

The Ritual of Reconciliation in Thai Culture: Discipling New Converts

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Introduction

A Thai pastor complains, "When our church gets one weak Christian. We get two hundred strong enemies from the new convert's social networks."

What this Thai pastor says is a plain fact. In Thailand, a Thai becomes a Christian in secret. The church and the seeker do not let the parents know about the searching, being afraid that the parents will stop the seeker from attending the church. Then, one day, out of the blue, their son or daughter announces his or her conversion to Christ. Having no emotional shock absorber, the parents are enraged. The conversion brings shame to them. The neighbors gossip that they did not bring their child up well. The convert challenges their authority by making an important decision without acknowledging them or asking for advice. The parents worry for their child. They have no idea about the new social network their son or daughter is having fellowship with. They know nothing about Christ. The announcement brings bewilderment to the parents and relatives.

Moreover, the church trains the new convert to witness aggressively to their parents and relatives. The aggressive witness causes anger because the convert violates the values of hierarchy and smooth relationships, as well as accepted social roles and status. The parents and relatives listen to the new convert's testimony, patiently, until they reach a boiling point. Then they hit back, hard. As a result, the new convert takes refuge in the church community. Yet, the missing relationship is too great. Though the church community is strong, it cannot provide the

support the convert needs. The church has thus gained one weak Christian while, through the convert's angry relatives, it has gained many strong enemies.

It can be seen from its history that Thai culture is very kind and generous to all religions. Thailand has accepted primal religion, Hinduism, and Buddhism for more than two thousand years. The believers of these faiths lived in peace. King Rama V (1868-1919) issued a law out of love toward missionaries that they were free to preach the gospel. At the present time, the government gives money to missionaries to preach the gospel to the Thai (Mejudhon 1994:1). It is a myth among Christians that Thais are against other religions. Usually, parents allow their children to learn about other faiths. Religion is good, from the Thai's viewpoint. The Thai learn about other faiths from primary school to high school.

The royal academy of Thailand records that the king is the protector of all religions (The Royal Academy 1995:783). This evidence should rid Christians of the fear they have of the seekers' parents. In fact, Christians should get to know them because Thai culture is a relationship-based culture. A relationship provides a shock absorber and lessens anxiety for the parents when they know about the conversion of their children.

Suntaree Komin, a Thai scholar, conducted empirical research among the Thai. She found nine Thai value clusters: ego orientation, grateful relationship orientation, smooth interpersonal relationship orientation, flexibility and adjustment orientation, religio-psychical orientation, fun making, education and competence orientation, interdependence orientation, and achievement-task orientation (Komin 1993:133). Christians violate the grateful relationship orientation, smooth interpersonal relationship orientation, flexibility and adjustment orientation, and the interdependence orientation when the new converts abruptly tell their parents of their conversion. The Thai like the proverb, "slowly but surely." They hate abrupt changes. Change is a slow process for them. They have a saying, "slowly, slowly change" (*koy-pen-koy-pai*), "I need time to prepare my heart and my mind" (*tong-tiam-toi-tiam-jai*). The Thai concept of time is cyclical (Feig 1989:23-24).

When new converts witness aggressively to their parents and relatives they violate their value of confrontation avoidance, as well as their culture's value of hierarchy, which Feig considers as an important characteristic of the Thai's (Feig 1989:37,76). While doing so, the new converts are usually under the spell of the 'theology of redemption,' according to which their parents and relatives are lost and will be in hell. Out of love, they are even more aggressive as their parents and relatives respond to their witness kindly and in quietness, or even with teasing remarks out of humor. As days pass by, new converts are more aggressive in witnessing. They overlook the ego-orientation value of their parents, who have strong self-esteem and strong self-identity as Thais. In order to keep their children meek and quiet, the parents fight back by scolding and criticizing. When the children talk back, their parents are enraged and ignore them, acting as if the children do not exist. Then the new converts withdraw into Christian communities and their other relational ties are broken.

As a result, these new converts lose their identity as Thais, which inhibits their spiritual growth. It seems to me that if converts were to remain bonded to their natural community—that is, to Thai culture—it would affect their identity as well as their bonding to Christian meaning. Because this does not happen, I believe that Christian churches in Thailand have many weak Christians.

As for the parents of the new converts, although they ignore their children completely, as Thai parents, they love them dearly. They long to bond with their own children and know what is going on in their lives so that they can help. This is an important duty of Thai parents, but they cannot do so as long as they feel that the church is stealing their children away. According to the parents, they invested their lives into their children, yet their children now belong to Christian churches which have invested nothing in them. The result leaves an open wound for the Thai families because Christians violate Thai values and break the family's relational ties. The letter recorded below is from Nantachai Mejudhon's mother, written to him from Thailand when she learned of his conversion while he was living in the States.

May 22, 1972

My Dearest Son,

Your last letter is the most important letter of my life. I read your letter at the office and in the bus and then at home in secret, afraid your younger brother would know about it. Usually, I allow him to read your letters as they inspire him. I have read your letter more than ten times now. I am glad that you have found peace and joy. Now that you are grown up and have a good education, you can think and make decisions on your own. I have tried to analyze your comment "I am still a good Buddhist in the way that I practice his teaching. I still respect and love Lord Buddha." I am trying to use this statement to comfort myself and put myself in the Buddhist middle way. Yet, I am confused and I ask myself, "Can he enter the monkhood again as he once did? Can my son still make merit as he once did? Does he have to give up all these rituals when he accepts Christianity?"

