

**Ancestral Practices and Their Impact on Christian Outreach
in Northeast Thailand**
by Wolfgang Sue

Introduction

I live among the Isan (sometimes spelled Isaan) people in Northeast Thailand, where I am involved in Church planting and evangelism. Many Isan come to church regularly, participating in worship and church activities, but once they enter the workforce or return to their families, they leave all Christian involvement behind and reengage in some folk Buddhist practices, which include venerating ancestors. This scenario is prevalent in churches that work in a university environment but is also noticeable in other congregations. Could neglecting ancestral practices in the church be a possible reason for the poor retention of new believers? Ancestral practices should be considered in the liturgy of the Christian Church in Isan.

While the dominant religion in Isan is Buddhism, the whole belief system is animistic. Animism is a ‘belief in personal supernatural beings such as gods, spirits, and ghosts’, which can inhabit inanimate objects such as trees, rocks and houses.¹ The animist sees their world as being ruled by many spiritual forces. Sickness is often explained as being caused by a spirit, and a crop failure may be due to an angry ancestor.² This view can instil fear into their lives. Therefore, one approach to overcome the inherent power of these forces is for the animist to search for stronger powers to overcome the adverse effects of these spirits in his life. There are other ways of dealing with evil spirits, such as ‘merit-making’ (doing good to counteract evil) and performing various rituals to appease these spirits. Out of fear, many people seek comfort by visiting fortune tellers to know the future, buying amulets to ward off bad luck or making offerings to the spirits. Due to the desperation implicit in these approaches, animistic practices and beliefs can also

¹Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 202.

²Dave Johnson, *Theology in Context, A Case Study in the Philippines* (Philippines: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Press, 2013), 220.

open the door to gaining faith in Jesus Christ because animistic people are very aware of the spiritual confrontations that are going on around them and so seek resolutions.

There are observations in the literature regarding ancestral practices available, but all literature is written from an academic perspective, often from a western worldview. Almost all communities that are unreached with the gospel message at this time are oral societies that do not have the skills to write articles on important issues. A current first-hand opinion on this subject, delivered in written form, is generally not available. I am continuing to research this subject and intend to interview ordinary Isan people to extract their true heart feelings towards their ancestors and the many ancestral practices in the future.

Background

The law of karma is another overruling and determining dogma in Buddhism, quickly explained as "do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil."³ People are generally aware of their karma, and "merit-making" improves karma. Misfortune in life seems a result of bad karma. They also believe in rebirth in the form of humans, animals or spirits. According to Buddhist teaching, the souls of the deceased will progress to one of the six heavens or go to hell. Neither heaven nor hell is seen as a permanent place in Thai Buddhism.⁴ Buddhists believe in the cycle of death and rebirth until they are liberated through the framework of *Samsara* and Nirvana.⁵ This concept is known in Isan, but according to my observation Isan people generally do not believe they can ever reach Nirvana. The Isan community exists of many people living in family groups, including the living and the dead. Merit can be transferred from the living to the dead.⁶ Merit is shared within communities; 'merit-making' becomes essential not just for the person making merit (*tam bun*) but also for the person receiving the merit. Making merit is vital for all

³D Lim, "Contextualization of Merit-Making and Grace for Christward Movements in the Karmic World," *Academia. Edu*, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/40162969/Contextualization_of_Merit-making_and_Grace_for_Christward_Movements_in_the_Karmic_World. (accessed May 25, 2020).

⁴K. Dhammananda, "Buddhist Concept of Heaven and Hell.," *Buddhist Study and Practice Group*, 2011, 1, <https://www.budsas.org/ebud/whatbudbeliev/303.htm>. (accessed May 17, 2019).

⁵Glenys Eddy, "How Affiliates of an Australian FPMT Centre Come to Accept the Concepts of Karma, Rebirth and Merit-Making," *Contemporary Buddhism* 14, no. 2 (November 2013): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2013.832495>. (accessed March 30, 2021).

