resurrection and all the promises of Jesus (Acts 4:8-20).

God wants human beings' hearts, not their attention. Because the Holy Spirit is fully God and shares all the attributes of the Godhead, he brings a godlike character or atmosphere to any situation in which he is active, resulting in conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn.

⁷²Ibid., 1042.

⁷³Gordon D Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 589.

⁷⁴Merrill F. Unger, 22–23.

⁷⁵Keener, 72–73.

16:8–11).⁷⁶ Because God is love, the Holy Spirit pours that love into our hearts (Rom. 5:5; 15:30; Col. 1:8), and often his strongly manifested presence will create an atmosphere of love. God is “not a author of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33), and it’s the Holy Spirit who brings that peace into situations—“The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17; cf. Gal. 5:22),⁷⁷ this verse also teaching us that he imparts an atmosphere of joy (see also Acts 13:52; 1 Thess. 1:6). Paul summarized many of the godlike qualities that the Holy Spirit produces when he listed the various manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23.

To review, then, the atmosphere of the Holy Spirit’s manifestation differs vastly from the phenomena of *Khong Kuen* because the Spirit points to salvation in Christ, which frees humankind from sin. Therefore, the aim of the manifestation of God is to reconcile a broken relationship through Christ, the Lord and Savior (Lk. 10:21-24), which results in an eternal peace that the world—and *Khong Kuen*—cannot give. The Holy Spirit also provides the assurance and the confidence in salvation through encountering God, bearing witness “with our spirits that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16). Plus, he gives evidence of the work of God within believers—“And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which He has given us” (1 Jn. 3:24, 4:13). Besides witnessing to believers who are God’s children, he also witnesses that God abides in His people and they abide in him. More than the intellect is involved; rather the Spirit works to give assurance at the subjective level of spiritual and emotional perception.⁷⁸ The sign of abiding in God is the promise of salvation, which empowers believers not only to be confident (1 Jn. 4:17), but also to love one another (1 Jn. 4:11).

Discussion and Conclusion

Tattoo Spirits vs. the Holy Spirit: Attributes and Purposes

The appropriate response to spiritual tattoo wearers’ claim of no difference between the manifestations of the spirits in the *Wai Kru*

⁷⁶Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, New Edition edition (Zondervan, 2009), 562.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid., 562.

ceremony and the Holy Spirit in the baptism in the Holy Spirit involves distinguishing the differences in both attributes and purposes. While these spirits behind the manifestations may appear similar, they are far from being so. The spirits inserted in the tattoo are clearly evil spirits, having as their basic characteristic and intent to destroy, steal, and kill (Jn. 10:10). Instead of controlling those spirits, the tattoo wearer is instead controlled by them (2 Tim. 2:26), which they do by attracting the wearer to materialism and by perverse spiritual manifestations. While these evil spirits control people with taboos and kill them spiritually, the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, comes to give life (Jn. 10:10).

Often accompanying the baptism in the Holy Spirit are signs and wonders, such as speaking in tongues, being slain in the Spirit, the casting out of demons, or healings. Such phenomena serve to empower believers to bear witness that Christ is Savior and to become more Christ-like. Thus, the purpose of the baptism in the Holy Spirit is to declare salvation in Christ, who is the center of all. Jesus is looking for reconciliation with all believers because he cares for and loves them, not to satisfy their fleshly wants. Luke 15:3-7 depicts just how much he loves his people:

Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Besides illustrating Jesus’ love, this passage also shows the depth of our worth to him. 1 Corinthians 6:20 says, “You were brought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” Jesus, who intends for the salvation of all, wants us to respond to his love by sharing with others—1 John 3:16 saying, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”

The Holy Spirit in his role as helper will manifest himself in all believers in order to empower them to share Jesus’ love with everyone. Although believers may face trials or obstructions, that is often the

process through which they learn to trust God and allow him to work in their lives. The result is not to satisfy their needs but to become mature in their relationship with Christ.