Why do you write to me, "Please don't be sorry?" What about this religion could change the deep relational love between mother and son? I accept that I am too stupid to study and make experiments to find the truth like others. Even in the religion in which I worship and which I have respected from birth for more than sixty years I cannot find the truth yet. How could I find the truth in another religion? It is impossible.

I now accept this suffering because I have a lot of bad karma. I can no longer find peace and joy in my life. I have fought against all kinds of fate and shed my tears many times. I will try to quench my suffering, saying to myself, "It's my karma." The fate of karma predestines our life. Through suffering and pain, I will accept my karma and try my best to do good. I will try my best to do the mother's duty in this life, so that I don't have to suffer in another life. I think in my humble capacity. This world, this life is uncertain. That is the truth of truth.

Anyhow, I congratulate you, my son. Yet, I would like to plead and beg of you not to announce your new religion to any relatives. I plead with you not to be baptized like some others until you return and meet me, because I need your help in solving some problems. Please heed my requests in this matter. Good luck, my son. May you have peace and joy in our Lord Buddha's teaching. May you think about the grace of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangka, if you can?

From Mother,
Tipparat Mejudhon

P.S. I am frustrated and wonder how far this religion sets limitations and disciplines for other religions. Is it possible for this religion to get along with Buddhism in worship and rituals or is absolute separation the only possibility?

The wounds caused by broken relationships can no longer be ignored. I believe the ritual of reconciliation in the Thai culture provides an answer for the dilemma mentioned above. This

paper presents, in four parts, Thai culture's ritual of reconciliation as a discipling tool for new converts. The first part has been introductory. The second part is a theoretical framework for the ritual of reconciliation. The third part deals directly with critical contextualization proposing a way of creating a Christian ritual of reconciliation for bonding new Christian converts with their families. The last part is the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand this paper, we need to understand three important definitions: the definition of "reconciliation," the definition of "ritual," and the definition of "critical contextualization." I will present "reconciliation" as it is defined by Robert Schreiter. I will explain "ritual" (within the context of rites of passage) using A. H. Mathias Zahniser's thought as a framework. I will use the theoretical frameworks of Schreiter, and Zahniser to analyze the Thai ritual of reconciliation. Finally, Paul G. Hiebert's theory of critical contextualization and Suntaree Komin's nine Thai value clusters will serve as a guideline for inventing a Thai Christian ritual of reconciliation. They are authorities in contextualization.

Robert Schreiter's Definition of Reconciliation:

Robert Schreiter is an eminent Catholic scholar who has written many books about social reconciliation. He presents his idea about the definition of reconciliation as follows:

There are at least three understandings of reconciliation that come close to the genuine meaning of reconciliation but distort and even falsify its true sense. These three are reconciliation as hasty peace, reconciliation instead of liberation, and reconciliation as a managed process. (1997:18)

Many people misunderstand "reconciliation" as hasty peace. They perform reconciliation to cover over problems. We need to understand the real meaning of "reconciliation." Robert Schreiter explains that reconciliation is a long process. Reconciliation does not require victims to quickly forget their pain and suppress their memory of a history of violence. Schreiter thinks that to trivialize and ignore the memory of victims is to trivialize and ignore human identity. To trivialize and ignore human identity is to trivialize and ignore human dignity. In this long process of reconciliation Schreiter believes that only certain people have the moral authority to issue the call for reconciliation. Reconciliation demands special grace and kindness from victims. Oppressors cannot initiate it. Therefore, reconciliation is more likely to come from the victims in the situations, not from the wrongdoers. Reconciliation requires time for starting a new life for both victims and oppressors if reconciliation really takes place between them.

Moreover, Schreiter affirms that reconciliation goes hand in hand with liberation—without liberation, there will be no reconciliation. Schreiter states, "If the sources of conflict are not named, examined, and taken away, reconciliation will not come about. What we will have is a truce, not a peace" (1997: 23). He believes that true reconciliation must meet conflict and confront its cause. Schreiter points out that reconciliation is not a managed process.

Reconciliation is spiritual. It is God who reconciles. It is God's grace welling up in one's life. Reconciliation is more of an attitude than an acquired skill or strategy. Schreier implicitly suggests that forms of reconciliation should be designed to fit various cultural contexts. He explains, "By making reconciliation a skill it is accorded the highest (read: most scientific) form of rationality. But to reduce reconciliation to the technical-rational is to devalue it in other cultures" (1997:27). Robert Schreier's framework for the definition of "reconciliation" is summarized in a schematic representation below.

A.H. Mathias Zahniser's Theory:

A. H. Mathias Zahniser, the John Wesley Beeson Professor of Christian Missions, firmly believes that Christians can utilize symbols and ceremonies in making disciples across cultures, especially in times of crisis and transition. He points out four reasons for his belief:

(1) at times of crisis and transition people revert to traditional religious practices; (2) at times of crisis and transition people are ripe for bonding to meaning; (3) the discipling done at times of crisis and transition will help individuals, families, and their communities deal with daily, more ordinary needs in Christ; and (4) at times of crisis and transition outsiders need the loving service of the Christian community of faith. (Zahniser 1997:107)

In order to understand Zahniser's ideas, we should look closely at some definitions: the definitions of "ritual," "symbol," "rites of passage" and "liminality."