⁶S. Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls, Gender and Cosmology in an Isan Village in Northeast Thailand* (Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus, 2005).

the ancestors, regardless if they are still living or are already deceased. Isan people have a concept of merit transfer, which becomes apparent as most Thai men are ordained as monks. Thai men live in a temple for a short period (often only one to three months) to enable the transfer of merit to their parents, especially their mother.⁷

The Living and the Dead

The concept of the living and the dead existing together is necessary to understand. The dominating belief regarding ancestors is the conviction that the spirits of the deceased ancestors are still present and are required to be looked after. Many believe that the relationship between the living and the dead is continuously interactive.⁸ Thais are cremated at the temple, which is seen as the abode of the dead.⁹ Many ancestral spirits live on the temple grounds. Some widows in Isan villages bring food to the temple every day to feed the spirit of their deceased husbands. The monks will chant while they perform the "ครุฑน้ำ" (*kruatnam*) ritual¹⁰ to make the offered food available to the spirits of the deceased.

A significant issue is that no one can explain where the dead are going after leaving their earthly abode. They fear that the ancestral spirits could be angry and the spirits could come back and haunt the living. The spirits could remember something in the past that displeased them, and they may seek revenge. Many Isan people make a shrine on an elevated shelf in the house. This shelf usually displays a picture of some deceased family members and a small Buddha statue. They usually place some offerings of food, flowers, drinks or candles on the shelf daily or frequently. The shelf has an important place within the house—it is where food is offered to deceased relatives, especially to husbands by the widows. The belief is that if food is not given to the deceased relatives, the relatives will go hungry and may become troubled.

⁷Lim, "Contextualization of Merit-Making and Grace for Christward Movements in the Karmic World," 4.

⁸Choon Sup Bae, Van Der Merwe, and P. J., "Ancestor Worship: Is It Biblical?," *HTS Theological Studies* 64, no. 3/2008 (2008): 1302, http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_abstract&pid=S0259-94222008000300009&lng=en&nrm=iso&tlng=en. (accessed September 6, 2018).

⁹Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls, Gender and Cosmology in an Isan Village in Northeast Thailand*, 124.

¹⁰B Terwiel, *Monks and Magic, Revisiting a Classic Study of Religious Ceremonies in Thailand* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 1975), 115, <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjskMSis7b3AhXoR2wGHScTDVwQFnoECBMQAQ&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.diva.portal.org%2Fsmash%2Fget%2Fdiva2%3A867441%2FFULLTEXT01.pdf&usq=AOvVaw2Bxzk81rOWZlmO60Ks124X>. (accessed September 28, 2020).

Ancestral Practices as Traditional Ceremonies

David Lim presumes that ancestral veneration is not idolatrous in nature but are non-religious, cultural celebrations that fit into a communitarian worldview.¹¹ Lim concludes that ancestors are not gods and are never seen as deities when they are honoured by their descendants. It is impossible for most people experiencing life with an Eastern worldview to separate the seen and the unseen, the material and the spiritual world. Spirits are always present with the living. Religion in China (and in Isan) is interwoven into all family and social life areas. Religion becomes interwoven with the culture, making most rituals and ceremonies religious - cultural events.

Lim cites¹² that indigenous celebrations can be given a new Christian content. This includes using indigenous ways of worship and ceremony that will contribute to and enrich the unity of the believers in Christ and will be more likely to find acceptance than foreign forms and rituals.¹³ The Apostle Paul states in Colossians 1:20 that God reconciled everything to himself, which gives Christians the potential to bring societies that venerate ancestors into a universal understanding of Jesus. The abundant love of our Father God, our most significant ancestor, will draw people to himself. Christ can feel at home within all cultures and languages to give Christianity the flavour of local people's hearts and language.¹⁴ Lim concedes that believers must remember ancestors with all their hearts and even honour them more than unbelievers do¹⁵ in an Asian cultural context.

Remembering Ancestors

According to Wonsuk Ma ancestral practices are a struggle for the Asian church. The church's attitude towards these practices shows where the individual church stands in its own culture.¹⁶ If honouring ancestors is not worship but cultural practice, could the church fulfil the fifth

¹¹“Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration: A Theological Survey and Practical Steps for Implementation,” *The Journal of the International Society of Frontier Missions* 32, no. 4 (2015): 183–93, https://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/32_4_PDFs/IJFM_32_4-Lim.pdf. (accessed September 21, 2020).

¹²A Tippett, *Introduction to Missiology* (Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 1987), 185.

¹³Lim, “Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration: A Theological Survey and Practical Steps for Implementation,” 188, 189.

¹⁴Lim, 2015, 190.

¹⁵1 Timothy 5:8.

