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GOD'S WORD FOR ISAN NEWSLETTER

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"Thai Buddhism – Part III" (Syncretistic and Animistic Beliefs and Practices)

By Ron Myers

Greetings Again In the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ,

Buddhism, although defunct in its country of origin (*India*), it is very much alive in Thailand today. For many centuries it has influenced individuals and helped form Thai society. Yet, it is prone to *syncretism*, through which other religious practices are absorbed. Allow me to clarify a couple interrelated terms that you may not be familiar with. I realize that what I'm about to convey won't sound anything like Buddhism, and it isn't. However, these cross-cultural subtleties in belief and practice are an integral part of what all missionaries to Thailand will encounter, and need to be aware of if they are to enjoy a successful ministry among the Thai... be it rich and flourishing city folk, or the destitute village-dwelling peasant farmers of the hinterlands, and all in between. Everyday routines and decisions throughout the land are influenced by these beliefs and traditions—be it Bangkok executives making multi-million Baht international business deals on the one hand, or peasant farmers deciding which day of the week to begin planting rice on the other (*an Animistic tradition among Isan rice farmers called "Grandmother's choice"*).

- **Syncretism:** Simply stated, *Syncretism* refers to the intertwining of two or more dissimilar systems of belief and practice, typically between contradicting religions, customs, or traditions. This most-often occurs when a major world religion comes into an area where various folk-lore beliefs and practices have dominated. Sometimes, instead of forsaking the former, the people incorporate the Gospel in with their old beliefs and practices... to the point where demarcation lines become nearly indistinguishable to the devotees. At times, missionaries have mistakenly thought that those they came to reach had truly trusted Christ, when in fact the Message of Salvation was being mixed in with the people's former beliefs. Lacking actual evidence of a changed lifestyle meant that syncretism was likely taking place. As Pastor Adrian Rogers once said, "*What you really believe, you will act upon.*"

When Cheryl and I were in the training phase as missionary candidates with New Tribes Mission (1969-1973), there were reports of people turning to Christ in various locations on the mission field. Most were genuine; however, one concerned the response to the Gospel by a remote tribal group on the island of Mindanao, Philippines. Another instance pertained to a tribe on the island of Papua New Guinea that seemed to be on fire for the Lord.

Everything seemed genuine in both cases as people appeared to have accepted the Gospel message. The missionaries involved were well-trained, dedicated professionals who spoke the heart language of the people. The "new believers" sang hymns, prayed, and gave testimonies. Yet, in their hearts and minds, the people were not trusting Christ at all, but thinking something entirely different. The missionaries began to realize something was amiss. In fact, the people had merged or *syncretized* the Gospel with their old beliefs. Once the missionaries became aware of the problem and corrected their approach, they began to see real fruit. Consequently, an in-depth understanding of the people's culture and beliefs, combined with altering one's methods—teaching the foundational *Creation to Redemption* account first—can eliminate these pitfalls among people with differing worldviews.

In one case, the people had a legend known as the "Cargo Cult." When the Gospel was presented, they merely mouthed what they assumed the missionaries wanted to hear, all in hopes of gaining back the lost wealth foretold in their legends... that which the foreigners had stolen. And, they could gain it all back if they accepted what was told them by the strangers who brought "*the book.*" These natives were incorporating a stylized version of the Gospel in with their own beliefs, all in hopes of gaining a material windfall.

- **Animism:** The term *Animism* does *not* refer to the worship of animals, but to the world-wide heathen belief that there is a spirit world residing alongside and interacting with our physical/material world. All natural objects (*rivers, streams, trees, land, mountains, skies, etc.*) are inhabited by these territorial owner or guardian spirits that must be kept pacified. People can remain in the spirit's good graces by food and gift offerings, as well as avoiding committing something that offends. If a spirit becomes offended and causes a calamity to occur, i.e., sickness or misfortune, it can be appeased through offering blood sacrifices. Communication with the offended spirit is accomplished through human mediators, who perform a divination ceremony. The mediator often receives an agreed-upon price to confer with the offended spirit, who relates the causative offense and the appeasement price—typically the blood sacrifice of a chicken or pig, or even an oxen or water buffalo on special annual occasions.

Now, does this begin to sound like the Biblical account of the annual Passover Lamb—Jesus Christ, the sacrificial Lamb of God, Who came to pay the sin price to redeem all mankind (*reminiscent of Old Testament animal sacrifices*)? It should, because Satan, the jealous imposter, the powerful but fallen archangel who, according to scripture, rebelled against God and was cast down from Heaven to become the "Prince of the Power of the Air," or "God of This World." And, who now—along with his fellow fallen angels, the demonic forces under his command—deceives and blinds the hearts and minds of those still in spiritual darkness, that they might not ever hear or receive the Gospel?