Scholars and anthropologists define "ritual" differently. Victor Turner, a renowned anthropologist, defines ritual as an aggregation of symbols (1968: 2). I think any ritual is rich with symbolic objects, symbolic actions, symbolic time and place. Victor Turner views rituals as performances. These rituals transform lives of ritual participants. Moreover, rituals reveal major classification, categories and contradictions of cultural process (Grimes 1995: 148).

As rituals are an aggregation of symbols, Turner also recognizes that symbols are the "molecules of ritual" (1969:14). Of the many definitions of "symbol," I personally like Paul Tillich's. He says, "Symbols point beyond themselves, in the power of that to which they point (1997:77)." Tillich recognizes that symbols are powerful—that the forms of symbols contain powerful, important and deep meanings. These deep meanings justify the use of symbols. The national flags and national anthems of our countries are just such symbols, and they powerfully affect the hearts and minds of people.

Rites of passage are important rituals in all culture. Victor Turner explains rites of passage as follows:

Van Gennep himself defined *rites de passage* as 'rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.' . . . Van Gennep has shown that all rites of passage or "transition" are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen, signifying "threshold" in Latin), and aggregation. The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions ("a state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of

the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. (1969:94-95)

A. H. Mathias Zahniser puts the explanation about rites of passage of Gennep and Turner into the schematic diagram below (1997:92).

According to Zahniser,

A rite of passage enables initiates to make a transition from one clearly defined position in society to another. These rites usually accompany the change from nonbeing to being in birth, from childhood to adulthood in puberty rites, from the single to the married state in marriage, and from life to the status of ancestor in the funeral. (1997:92)

In rites of passage, liminality or "threshold" is very important. Initiates are in a gray area of life that causes them to deeply think and feel. This experience encourages them to grow spiritually and socially. Many Buddhists novices weep in the ritual process of monk ordination and many Christians experience God's presence when they are baptized. Zahniser also advocates anthropologist Kenneth Tollefson's saying about the power of the rite-of-passage structure as a "pedagogical opportunity for promoting personal development and spiritual growth" (1990:315). Tollefson believes that liminality provides educational opportunity. The initiates experience the state of marginality which helps them reflect on the past and the future. The process of reflection encourages cognitive dissonance which stimulates the initiates' reorientation of self-understanding and perception of suitable social obligation and behavior. The state of liminality is very important for the structure of the rites of passage.

Below is a schematic presentation of my theoretical framework concerning the ritual of reconciliation. Here, I utilize Schreier's theory about the definition of reconciliation, and Zahniser's schematic presentation of rites of passage abstracted from Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner.

Critical Contextualization

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Now, I will elucidate a concept of "critical contextualization." Paul G. Hiebert makes many suggestions in his book *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (1994). I will discuss their bearing on contextualization as follows: (1) exegesis of the culture; (2) exegesis of Scripture and the hermeneutical bridge; (3) critical contextualization's demand for a critical response; (4) new contextualized practices; and (5) checks against syncretism.

Hiebert explains exegesis of culture:

The first step in critical contextualization is to study the local culture phenomenologically. Local church leaders and the missionary lead the congregation in uncritically gathering and analyzing the traditional beliefs and customs associated with some question at hand. (1994:88)

He also describes exegesis of Scripture and the hermeneutical bridge:

The leader must also have a meta-cultural framework that enables him or her to translate the biblical message into the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of another culture. This step is crucial, for if the people do not clearly grasp the biblical message as originally intended, they will have distorted view of the gospel. (1994:89)

Hiebert explains that critical contextualization requires a critical response from local Christians in the light of their new biblical understanding. They should make decisions toward the new found truths; then Christian leaders will be able to help locals practice a new ritual that expresses the Christian meaning of the event. Hiebert suggests four criteria for checking against syncretism: that critical contextualization be biblically based; that believers be guided by the Holy Spirit; that the church acts as a hermeneutical community in contextualization; and that evangelical theologians from different cultures participate in discussion.

Using Paul G. Hiebert's theory of critical contextualization I will proceed to exegete the Thai ritual of reconciliation. Then I will present the exegesis of Scripture and the hermeneutical bridge of etic and emic Christians concerning the biblical meaning of "reconciliation." After this, I will briefly present a critical response to the ritual of reconciliation among Christian communities in Thailand. Following this, a Thai Christian ritual of reconciliation will be illustrated. My new contextualized practice will then be ready for checks against syncretism.

Exegesis of the Thai Ritual of Reconciliation:

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The Thai naturally participate in rituals of reconciliation through rites of passage: *e.g.* through monk ordination, funeral rites, conflict solving process, eloping and a lot more. With the help of Schreiter and Zahniser's theory of the ritual of reconciliation, in order to find out its meaning and structure, I will analyze an example of the Thai ritual of reconciliation as it is recorded in a famous novel "A Child of the Northeast." Recorded below is an event concerning a couple in the NorthEast of Thailand who committed fornication:

Early the next morning, when it was still dark as midnight, Koon awoke to hear a woman yelling at the top of her voice, right outside their house.