¹⁶Ma, 2002, 202.

commandment (honour your father and your mother) by honouring parents through appropriate ceremonies?¹⁷

Their spirits, who live around the house compound or local temple, can become angry if they are not well looked after. This emotion of anger can cause many problems.¹⁸ When suffering occurs or persists, the ancestral spirits are often blamed, especially if the family does not care sufficiently for them. To appease the spirits is a principle daily responsibility for the older members of the family in order for the family not to get hurt and to have good fortune. From a biblical perspective, Ma & Ma states that there are no ancestor spirits but instead many demons who can act as ancestors. This concept needs to be taught from Scripture so that “God will completely replace the ancestors in their allegiance.” The power of our God is far above the power of any of these spirits.¹⁹

Replacing Old Ways

Kosuke Koyama states that Christianity will never replace Buddhism in Thailand. Instead of replacement, one should look at 'mutual enrichment.'²⁰ The roots of Buddhism or animism are too strong to disappear altogether. Charles Kraft underlines this concept and explains:

Jesus spoke of our faith as a seed, not a tree. We have often taken full-grown trees to other peoples, trees that were at home in their native soil but are out of place in the new context. What Jesus meant by picturing our faith as a seed is that the tree or bush that springs from that seed do not look like it came from another place. It is chosen to serve inside, nourishing the new soil and water. It is meant to look like it belongs.²¹

¹⁷Exodus 20.

¹⁸Ma, 2002, 204, 205.

¹⁹Ma & Ma 2005, Kindle loc 2908.

²⁰*Water Buffalo Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), X111.

²¹Charles H Kraft, *Issues in Contextualization*, 2016, <http://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=5718807>. (accessed March 24, 2022), 14 of 328.

Ancestral Spirits

The Isan predominantly follow the animistic customs and beliefs of their forbears. Kevin Hovey posits that for the animist, the spirit world is part of "this world", while the westerner sees the spirit world as part of the "other world."²²

Hovey suggests that western attitudes are reinforced by the Bible prohibiting communication with the dead.²³ Hovey claims that ancestors are living members of their community who interrelate with the living. Offerings are given to extend the human relationship with the deceased.²⁴ Unless missionaries come to a greater understanding of ancestral practices and find more realistic and creative solutions, traditional practices will be pushed underground and not evaluated from the knowledge of the Word of God.

Can Ancestral Practices Disappear?

Ancestral spirits that come into existence after a traumatic death, such as after accidents or unexpected death through sickness (e.g. deceased children), will be believed to cause more problems and difficulties for the living. These ancestral spirits are furious, so more rituals are necessary to appease them.²⁵ In Isan, anyone who dies a tragic death, like in a car accident, is not usually cremated in the temple but buried in the forest outside the village area.²⁶ The Isan people attribute accidental and unforeseen deaths to the work of malicious spirits. According to the belief of the Isan, that the spirits of the deceased are still present in the village, these malicious spirits are not welcome in the village and the village temple. So deceased people who harbour these spirits are buried outside of the village.

Understanding the Animist

Like Ma, Hovey and Rheenen, Kraft also sees different perceptions of the living and the dead as a significant problem in interacting with people from the East and the West. These differences lead to

²²Kevin Hovey, *Before All Else Fails, Read the Instructions: A Manual for Cross Cultural Christians*. (Brisbane, Australia: Harvest Publications, 1995), 128.

²³Hovey, 1995, 145.

²⁴Hovey, 1995, 144.

²⁵G Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1991), 261.

²⁶Shodhganga, 1992. Disposal of the Dead. *Journal of Siam Society*, 48, 108, https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/69790/11/11_chapter%206.pdf, (accessed September 25, 2020).

communication problems. It is the purpose of teaching to shift the allegiance from the ancestor to God. The ultimate power source may well come from God, who should be seen as the most powerful ancestor. Jesus can be seen as the supreme ancestor who deals on our behalf with God. Instead of talking with the ancestors, the animist can now talk with Jesus.²⁷

Hiebert talks about critical contextualisation, an important tool for dealing with various rituals and ceremonies. The first step is to understand people and not criticise them.²⁸ As one person eats, the food will be shared with everyone, including the ancestors. They should be informed of any changes and be part of any capital that changes hands, for example, during a wedding. Leaving the ancestors out of these celebrations is a great sin against the immediate and the extended family. Everyone is fearful that the ancestors may become angry; the community will have regular ceremonies to pacify them.²⁹

If missionaries eliminate traditional ceremonies from a people group, they extract power, which will lead to a powerless Christianity. Indigenous people perform celebrations secretly so as not to disappoint the westerner.³⁰ This practice accounts especially for the most important feasts, such as ancestral rituals.³¹ The result of attempting to reject these celebrations will lead to a dualistic approach to Christianity. People will travel both ways, the traditional and the Christian ways, the new and the old.