The Kingdom of Light vs. The Kingdom of Darkness

In Thailand, many Christians are disturbed and afflicted by evil spirits because of the charms or amulets that remain in their homes. These spirits can still affect a believer's life through the *Yant* in idols or tattoos. While charms and amulets can be gotten rid of, unfortunately the spiritual tattoo engraved on one's body is a different matter. Although tattoos can now be removed via laser technology, the procedure is often too expensive for many people. In addition, because the "sacred geometry" of spiritual tattoo functions as the bridge or connector between the spiritual world and the physical world, a very real question for Christians so tattooed is—can they, in fact, be possessed by spirits other than the Holy Spirit? Those believers especially need to know how to deal with evil spiritual influences and how God protects his people.

In Luke 10:17-20, Jesus says, "I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemies, and nothing shall hurt you." This passage makes clear that the power of the spiritual tattoo will *not* be able to overcome believers because of the authority that Jesus has given to them. Now being in Christ, who defeated Satan at the cross, they are protected from evil spirits. According to Thais' general understanding of the spiritual rule, those spirits who have more power will defeat those with less power. This understanding should help Thai Christians because God, who created the heaven and the earth, has all power and authority, has defeated Satan, and has overcome the world through Christ Jesus (1 Jn. 5:4).

Jesus promised the protection of believers by the Holy Spirit (Mk. 16:16-18), that they will fear no evil and harm because he is with them. However, since Satan's aim is to destroy believers (Jn. 10:10; 1 Pe. 5:8), they have been provided and are to put on the "full armor of God" (Eph. 6:10-18), cooperate with the Holy Spirit, stand firm in their faith, and be ready for spiritual warfare.

In order to prevent the confusion between spiritual tattoo manifestations and the baptism in the Holy Spirit, one must understand that there are two kinds of "spiritual kingdoms" in this world—the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. The King of the kingdom of light is Jesus Christ, while the prince of the kingdom of

darkness is Satan (Jn. 12:31), and every human being “belongs” to one or the other. Opal Reddin explains that the Christ rejecters belong to Satan’s kingdom, that they are “possessed by him.”⁷⁹ When sinners accept Jesus as their savior, they are possessed by Christ and are set free from the chain of sin, all connections with the kingdom of darkness being cut by the blood of Christ.

This is the sensitive area that cannot be taken lightly. Believers are not in the realm of flesh but rather in the realm of the Spirit, and anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ (Rom. 8:9). So to whom then do those who do not have the Spirit of Christ belong? They belong to Satan, whom the Bible identifies as “The father of this world” (Jn. 8:39-47). The important point is that, when one becomes a “citizen” of the kingdom of light, he/she cannot be possessed by Satan as Paul confirms in Romans 8:38-39:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In other words, when it comes to the two spiritual kingdoms, there is no such thing as “joint ownership,” because it is impossible for Satan to repossess what Christ possesses. So long as Christians continue to abide in Christ, the enemy of their souls cannot occupy them; he can only tempt, accuse, and try to undermine their faith. That’s why the reminder to believers is to, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). Reddin notes, “Satan may cause him (the believer) to stumble; Satan may influence his behavior; but Satan cannot ‘possess’ him!”⁸⁰ To reiterate, once believers belong to the kingdom of light, Satan has lost the power over them—including all of the instruments and connectors, such as the spiritual tattoo.

⁷⁹Opal L. Reddin ed., *Power Encounter: A Pentecostal Perspective*, Revised Edition edition (Springfield, MO: Central Bible College Press, n.d.), 161.

⁸⁰Ibid., 163.

In Conclusion

There are two spiritual worlds, which appear to be both similar but are vastly different. Although Thai people believe in the power of the spiritual tattoo that can ostensibly protect them and provide whatever they want, they have to maintain that spiritual power by attending the *Wai Kru* ceremony and by keeping the taboos and rules. For Christians, the manifestation of baptism in the Holy Spirit reveals how much they are loved by God, who sent his Son to die in order to redeem them from their sins. God is concerned not only about their physical lives in this world, but also their spiritual lives after this world. His plans for us are greater than just to satisfy our temporal needs, but to prepare us for His eternal Kingdom.

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