"Put down your ladder, Koon's papa!"

It was Auntie Kao, who was the wife of Uncle Yai and the mother of Kamgong. "Open your door," she yelled. "The water buffalo?" Koon's mother called out, opening the door and leaning out.

"Where is it now?" Koon's father asked.

"Still in Kamgong's bedroom," she said. "And her Papa is standing outside the door with his long knife."

His parents leaned out the doorway, and there was a hasty discussion. Koon soon understood that the water buffalo was Tid-Joon, son of Uncle Mek, and that he had been in Pi Kamgong's bedroom the whole night. Just before dawn, at the hour when the rooster was about to hop from his perch, Pi Kamgong had called to her mother that Tid-Joon was in there, and had been with her the whole night.

At once, her father had jumped up and grabbed his long knife to stand guard in front of his daughter's door, so that Tid-Joon could not jump down from the house, leaving Kamgong up there, as daughters sometimes were left.

Koon's father sent Auntie Kao off to fetch Tid-Joon's mother and father. Then he dressed and went to tell Auntie Bua-si and Uncle Kem. They were more distant relatives, but in any important family matter, all of the family gathered—which was to say, almost the whole village.

“Mama, will Tid-Joon live with Pi Kamgong now?”

“Yes, son.”

“Why don't they have a wedding, and invite people to eat lop and drink whiskey?”

“Because they are so poor. When two people marry this way, it is called chu sao. Kamgong's Papa says that he does not like Tid-Joon, and that Tid-Joon has no money. But that is not really true. The important thing is that Kamgong is the only child in the family who still lives at home and can help Uncle Yai and Auntie Kao. That's why Kamgong needs a little help herself . . .”

“So Tid-Joon went over there last night and sneaked into her bedroom and helped her?”

“Er . . .”

The sun still had not risen when they reached Uncle Yai's house, but Koon could see the dim shapes of many people clustered in the yard. Four or five of the oldest people in the village were up on the porch, chatting quietly with Koon's grandmother.

When they climbed into the house, Koon was very relieved to see that Uncle Yai was not standing in front of Pi Kamgong's door with a long knife, but sitting calmly enough on the kitchen floor and smoking a cigarette. And he was amazed to see that Tid-Joon's father had arrived already, and was sitting and smoking with Uncle Yai. He did not see Tid-Joon's mother.

And there was Pi Kamgong, the cause of all the trouble, sitting next to her mother, sitting hunched over and staring miserably at the floor.

“All right, everyone is here now,” Koon's father said. “It is time for Tid-Joon to come out of the bedroom.”

The door opened slowly and Tid-Joon crept forward. He crawled to his father's side on his hands and knees, and sat hunched over just like Kamgong, staring at the floor.

Koon was astonished. The swaggering young man he had seen at the well was not swaggering now!

“What do you all say to our mother speaking first?” Koon's father asked. No one replied. They all turned toward the old woman, and waited respectfully for her to speak. Koon's grandmother looked at Kamgong and Tid-Joon for a moment, then at the others. She said,

“A man and a woman become husband and wife in one of three ways. One, the man asks for her, and there is a wedding ceremony. Two, they run away together. Three, chu sao . . .”

“So what is to be done now?” Uncle Yai asked angrily.
Koon’s grandmother raised her hand.

“If Tid-Joon asks forgiveness of our family, and of the spirits of our ancestors, that is enough.”

She looked sternly at Uncle Yai and said; “Everybody in the village knows that Tid-Joon does not have a thing to offer but his apology, so that will have to be enough!”

“Our family accepts the whole blame,” Uncle Mek said, “because Tid-Joon is our son, and he did wrong. But if the other family calls for some payment, I do not know what we will do, because we do not have anything, and that is the truth. There is nothing of value in our whole place but three baths and a chicken.”

They talked until the sun began to rise, and it was then that Tid-Joon’s mother appeared, carrying a tray on which she had placed one folded pakomah, some flowers, and the family’s three baht. Tid-Joon sat up straight, for the first time, and Koon noticed the movement of the powerful muscles in his shoulders, arms and chest as he took the tray from his mother and crept on his knees toward the elders. He bent low before Uncle Yai, and before Auntie Kao; then he crawled toward Koon’s mother and father, and bowed before them.

“And before our grandmother!” Uncle Yai said gruffly, and Tid-Joon quickly crawled to Koon’s grandmother, and touched his head to the floor before her.

Koon’s grandmother smiled down at him, and dabbed at her eyes with a square of red and black cloth.

“This Tid-Joon is a good boy,” she said. “This boy has gone to the temple to be a monk in his time, and he will be a good husband and a father until he is an old man.

“Tid-Joon, listen to me. If you are a poor man, then you make merit with your good heart, and with the strength of your body.”

Tid-Joon looked up, smiling gratefully at these sweet words from his bride’s grandmother, and it was at the moment that Tid-Hod, the drunk, came struggling up the house ladder with the chicken under one arm, and stood steadily on the porch.