As the Isan believers grow in their faith in Jesus and see him as their one true and only God, they will question some of their cultural celebrations and look for ways of bringing these in line with their new beliefs. Alan Tippett suggests that "in the newly planted church of animist converts, a direct relationship exists between the effectiveness of the functional substitutes and the possibilities of reaction against cultural voids."³² Tippett introduced functional substitutes to bring local cultures more in line with biblical Christianity, which encourages local people to find ways to replace aspects of their own culture in more biblically

²⁷Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 234.

²⁸Paul G Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, 2000, Kindle loc 265, <https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=304E6CD3-1AA9-469C-B51D-EA7E040F2182>. (accessed May 2, 2022).

²⁹Hiebert et al., 2000, Kindle loc 1006,1011.

³⁰Robert Daniel Shaw and William R. Burrows, eds., *Traditional Ritual as Christian Worship: Dangerous Syncretism or Necessary Hybridity?*, Kindle loc 553, American Society of Missiology Series, No. 56 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018).

³¹Shaw & Burrows, 2018, Kindle loc 559.

³²*Introduction to Missiology*, 201.

comparable ways.³³ If this process is carried out well, The Isan people will come to see Christianity as something that belongs to them and fits in their world.³⁴ Hovey suggests that “it is the people themselves who determine what is truly satisfying to them, even though an outsider like a missionary can be a resource person for them in this process.”³⁵

Fear of Ancestors and Offerings

The question is, nonetheless, “are ancestors revered as gods or are they seen simply as grandfather and grandmother”? Lim has never met any Chinese person who saw the ancestors as gods. Lim states that ancestors are not gods to be worshipped.³⁶ The animist will give gifts and not offerings. As the animist in Isan gives food to the deceased, this is a gift for the ancestors to survive and not be hungry. The animist commonly talks to the ancestors, informing them of all the family happenings as if they are still alive in the same room. This conversation is not to be confused with a prayer to the dead. Biblical Christianity challenges ancestral practices because the dead cannot help the living. The dead live in another place; they are not here.³⁷ Biblical Christianity can challenge the concept of ancestors not on the basis of worship but on the basis of the fact that ancestors live in heaven or in hell. The living is separated from the dead. If the saved ancestors live in heaven, where do those who have not heard the salvation message live?

McGavran suggests in³⁸ that God is sovereign and can do whatever he chooses to do; there is no clear answer in Scripture. The Bible says in Romans that there will be a revelation of the judgment of God. Who “will render to each one according to his deeds”: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour and immortality.³⁹

God may give eternal life to people who know right from wrong and lead an exemplary life for God, such as Abraham, Moses, Joseph, David, etc. However, the only sure way to heaven is through Jesus Christ, our Lord. In the Old Testament, Naaman declared he would not offer burnt

³³Hovey, 2019, 253.

³⁴Hovey, 2019, 255.

³⁵Kevin Hovey, *Guiding Light: Contributions of Alan R. Tippett toward the Development and Dissemination of Twentieth-Century Missiology*, 2019, 260, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=2605294>. (accessed September 22, 2020).

³⁶Lim, “Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration: A Theological Survey and Practical Steps for Implementation.”184.

³⁷Luke 16:26.

³⁸Malcolm McVeigh, “The Fate of Those Who Have Not Heard? It Depends,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 21.4 (1985): 370–80.

³⁹Romans 2:6 -7, NKJV.

offerings or sacrifice to other gods after being healed from leprosy after Elisha, the man of God, sent him a message to bathe in the Jordan River. Naaman spoke with Elisha and asked the Lord for forgiveness regarding his temple visits with his master:

Yet in this thing may the Lord pardon your servant: when my master goes into the temple of Rimmon to worship there, and he leans on my hand, and I bow down in the temple of Rimmon—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord please pardon your servant in this thing. Then he [Elisha] said to him, “Go in peace.”⁴⁰