So, what are these so-called territorial guardian spirits to which the people offer appeasement sacrifices? They certainly aren't playful little imps, or spirits of dearly departed relatives who return to beg for sustenance or help, as adherents of these beliefs believe. No, they are evil demon-entities; i.e., the fallen dark angels described above, who seek to keep lost souls under their control from understanding the Gospel and receiving Christ!

Every Thai city, town, and rural village has a prescribed location, in the form of a shrine where local inhabitants go to kneel and pray to the spirits, all in hopes of gaining a wish, or asking for help. I have personally watched these occurrences, even seen mothers mentor their young children to do the same. I was present when one village mediator prayed to the village guardian owner spirit. Amazingly, he mouthed the same things we would say in petitioning God for health and watch-care. In times past, a faithful slave was killed and buried in a pit where a sacred post was then erected to mark the spot, normally occurring in major cities or fiefdoms. The soul of the sacrificed human became the mediator to which adherents prayed and offered sacrifices—candles, incense sticks, flowers, food items, and the like. (*I often refer to this vivid analogy as being a type of Christ when presenting the Gospel among Animistic people—all in hopes of personalizing and bringing the message better into focus for them.*)

The Syncretistic and Animistic Account of Uncle Pea's Harrowing Incident

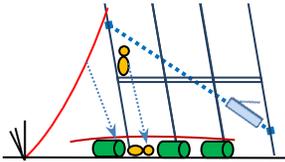
To help explain Syncretism in action, I want to relate a true-life account about our village neighbor, Uncle Pea. This occurred when we lived and served among the ethnic Nyaw people in the remote peasant village of Naa-Nai (*Inner Fields Village*) during the early years of our ministry.

One morning, Uncle Pea came over to borrow my hand saw since his wasn't very sharp. His family was growing in number because his son had just taken a wife—the new couple having moved in with them according to cultural tradition. The plans were to increase living space by adding a new section onto the existing porch. Most all of life's daily chores and activities in rural villages occur on the porch—eating, visiting, napping, weaving, treating illness... almost everything. The interior portion of these one-room homes is reserved for storage and sleeping, *on thin grass mats*. Farm animals, such as oxen and water buffaloes, are penned in make-shift corrals underneath the house, which is constructed on a series of large poles.

My saw in hand, Uncle Pea walked back across the dirt road to his house where some village men were now gathered. These were fellow-villagers who had volunteered to assist with erecting the new addition. Materials had already been rounded up; namely wooden poles, floor joists, planks, roof purlins and rafters—freshly sawn using two-man bucksaws from felled trees in the surrounding forests. Uncle Pea had also purchased galvanized roofing from the Chinese-owned hardware store in the district town, ten kilometers away, then hauled back to the village on local public transportation, namely small locally-owned Japanese pickup trucks with a roofed framework and bench seats along the sides of the pickup box for passengers.

I went over a while later to observe their progress. Post holes had been dug and a row of four vertical house poles had been erected, with floor beams securing them together in the middle. However, instead of making sure the poles were vertical before affixing the floor beams, they were left canting over to the left, resembling a parallelogram.

To correct the oversight, the men had nailed one end of a long, freshly-sawn, 2" x 4" **roof purlin** to the top end of the leftmost house pole. The men were now standing out beyond the structure, grasping the lower end of the heavy purlin, heaving as hard as they could, trying unsuccessfully to push the framework up to a vertical position using the springy, now-bending purlin.



I soon realized what was needed and told them I could easily accomplish the feat with one hand, to which they all laughed. I went back to my house, returning with a *Come-along* winch, and a **long chain** I had brought from the States. Wrapping one end of the chain around the top of the leftmost house pole, I then wrapped the other end around the lower part of the rightmost pole. After fastening the hooks of the extended come-along to the chain, the villagers watched in surprise as I easily brought the leaning framework up into position with a few strokes of the handle amongst *oohs* and *aahs*. When it was perfectly vertical, I instructed the men to use another roof purlin as a brace, nailing it into position across the four poles at the same angle as the chain.