“Kamgong! What is this, letting that big water buffalo into the garden? Ha ha ha!”

“It is my karma, Tid-Hod,” said Kamgong in a small shaky voice, not raising her head.

Tid-Hod sat down, leaned back on one elbow, and said that as soon as he had heard about this bad water buffalo, he had gone out and gotten a chicken for Tid-Joon to cook for his bride’s ancestors. “After we make some lop from the chicken,” he said, “and after the ancestors have had their share, we will all take a few bites ourselves.”

Tid-Hod picked himself up and went off with Uncle Sang, Auntie Si-nin's husband, to kill the chicken and make the lop. It took them only a few minutes, and soon Koon's grandmother was lading chicken lop into a tiny bowl.

She put this bowl into a tray with some betel leaves, prettily folded and sprinkled with water, and the three baht from Tid-Joon's family. She carried the tray from the kitchen, and called Tid-Joon and Kamgong to follow her into Kamgong's bedroom, where she made them kneel down and ask forgiveness of Kamgong's ancestors, so that they could have a happy life together, and then she led them out to sit facing the people who by now filled the house, and also the porch.

"Tid-Hod brought a chicken for lop," she told them.

"Will there be enough rice for all these people?" one old woman asked.

"There will be enough," said Auntie Kao, Tid-Joon's mother. "Our neighbors have come, bringing four boxes."

Koon sat beside his father, sniffing the air hungrily. When six small bowls of chicken lop were set down between four boxes of rice, the people all reached forward politely, quickly rolling balls of rice and dipping them into the delicious food. (Boontawee 1994:84-90)

The events portrayed here illustrate a transition in the lives of Kamgong and Tid-Joon from the status of single to the status of married, through fornication. They separated themselves to secretly enjoy their desire. The first state of separation was abruptly ended when Kamgong called at dawn to her mother acknowledging Tid-Joon's presence in her bedroom.

Then the liminality elucidates itself driving Kamgong and Tid-Joon into "threshold." They were not single; yet they were not married either. They brought shame to both families and relatives. Kamgong's parents became victims. Tid-Joon polluted their virgin daughter without paying a dowry. Both Kamgong and Tid-Joon committed a cultural sin. They also committed a religious sin, breaking the third precept of Buddha. The spirits of Kamgong's ancestors were violated. The spirits could punish the whole clan of Kamgong and Tid-Joon. In liminality, Kamgong and Tid-Joon lost their old status. However, during, betwixt and between in these events, both of them probably learned about the difference between pollution and purity, as well as the importance of community. They probably reflected a lot about their past and future as they were confronted publicly by the victims of their sins.

Note that the victims initiated the process of reconciliation. It was a long process because the victims did not suppress their pain and anger. They pointed out the cause of the problem. The father wanted to liberate himself from shame, the loss of identity and the loss of dignity. Grandmother was the authority of the ritual of reconciliation. I believe that through God's image left in each victim, they could forgive Kamgong and Tid-Joon. Yet, they also humiliated both oppressors. Thai culture demanded that both oppressors bow down to their victims' feet—the most humiliating of actions—signifying the submission of ego and oneself to the victim.

The ritual objects are humble and simple: a piece of cloth, a small amount of money and flowers. A piece of cloth is a gift the Thai give to elderly people in sacred times such as festivals and ceremonies. Money represents a dowry. Tid-Joon's dowry, three baht, was all that his family had. Flowers represent friendship. Liminality ended when the victims forgave their oppressors and grandma blessed them. Then Tid-Joon and Kamgong were reintegrated into a new status as a married couple. They reconciled to the victims and to the Buddhist precept of purity. They also

apologized to Kamgong's ancestors' spirits. After that, celebration of the new status quickly followed.

This analysis reveals that the Thai ritual of reconciliation follows Schreiter's definition of reconciliation as well as the structure of rites of passage. The only superfluous action from the Christian perspective is the reconciliation to the ancestor's spirits. Apart from that, most of the ritual can be participated in by Thai Christians.

Some more information about the ritual can be helpful. This ritual of reconciliation is called the Kama and Ahosikarma Ritual. Kama and Ahosikarma are archaic words which come from Pali. Kama means "to ask for pardon; to humbly apologize." Ahosikarma means "forgiveness of the offence is granted" (Thai Royal Academy 1995:128, 925).

Perhaps these concepts come from myths in primal religion, Hinduism, and/or Buddhism, being that these are the main strands of Thai syncretistic religion (Sataanandha and Boonyanate 1993:6-12). Hinduism provides many myths about humans who offended gods and, thus, had to be reconciled to gods through sacrifices. Buddhism emphasizes reconciliation for broken human relationships. The Buddhist myth of Buddha's life tells about the great thief, Ongkulimand, who asked for pardon from Buddha, whom he wanted to kill. Buddha forgave him. Primal religionists in Thailand worship spirits both good and bad. When Thai people offend these spirits, they have to ask for forgiveness (Kama) and make an offering to suspend the offended spirits' chastisement.

Nowadays, the words 'Kama' and 'Ahosikarma' are frequently used in Thai language when relationships between persons are being challenged. The word 'Ahosikarma' is shortened to 'Hosi,' being a vernacular expression. This demonstrates that the concept of reconciliation is still very important in Thai culture.