There was peace for Naaman, just as there can be peace for believers who go to the temple with their unsaved relatives. Ma thinks that ancestral practices are necessary to meet cultural expectations. The worldview of that particular community drives these expectations. For animistic communities, ancestral practices must follow as culture demands.⁴¹ People follow their parents' expectations; children are taught the Isan social hierarchy from early childhood, which is reflected in the type of language used when speaking to people of higher or lower status. As children become adults, they are responsible for looking after their parents as they age. They will always respect and honour their parents and show reverence towards them. This practice will continue after the parent's death. Because the ancestral spirits have more power than the living grandparents, these spirits are more powerful and knowing than the living. “The living man is happier than the departed because he is alive, but the departed are more powerful.”⁴²

Power Encounters

Miracles not performed through divination and magic are miraculous acts through the power of God. God will receive the glory.⁴³ These miraculous acts need to enable the animist to encounter God at a powerfully felt level of their being. Only power encounters with Jesus, and his Holy Spirit can change their attitudes⁴⁴ from unbelief to God.

Christianity often fails to address these power-related issues. Pentecostal believers appear more successful in addressing power

⁴⁰2 Kings 5:18,19, NKJV.

⁴¹Ma, 2002, 202.

⁴²John Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London: SCM, 1963), 148.

⁴³J.J Burden, “Magic and Divination in the Old Testament and Their Relevance for the Church in Africa,” *Southern African Missiological Society* 1, no. 3 (1973): 103–12, https://hdl.handle.net/10520/AJA02569507_1163. (accessed September 21, 2020).

⁴⁴Hovey, *Before All Else Fails, Read the Instructions*, 139.

issues.⁴⁵ It is a continuing process to change people's perception of the spiritual world in which they live. The message must be contextualised toward their understanding to enable them to move from their current viewpoint to a new understanding which will eventually eliminate fear.⁴⁶ Hovey's model, using Tippett's theory of power encounters in three different phases, is helpful here. Firstly, an encounter with God, secondly, a demonstration of God's power (powerful God) and thirdly, a conversion encounter where Jesus becomes Lord.⁴⁷ People need to see and experience that God is more powerful than all other spirits. God often becomes real through healings and other miracles, and the animist will become aware of God's presence in their lives. As God answers many prayers of new believers, they gain trust in Jesus and learn to rely on him daily, but many still keep the old beliefs in the back of their minds.⁴⁸ Hovey calls this the first phase (God is supreme/ Cosmic encounter) in which the animist will gain authority over Satan and find a safe place to reflect on Jesus.⁴⁹ During the second phase of the power encounter (God is powerful/ demonstration encounter), the animist will experience supernatural intervention, leading to increased confidence.⁵⁰ As people who follow animism and move towards a sole reliance on Jesus, their old religious ways will cease slowly. Over time the old altar and places to perform animistic rituals will collect dust and disappear. Now allegiance changes from the "old ways" to Jesus alone. The animist will now proclaim: "Jesus is Lord" (conversion encounter/ absolute dependence on God).⁵¹ Many animistic background believers realise that the power of the Holy Spirit is greater than all other spiritual powers because God's power is above all other powers. Power encounters are often the driving force for the animist to meet Jesus. For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake.⁵²

Because the animist lives in a world of power, only a God who demonstrates mighty power can be of any help to him.⁵³ Animism can prepare people for the Gospel as animistic people will rarely refuse

⁴⁵J. Ma & Ma, 2010, Kindle loc 2904.

⁴⁶Ibid., Kindle loc. 1659.

⁴⁷Hovey, *Guiding Light*, 224–26.

⁴⁸P Hughes, "The Incarnation and Communication in Thailand.," *The South East Asia Journal of Theology* 23, no. 2 (1982): 179.

⁴⁹Hovey, 2019, 220.

⁵⁰Ibid., 216-17.

⁵¹Ibid., 216, 231.

⁵²1 Thessalonians 1:5, NKJV.

