
SPLIT-LEVEL CHRISTIANITY IN THAILAND: A SURVEY OF LOCAL THAI BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG THAI CATHOLICS

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Illustration 1: Statue of Mary with offerings (photo by authors)

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ABSTRACT

Popular religiosity, which involves a mixture of older local beliefs and practices, with newer more universal religious practices, is very common in Thailand. These older beliefs and practices are rooted in animistic beliefs and practices present before the coming of other religious traditions. This phenomena – which is often described as syncretism – has been well documented with regard to Thai Buddhism. But what has not been investigated is its presence in Thai Catholicism and Christianity. While Thai Catholics confess themselves as Catholics, in their daily lives, they still hold older local Thai beliefs and practices. This paper will consider this phenomenon through the concept of 'split-level Christianity,' a term coined by Jaime Bulatao. And it will discuss the attempts of the Catholic Church in Thailand to accommodate those local Thai beliefs and practices through various kinds of inculturation.

Key Words: Thai Catholicism; syncretism; inculturation; Split-level Christianity

Introduction

It is very common, throughout Thailand to find sacred offerings placed before statues, trees, and spirit houses adjacent to homes and businesses. Many Thai people wear various kinds of amulets around their necks or wrists. Such examples can be considered as a kind of popular religiosity, and can be traced back to animistic beliefs and practices that predate the arrival of other religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Peter Jackson in his book *Capitalism Magic Thailand: Modernity with Enchantment* has documented how these movements of popular religiosity persist in the mainstream of Thai religious life.² Moreover, they have persisted even with the introduction of beliefs from

² Peter A. Jackson, *Capitalism Magic Thailand: Modernity with Enchantment*. Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022., 2

other cultures and religious traditions, including the coming of modernity and technology. Yet these traditional beliefs and practices, that are often dismissed as superstition and myth, also give deep value to the lives of Thai people. As Mircea Eliade observes concerning earlier myth, “it supplies models for human behavior and, by that very fact, gives meaning and value to life.”³ Thai people have integrated these older beliefs into various religious practices mentioned above because they remain meaningful and valuable for them, and have always been a part of their way of life.

But this phenomenon can be seen not only in connection with Buddhism, but also other religions, including Catholicism. While having a history in Thailand dating back to the 16th century, Catholicism has encountered difficulties gaining a large following and having an impact on Thai society and culture. After more than five centuries of entering Thailand, the number of Catholics never reached one percent of the whole Thai population. There are various reasons for this. The most significant for the purposes of this study is Catholicism’s resistance to syncretism. While scholars like Stanley Tambiah contend that syncretism does not exist in Thai Christianity as it does in Thai Buddhism, this paper wishes to document how this tendency can also be observed in Catholicism. Even with the resistance of the Catholic church to traditional beliefs and practices, they still persist in Thai Catholic devotion. So it is common to find Thai Catholics formally confess their faith, yet also still hold local Thai beliefs and practices in their daily lives which is seemingly incompatible with the Catholic faith. This phenomenon has been interpreted in various ways, but this study will consider it from the perspective of Jaime Bulatao’s concept of “split-level Christianity.” This will allow us to also consider the efforts of the Catholic Church in Thailand to reconcile this split and to accommodate and integrate those local Thai beliefs and practices into Catholicism through inculturation.

³ Ibid, 2.

Local Thai Beliefs and Practices

Local Thai beliefs and practices are an integral part of Thai culture. They influence almost all aspects of Thai society, including economic, politic, social, and also religious aspect. There are more than 30 ethnic groups with their own languages and cultures. Some ethnic groups mentioned here: Thai, Malay, Chinese, Vietnamese, Karen, Akha, Hmong, Lao, Yuan, and other small ethnic groups. Even though each ethnic group has its own stories and beliefs, there are some similar or common characteristics, for example the belief in bad and good spirits and their supernatural powers. Moreover, Thai culture also consists of layers of belief systems from animism to Hindu beliefs to Buddhism. The earliest belief of those people was animism, including the worship of ancestors. Rajadhon says that these beliefs were the main beliefs of people in the region at that time.⁴ In Tylor's theory of animism, he says that animism is belief in spiritual beings, that include souls of individual creatures after death and the powerful deities.⁵ Marett simply defines animism (or animatism) as belief in "impersonal forces, associated with awe-inspiring beings, objects, and phenomena."⁶ Animism plays a part of many cultures, and has a great value in the life of people, especially in Asia. Since the earliest times, Thai people believed that natural elements in this world, such as mountains, animals, rivers, trees, stones, and sky have specific souls or spirits, that mostly have supernatural powers. These animistic beliefs have become the root of local Thai beliefs and practices, which are part of Thai culture.

⁴ Phya Anuman Rajadhon, *Essays on Thai Folklore*. Bangkok: Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development & Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, 1988, 48.

⁵ Edward B. Tylor, *Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. London: John Murray, 1988, 385.

⁶ Frederico Delgado Rosa, Edward "Tylor's Animism and Its Intellectual Aftermath" in Tiddy Smith. (Ed.). *Animism and Philosophy of Religion*. Gewerbestrasse: Palgrave Macmillan 2023, 64.