Exegesis of the Biblical Concept of Reconciliation:

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I will present here a meta-cultural exegesis of the biblical concept of reconciliation. I will employ the theological work of Robert S. Schreiter, a C.P.P.S. American Theologian, William Barclay, a Scottish New Testament interpreter, Clearence B. Bass, an American Professor of Systematic Theology, and my own work, that of a Thai missiologist and theologian.

Schreiter also references a German theologian of New Testament, Cilliers Breytenbach:

Cilliers Breytenbach has argued recently that the usages in the authentic Pauline passages in Romans 5 and 2 Corinthians 5 are not connected with the older biblical ideas of atonement, but reflect a more secular usage, namely, a making of peace after a time of war. (1992: 42)

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I think Breytenbach's idea elucidates human reconciliation in a way which can be easily understood by non-Christians.

Making reference to Latin American liberation theologian Jose Comblin, Schreiter notes:

Combining the references in Romans and 2 Corinthians with the usages in Colossians and Ephesians, Jose Comblin has suggested that a theology of reconciliation can be discerned on three levels: a christological level, in which Christ is the mediator through whom God reconciles the world to God's self; an ecclesiological level, in which Christ reconciles Jew

and Gentile; and a cosmic level, in which Christ reconciles all the powers in heaven and on earth. (1992: 42)

Robert J. Schreiter condenses the exegesis of the New Testament texts regarding reconciliation into five points: (1) it is God who initiates and brings about reconciliation; (2) reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy; (3) reconciliation makes both victim and oppressor a new creation; (4) the new narrative that overcomes the narrative of the lie is the story of passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; (5) reconciliation is a multidimensional reality.

I have clarified the first three points in the “Theoretical Framework” section of this paper, but have not touched on the fourth and fifth. Schreiter beautifully interprets the meaning of passion, cross, death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God illustrated his passion when He incarnated Himself into the suffering, violence and death of humanity through his death on the cross. Human blood brings death; God’s blood brings life. Jesus’ resurrection heralds “new status” for all mankind, both victims and oppressors.

Schreiter also notes that reconciliation goes beyond problem solving. Reconciliation heals otherness and alienation, as stated in Romans 9-11: God reconciles Jews and Gentiles. Reconciliation includes all things in heaven and on earth (Colossians 1: 19-20, Ephesians 1: 9-10). Reconciliation, therefore, takes on a cosmic dimension. I think Schreiter has given us a cornerstone for the exegesis of the biblical concept of reconciliation.

William Barclay’s exegesis confirms the first four points of Schreiter’s conclusion. Barclay believes that God initiates reconciliation. It is completely by grace. The death of Christ changes our status with God. Christ’s resurrection changes our state. Christ’s justification puts us into a right relationship with God. Christ’s sanctification affects our state. We can experience God’s continuous saving grace (1975: 75-77). Barclay’s exegesis seems to emphasize a specific dimension of reconciliation: that of God-man relationship.

Clarence B. Bass exegetes terminology regarding reconciliation. The exegesis is much more detailed than that of Barclay. However, the conclusion is the same in its lack of reference to social reconciliation, individual reconciliation and cosmic reconciliation.

I, myself, exegete “reconciliation” differently. As a believer from Asia, I prefer to exegete the deep meaning of “reconciliation” from life stories. In this paper, I want to explore the reconciliation process recorded in the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 37-47 and the story of Peter’s reconciliation with Jesus in John 21. I see in these two incidents some structures similar to Schreiter’s exegesis of “reconciliation:”

- (1) It is God who initiated the reconciliation. Probably, Joseph met God on the road to Egypt. He was a changed man while in Egypt; God was with him (Genesis 39: 3, 5, 21, 23). Jesus is God who incarnated Himself into Jewish culture.
- (2) Reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy. Joseph and Jesus encountered betrayal from someone whom they loved. Both of them experienced pain, violence and injustice. However, they forgave. They took initiative in the reconciliation process. They confronted their oppressors. The causes of problems were clarified.
- (3) Reconciliation makes both victims and oppressors a new creation. Joseph’s brothers were changed. Joseph was changed. Peter became a pillar of the early church. Jesus, the Victim, became the Victor.
- (4) The new narrative that overcomes the narrative of betrayal is the narrative of atonement. Suffering begets life and liberation. Death brings life.

- (5) Reconciliation is a multidimensional reality. Individual reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers affects the clan and the nation. Peter's reconciliation affects the community, various nations, the world and the cosmos as the gospel spreads out. Reconciliation is holistic. It affects the material world, relational world and spiritual world.
- (6) Reconciliation confirms that God's image remains in all cultures (Genesis 1: 27). People had reconciled through God's image before Christ came.

It seems to me that the exegesis of meta-cultural theologians provides strong ground for the claim that the Thai ritual of reconciliation is biblical.

A Critical Response:

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Through various seminars I have discussed the concepts involved in the Thai ritual of reconciliation with approximately one hundred missionaries to Thailand. Most agree that the Thai ritual of reconciliation is biblical and it can be contextualized. Thai Buddhists unanimously suggest that Christians use this ritual in discipling. Most Thai Christian leaders like the Thai ritual of reconciliation. Though few missionaries express concern about the use of symbolic objects, their use remains the only area of question. We are now ready to look at the contextualization of the ritual of reconciliation and its ability to bond new converts to their families.