⁵³Alan Tippett, *Introduction to Missiology*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1987), 331.

prayer to meet their needs. They have an open heart for Jesus (first phase encounter).⁵⁴ As they engage in these power encounters and gain experience with God, they become more reliant on God. The animist will not replace one power with another, like the power of spirits with the power of God. However, he will always add more power to the previously gained power and “add more power sources to the previous power sources that they have feared, worshipped, served, manipulated, and from which they have drawn power and assistance.”⁵⁵ They will see that this increased power will help in their daily lives through miraculous acts, like healings (second phase encounter).⁵⁶

The apostle Paul asked the Ephesians to take off the old things and put on the new in his letter to them in chapter 4:24.⁵⁷ As the animist will never give away power, new believers have to continue their walk with the power of the Holy Spirit rather than with the power of any other spirit. They have to add power to the existing power in their earthly life,⁵⁸ the power of Jesus and his power alone. The message of the Christian regarding the greatest power (God) will address the animist’s needs. Scripture verses like “all power is given unto me”⁵⁹ and “power over all power”⁶⁰ will touch their heart.⁶¹ The challenge now for the new believer is that the supernatural experience or power encounter will modify their beliefs into a new belief, a faith in the still greater power of Jesus Christ. As the animist progresses and destroys the old powers (present as idols or other religious paraphernalia), he will overcome the old ways with a new winning path (third phase encounter).

Bowing as an Act of Worship

Buddhist or animistic background believers need to bow before their ancestors. This practice is an essential act of honour and respect, not worship. According to my observation, the Isan will always bow down if asked to pray sincerely. Bowing makes no difference for believers or unbelievers. Asian people bow down to authority. Ancestors are highly esteemed and have authority in Asia and other parts of the world with predominantly animistic belief systems. Showing honour and respect to the elders and the ancestors is most important. In many Asian countries,

⁵⁴Hovey, 2019, 203, 204.

⁵⁵Hovey, 2019, 228.

⁵⁶Hovey, 2019, 221.

⁵⁷Tippett, 1987, 328.

⁵⁸A Tippett, “Possessing the Philosophy for Animism in Christ,” in *Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow*, ed. Donald A McGavran (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 331.

⁵⁹Matthew 28:18.

⁶⁰Luke 10:19.

⁶¹Hovey, 2019, 202.

it is common practice for children to approach the head of the house on their knees when asking for a favour. The bride and groom bow down before their parents during the Thai marriage ceremony to show them honour. It is not surprising that people in Asia bow before the picture of their ancestors during ancestral ceremonies. Yonggi Cho, founder of Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul (South Korea), the biggest church worldwide at the time, did not object to his congregation bowing before ancestors as culturally appropriate behaviour. He said, if people can bow before their father and mother while they are alive, they can bow before them when they are dead. He was heavily criticised for this decision by the Presbyterian Church in Korea. This and several other issues caused him to leave this denomination.⁶²

Isan Christians

The Isan Christian church struggles to attract a significant number of followers despite a long missionary presence of approximately 500 years (including the first catholic monks) in Thailand.⁶³ Today ninety-five per cent of the approximately eighty thousand villages in Thailand have no Christian church presence. Only 0.2% of the population of Northeast Thailand are Christian.⁶⁴ Could the general oversight of the importance of ancestral practices for the Isan people be one stumbling block to successful evangelism in Northeast Thailand?

As someone becomes a Christian, this person may withdraw from all family rituals or traditions, and this decision will negatively affect his whole family. Missionaries often ignore the communal aspect of Thai life.⁶⁵ Herbert Swanson has lived in Thailand for most of his life. He states that early missionaries would influence converts to live together with the foreigners in foreign enclaves and withdraw from celebrating

⁶²Ig-Jin Kim, "History and Theology of Korean Pentecostalism: Sunbogeum (Pure Gospel) Pentecostalism. An Attempt to Research the History of the Largest Congregation in Church History and the Theology of Its Pastor Yonggi Cho," 201. *Missiological Research in the Netherlands* 35, no. Uitgeverij Boekencentrum: Zoetermeer (2003): 201, <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/1874/605/full.pdf>. (accessed October 27, 2020).

⁶³Saad Chaiwan, "A Study of Christian Mission in Thailand," 2010, 63, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/A-Study-of-Christian-Mission-in-Thailand-Chaiwan/ea02f9517c02fc12b9a4b37b0552b98a520ac72c>. (accessed April 29, 2022).

⁶⁴Dwight Martin, "EStar Foundation. Christian Presence Map," 2018, 1, <https://www.estar.ws/harvest.html>. (accessed February 15, 2019).

⁶⁵K Hilderbrand, "A Historical Analysis of Hinderances Related to the Slow Growth of Christianity in Thailand," *Great Commission Research Journal* 7, no. 2 (2016): 8.