I then unfastened my chain and come-along and took them home. Returning later, I discovered that they had removed the roof purlin that braced the framework safely in place, preferring to use their old method. They had managed to use another roof purlin, which was now staked to the ground and bent under great pressure as it strained to keep the structure upright. *Oh well, I tried*, I told myself. One man told me that this was the way they did things. (*This is an example of how difficult it is for Isan villagers to accept new ways, including the Gospel message, as we seek to turn their hearts to Christ.*)

By the end of the day, the new porch extension was finished, except that the porch floor boards hadn't yet been trimmed off. The following morning, **Uncle Pea** (♂) began the task of sawing off the odd lengths of the floor boards, starting, directly underneath the highly-stressed **roof purlin-2**, which was fastened to the hardwood pole with nails that were inadequate, being too short. Uncle Pea's sawing action caused the new porch to sway back and forth ever so slightly, but just enough to dislodge the nails holding the heavy purlin to the pole, which sprung forward hitting **UnclePea-2** (♂) across the shoulders and knocking him to the ground, two meters below (6', 6")... followed closely by the heavy purlin. He would likely have been seriously injured or worse had there not been a few discarded **old house poles** lying on the ground directly below. Uncle Pea landed on the soft dirt, between two of the poles, the heavy roof purlin coming to rest across the top of the old poles, leaving Uncle Pea pretty-much unscathed, except for being temporarily knocked unconscious.

The village spirit mediator (ANIMISM), Uncle Deet, a friendly neighbor who saw the whole thing, came rushing over to recite a special healing incantation just under his breath (BRAHMANISM) while spraying lustral water from his mouth across Uncle Pea's face, intended to heal any injuries Uncle Pea may have incurred (BRAHMANISM), and revive him. (*For this, some credited Uncle Deet for saving Uncle Pea's life.*)

This was just the beginning of a long series of ceremonies and folk remedies that would be performed. The next was an ancient "*Suu Khwan*" or wrist-tying ceremony (FOLK-LORE PRACTICE), attended by friends and relatives and presided over by village elders, who recited the chants to call Uncle Pea's frightened spirit essence (*soul stuff*) back into his body (FOLK-LORE BELIEFS). (*Note: The lines between these DESIGNATIONS can sometimes become indistinct or unclear.*)

Following this, a merit-making ceremony was performed, where gifts and money was presented to the local village temple (BUDDHISM). After that, local Buddhist priests came and performed chants at the residence in the Pali-Sanskrit language, to bless and ward off any evil or misfortune that had befallen Uncle Pea's household (BRAHMANISM/ANIMISM). Then, the Buddhist priests strung a small cotton string around the circumference of the village (FOLK-LORE PRACTICE), all the while sprinkling lustral water in front of them as they went, using a particular species of tree branch (BUDDHISM/BRAHMANISM).

To top it off, a local spirit doctor (mediator) was called upon to arbitrate with the offended spirit (ANIMISM), in hopes of learning what offense had been committed, and what type of blood sacrifice price needed to be paid to quell the offended spirit's ire. As I recall, the price was a chicken or two, killed and bled out at a predetermined location (ANIMISM), along with offerings of food and incense sticks (ANIMISM).

Later, I explained to Uncle Pea that the problem was the nails used to fasten the purlin to the house post were too short; and unable to hold against the movement and pressure. He politely listened and acquiesced. So, what was the actual cause of the whole incident? Uncle Pea came to me afterwards, telling me the actual cause the spirit medium had related to him (ANIMISM). You see, Uncle Pea's aged mother had recently passed and she didn't have enough accumulated merit (BUDDHISM/ANIMISM), to the point where she could be reincarnated again (BUDDHISM), instead of drifting around in the spirit netherworld (ANIMISM) for who knows how long. That, in short, is what had happened... nothing more, nothing less. As I recall, Uncle Pea also entered the priesthood for a day or two, which helped produce the lacking merit his mother needed (BUDDHISM/ANIMISM).

Who could have known that this dangerous calamity had been caused by his now-deceased mother (ANIMISM)? I asked Uncle Pea if she had loved him while she was alive. "*Why, yes,*" he assured me. I then asked why she might be trying to harm him now. He had no answer. Uncle Pea had heard the Gospel many times, but told me he had decided to remain with the old ways. To the best of my knowledge, he has now entered a Christless eternity.

In closing, please pray for good success and safety as I return to Thailand in a few weeks. Pastor Pitak and I will continue the final review process on the now completed Isan New Testament, hoping to go to print later this year. We are thankful for your faithful prayers and financial partnership in this very important task, i.e., taking God's Word and the Gospel message to those still dwelling in spiritual darkness at the ends of the earth, until Christ's return. Please pray also for my stubborn sciatic condition. I saw a well-respected neurosurgeon yesterday, who ordered more tests and specialist visits. Pray that the root cause of this painfully-debilitating problem will be discovered and corrected. I presently need crutches or a walker to slowly maneuver around.

By God's Grace and for His Glory,

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