New Contextualized Practice:

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On the basis of the frameworks and exegesis of Scripture, I believe that the concepts of reconciliation in the Thai Kama and Ahosikarma ritual can be stepping stones in Thai culture for the understanding of Christ as the Reconciler. I also believe that it can heal the broken relationship between new Buddhist converts (as well as old Buddhist converts) and their social networks. The contextualization of this ritual into a Christian Kama and Ahosikarma ritual must, therefore, be designed to help the new converts bond to their natural social networks and Christ, the Reconciler. This study will now lay out a Christian Kama and Ahosikarma ritual.

The Christian Ritual of Reconciliation, Kama and Ahosikarma:

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As a rite of passage, the Christian ritual of Kama and Ahosikarma is divided into three stages: (1) separation, (2) liminality, and (3) reincorporation.

According to the figure above, the rite of separation and the liminal stage take one year. Due to the Thai's value of grateful relationships and smooth interpersonal relationships, and the Thai's flexibility and adjustment orientation, the prolonged time provides a shock-absorber, allowing the new converts to throw away their idols and to tell their parents of their conversion to Christianity. These are acts of separation from Buddhism. At the same time, the prolonged time provides a shock absorber for the parents when informed by their children of this important separation. During the liminal stage, the prolonged time allows the initiates to be bonded to the meaning of reconciliation to other persons, to God, to cultural communities, and to Christian communities, thus allowing them to be both Thais and Christians. This will result in a good identity for the new converts. They will grow as Thais and Christians because they will have good relational ties with their natural and

cultural social networks, as well as with their Christian communities. They will have sound identity and good roots.

Due to the importance of this issue, I would like to concentrate on the bonding of the new converts to their relatives in each phase of the rite of passage in the Kama and Ahosikarma ritual. I will discuss this bonding within the context of the ritual of Kama and Ahosikarma as recorded in the event mentioned above. Moreover, I will use the nine value clusters of the Thai, their concepts of hierarchy, cyclical time and being, and their activity as a framework for the stages of separation, liminality and reincorporation.

There are five steps in the rite of separation: (1) the religious dialogues between the new converts and their relatives about Christ and the church, (2) the preparation for the new converts to understand the concept of reconciliation, (3) putting away idols, (4) informing the families of the conversion and (5) negotiating for confession and forgiveness. The religious dialogue between the new converts and their relatives is an important foundation for the Christian ritual of reconciliation, Kama and Ahosikarma.

Religious dialogue demands trust, respect and love for parents on the part of the new converts. According to the apostle John,

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. We love because He first loved us. (John 4:18-20)

This kind of attitude will help the new converts to communicate their contact with Christianity to their parents from the very beginning. This style of the communication will be effective only when it fits Thai cultural values. The parents will feel respected, trusted and loved if the new converts ask for permission to go to the church and report what they learn from the church. The parents are willing to discuss religion with their children about religions because the children's behavior indicates that they cherish the parents' identity, their concept of hierarchy, grateful relationship orientation, smooth interpersonal relationship orientation and interdependence orientations.

The new converts should also encourage Christians who are well aware of Thai culture to get to know their social networks. This will ease the fear and anxiety of Thai parents and help them to have a clearer view of Christians. They have various myths about Christians and churches. These myths should be corrected through the Christians' goodness.

The new converts must pay attention to their family's problems and needs. They must co-operate with their relatives to solve these problems because collectivism is very important for the Thai. These behaviors will prevent new converts from alienating themselves from their relatives. They will also help bonding with relatives, and both sides will be prepared for the religious separation. The meekness and the vulnerability on the parts of the new converts will prepare their social networks to negotiate in the liminal stage, as well as the rite of reincorporation.

The liminal stage creates deeper bonding between the new converts and their social networks. The bonding is divided into three steps: (1) confession and forgiveness, (2) the period of the probation, and (3) the baptismal service.

The first step is the formal act of confession, in which the new converts who bring shame to their immediate families and relatives ask for forgiveness and bow down at the feet of their parents. The meekness in communication, the sacred indigenous objects, and the sacred ceremony speak to the hearts and minds of the Thai, allowing them to respond positively to the new converts.

This ritual of confession and forgiveness provides ways for the parents and relatives to vent their anguish, anger, frustration, disappointment, and concern before they proceed further to truly grant forgiveness to the new converts. Their forgiveness is the action of reciprocity. When the new converts take the initiative to value the interdependent orientation in Thai culture by asking for forgiveness, they show respect for Thai culture and their parents' pain. As a result, the parents respect their decision to convert. A Thai poem states clearly the importance of interdependency in Thai culture.

Tigers are tigers because of jungles;
Jungles are jungles because of tigers.
Soil is soil because of good grasses;
Grasses are grasses because of good soil.
(Praya Sri Sunthorn Woharn 1962)

Respecting interdependency creates bonds between new converts and their social networks. The bonding will go deeper in the periods of probation and baptismal service.