“the communal and pagan rituals”⁶⁶ within the Thai community. This practice isolated new believers from their families and community, which did not make Christianity attractive to the Thais⁶⁷ and caused many issues for the new church. On their first visit, Christians even tore down charms and desecrated spirit shrines.⁶⁸

As some new Christians leave their families, the family can become angry over the “loss” of a son or daughter, leading to persecution of the new believer from those families and causing hatred towards the church. The families feel shamed and publicly dishonoured as one of their family members departed from their traditions⁶⁹ and are no longer seen to be publicly supporting their family through rituals and ceremonies – in essence, rejecting what the family stands for. On the other hand, we find believers who will participate in all the community celebrations, often doing this in secret and not telling the church to maintain “face” in the community and prevent being socially outcast or ridiculed by neighbours. This is also another reason why many Thai Christians attend church in larger urban centres – that way, their church activities can be separated from their life in the village, thereby avoiding any social disagreements.

I am aware that two Christian movements in Thailand do not restrict people's decisions on which ceremonies to participate in.⁷⁰ Rather than overtly forbidding members to participate, they prayerfully approach the situations but give people time to decide what to do and what not to do.

In Thailand, the formal church has the mindset of a “minority” church, which means that the church represents only a tiny part of the population. Adapting any indigenous rituals is seen as syncretism, and local believers are expected to leave their own culture/identity and identify with western Christianity to become “Christian.” There is still an enormous fear of the evil spirits among Thai Christian believers.⁷¹ The Thai church should leave its western forms behind and focus on the

⁶⁶H Swanson, “The Heathen People: The Cognitive Sources of American Missionary Westernizing Activities in Northern Siam, 1867-1889,” (unpublished Thesis, College Park, MD, University of Maryland, 1987), 17.

⁶⁷Swanson, 1987, 18.

⁶⁸Hughes, 1983, 94.

⁶⁹F McPhail, *Pioneer Missions, Meet the Challenges, Share the Blessings.*, e-book, Kindle loc 701. (Cambodia: self published, 2014), Amazon.com.

⁷⁰Kate Shellnut, “Making Missions Count: How a Major Database Tracked Thailand’s Church Planting Revival,” *Christianity Today*, no. March 2019 (2019): 1, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/april/missions-data-thai-church-fjcca-reach-village.html>. (accessed September 26, 2019).

⁷¹Philip J. Hughes, “The Assimilation of Christianity in the Thai Culture,” *Religion*, 1984, 323, 325. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0048-721X\(84\)80011-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0048-721X(84)80011-1). (accessed April 29, 2022).

salvation message,⁷² which should be expressed in indigenous forms within the local culture.⁷³ The Apostle Paul wrote regarding adopting different cultural means and values to other cultures in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Christians in Northeast Thailand should be encouraged to give the Isan people the freedom to build their own church. This process will need guidance and supervision but should lead eventually to the existence of a church that is acceptable for the Isan people and will meet their needs. As the church grows, it will be much easier to make disciples, as these young Christians can be nurtured in a church environment that is not antagonistic towards Isan culture and its people. Isan has a rich culture, which can be used to draw people to Jesus. Unless the Isan culture is understood and the church starts to respect the Isan worldview and includes this culture into its life, the church will continue to struggle to become the strong body that Jesus intended it to be.

In particular, the attitudes of many Isan churches towards anything involved with filial piety need to change. It is challenging to decide which ancestral practices can be included in the church liturgy, which ones need to be modified and which ones need to be substituted in the framework of biblical Christianity. Jesus has given us his Spirit as our helper. In his presence and trust in him, the Isan church can be transformed into a strong body of Christ and can still be relevant to the people living in Isan who search for hope now and later.

God has given us his word, which is relevant to the Isan culture and their animistic worldview. Apart from the book of Ecclesiastes, Paul's letter to the Ephesian and Colossian church, and even Genesis and Exodus are full of information about animistic communities. Suppose we can read the Bible without our western glasses and try to understand the Scriptures from the first reader's perspective in its original era. In that case, we will gain information about building churches in an animistic context.

⁷²James W Gustafson, "Syncretistic Thai Religion and Church Growth," 1971, 19, 11 [https://www.thaimissions.info/gsd/collect/thaimiss/index/ assoc/HASH8867.dir/doc.pdf](https://www.thaimissions.info/gsd/collect/thaimiss/index/assoc/HASH8867.dir/doc.pdf). (accessed April 29, 2022).

⁷³Gustafson, 1971, 15.

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