In the period of probation (Fig 6, No. 7), the families receive back their authority over the new converts. They will set criteria together with the local churches for the new converts to prove their accountability in preparation for their baptism. Thai culture perceives and defines 'activity' as *being* rather than *doing*. Therefore, the families will require the accountability of being from the new converts, and will be very happy that they can maintain their authority over them. If the new converts submit themselves to the families' authority, there will be deeper bonding because Thai culture requires the authority to be merciful to the submissive. As a famous Thai proverb suggests:

The meek bow down with burden;
They shall be blessed at the end. (Ngamdee 1993:36)

This bonding will prepare the parents and relatives for the baptismal service. This is one of the most difficult times for the convert and their families (Fig. 6, No. 8).

At this stage, liminality will soon end for the new converts, but suffering is at its peak for the new converts' parents and relatives. The bonding will go deepest if the new converts are sensitive to the pain of the parents because, from their viewpoint, the baptismal service signifies a complete separation from Buddhism and a full identification with Christianity. The children can comfort the parents in attitude and in action according to the Thai value of grateful relationship orientation. In Thai culture, gratitude is expressed through obedience, serving and giving.

As the baptismal service approaches, the new converts should dialog with their social networks about the concept of death and resurrection. In doing so, they should use stepping-stones, such as familiar experiences in daily living and familiar concepts in Buddhism. Eliade suggests that the moon symbolizes death and resurrection (Eliade 1987:156-157). Professor Wit Wisawate lectured that, in Buddhism, life is a continuous death and rebirth like electricity (Wissawate 1967). This will help social networks to understand the deep religious meaning of the ritual and they will be more appreciative because the Thai are religiously oriented. They should be led to understand the ritual not as a departure from Buddhism but as a fulfillment of Buddhist self-emptying. The baptismal

service should symbolize the perfect bonding to the concept of self-emptying in Buddhism through Christ. The families should be invited officially to attend the ritual. Now the process of this Christian ritual of reconciliation takes us to the rites of reincorporation.

The rites of reincorporation are divided into three steps: (1) the parents' discourse, (2) the symbolic serving, and (3) the feast. The bonding between the social networks and the new converts takes place in the first step. The parents are invited to give words of wisdom, which urge their children to fulfill their Christian duties to their families, communities and nation. The Thai like participating in formal ceremonies because of their value of hierarchy. If invited officially, they will usually agree to participate in religious ceremonies.

The feast provides another chance for bonding. The parents should be sat at the head of the table with their children, the other elderly relatives and the church elders. The food being served should symbolize bonding and blessings. The rites of reincorporation end in joy and fellowship, but the bonding continues, as well as the discipling of the new converts.

The bonding between the new converts and their social networks is not a sideline. It is their lifeline and it lasts as long as their life. If the bonding is life-long, the discipling of the new converts will last, and the church will have both strong Christians and good friends who are candidates for the kingdom. This indicates the effectiveness of the ritual.

The Effectiveness of the Christian Ritual of Reconciliation, Kama and Ahosikarma:

The ritual is likely to be effective because it creates bonding between the new converts and their social networks throughout the whole process. As a result, the new converts are not cut off from their cultural roots. The problem of their crisis in self-identity is solved and discipling becomes possible.

The ritual trusts God, the parents and the relatives of the new converts. Thais value ego orientation very highly, making respect and trust very important ethical issues for them. Christians cherish the Thai self-identity, self-esteem and self-respect.

This ritual accentuates six of the nine Thai value clusters: ego orientation, grateful relationship orientation, smooth interpersonal relationship orientation, flexibility and adjustment orientation, and interdependence orientation, as well as fun-pleasure orientation. The Thai will respond to this much more than to the old model of aggressive evangelism.

This Christian ritual of reconciliation, Kama and Ahosikarma, fits the Thai's concept of time and hierarchy, allowing Christians to be viewed as humble, meek, gentle and vulnerable, each of which is a religious model for Jesus' disciples. This is an effective way to win Thai hearts. As an ancient Thai poem says: "Be soft as a silk thread and tie a tiger down" (anonymous).

This ritual of reconciliation has been tested in at least three local churches. The results have been positive. People did not detect syncretism in the contextualization of the Christian ritual of reconciliation. I believe this ritual can be effectively used to heal memories of pain, violence, injustice and oppression in war- torn countries like Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.____

Conclusion

This study presents what is perhaps the core problem for Christianity in Thailand: the relational bonds between new converts and their natural social networks are broken; as a result, the new converts lose their identity as Thais and become weak Christians; the parents and relatives thus turn against the church and become strong enemies of Christian conversion. This study has determined the cause of this problem to be the violation of Thai cultural values. It has pointed out that Thai culture uses the ritual Kama and Ahosikarma to heal such broken relationships. This Thai ritual can be contextualized to become a Christian ritual of reconciliation and resolve the problem mentioned above. The study has demonstrated that the ritual is a rite of passage and has given the ritual's respect for Thai values as evidence for its potential effectiveness. The study thus concludes that the Christian ritual of reconciliation, Kama and Ahosikarma, can be a means to solve the problem of the church gaining one weak Christian, yet many strong enemies, with each new convert. It will provide an effective means for helping new converts to be reconciled to their culture and to understand "reconciliation" itself.

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