Meeting Other Traditions

Animistic beliefs and practices are the first layer of Thai culture. Historically, Thai animistic beliefs and practices have experienced the introduction of many other cultures and religious traditions that have shaped the complex many-layered Thai culture that exists today. With the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism Thai animistic beliefs and practices were not rejected but assimilated, and so they continued to have great influence on Thai culture until today. Nowadays, when people think about Thai culture, they immediately think of Buddhist culture. Yet as Nathalang points out, it is difficult to separate Buddhism from Thai culture.⁷ Buddhism in Thailand itself is unique, and quite different from the Buddhism practiced in other countries. Buddhism in Thailand contains many animistic and magical elements. This is because Buddhism in Thailand has absorbed and acculturated the earlier local Thai beliefs and practices.

The introduction of new belief systems in Thailand has not effaced the earlier beliefs and practices in Thailand, but has strengthened the existence of those beliefs and practices in different forms. First of all, this is because religious traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism came to Thailand with peace and tolerance of the older belief systems. This is characteristic of the region in general. Saran and Khanna in their book *The Ramayana in Indonesia* point out that Hinduism and Buddhism “did not totally displace local beliefs, but rather blended with them.”⁸ There was no condemnation of the older religious traditions. They instead accommodated those beliefs and practices into their own traditions and practices. In Thailand, this accommodation has created a kind of dialogue between local Thai beliefs and practices, and Hinduism and Buddhism. Moreover, this long process of dialogue has built a sense of tolerance

⁷ Siraporn Nathalang, “Conflict and Compromise between the Indigenous beliefs and Buddhism as Reflected in Thai Rice Myths.” in Siraporn Nathalang. (Ed.). *Thai Folklore Insights into Thai Culture*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2000, 100.

⁸ Malini Saran, and Vinod C. Khanna, *The Ramayana in Indonesia*. Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2004, 27.

among Thai people with different beliefs or religions. Pallegoix noticed this religious tolerance among Thai people in his book, “This diversity of religions does not cause any trouble because everybody can follow, adopt or abandon the one he wishes. Nobody has right to fight or despise that of others.”⁹ This blending of local beliefs and practices with other religious traditions, which sometimes has created new forms of beliefs and practices, continues to this day.

Common Characteristics

So what are local Thai beliefs and practices? They are truths or stories, believed to be true and real, that are passed among Thai people from generation to generation. While Thailand consists of many different ethnic groups and religious traditions we can still consider some similarities. Here are some common characteristics of local Thai beliefs and practices that have lived among Thai people in general.

Belief in Impersonal Powers. Thai people believe in mysterious and impersonal powers. They believe that certain things or objects, such as animals, trees, or even numbers, have their own power. This power may bring fortune or misfortune to those who believe in those things. Kirti Bunchua says that because this power is impersonal, nobody knows the origin and how it works. It works automatically and mysteriously.¹⁰ Yet, people believe try to appropriate this power for their own fortune, by wearing amulets or choosing auspicious days or numbers for special events. For example, some Thai people wear an amulet made of a tooth of tiger. People believe that a tiger has power in itself, and by wearing its tooth as an amulet, it will bring strength to those who wear it. Some people wear amulets, not only to protect them against dangers, but also to bring them luck.¹¹ Or, people would choose number nine for special events, because it will bring them luck. Another example, Thai people

⁹ Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, *Description of the Thai Kingdom or Siam: Thailand under King Mongkut*. Walter E. J. Tips. (Trans). Bangkok: White Lotus, 2000, 308.

¹⁰ Kirti Bunchua, *Contextual Religions*. Bangkok: Assumption University. 1994, 17.

¹¹ Phya Anuman Rajadhon, *Essays on Thai Folklore*, 300.

would plant a jack-fruit tree behind their house, for the prosperity of their family. These are some of many examples of this belief in impersonal powers.

Belief in Spirits. Another characteristic is the belief in spirits. These spirits have supernatural powers, and can live in the heavens as gods and goddess, or they can live in natural elements, and in many other things. There are good and bad spirits. The good spirits help people in their daily lives. Siraporn Nathalang points out that these good spirits include natural gods and goddesses, such as the gods of the mountain, the goddess of the river, the goddess of the rice field, the god of the forest, the goddess of the soil or earth, and the spirits of Thai ancestral spirits.¹² The bad spirits usually appear in the form of ghosts, such as *Phi Krasue*, *Phi Krahang*, and *Phi Pop*.¹³ Thai people worship those spirits, especially good spirits and their ancestors. People are in relations with those spirits—whether to ask for help, to thank, to appease or to apologize. People appeal to the spirits in rituals and ceremonies, by offering some sacred offerings, and performing merit. Suvanna Kriengkraipetch contends that these customs and rituals are still formative on the present behavior and conduct of Thai people.¹⁴

Belief in Reciprocal Relationship. Belief in reciprocal relationship follows belief in impersonal powers and spirits. Kriengkraipetch writes that Thai people believe that their relationship with those powers and spirits is based upon dependence and reciprocity.¹⁵ As mentioned above, people relate to spirits to ask for help, to thank, to appease or to apologize. If the spirits help and protect people, people have to give something in return, usually in form of offerings or sacrifices. People make deals or

¹² Siraporn Nathalang, “Conflict and Compromise between the Indigenous beliefs and Buddhism as Reflected in Thai Rice Myths,” 101.

¹³ Suvanna Kriengkraipetch, “Folksong and Socio-Cultural Change in Village Life” in Siraporn Nathalang. (Ed.). *Thai Folklore Insights into Thai Culture*. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2000, 149.

¹⁴ Ibid., 143.

¹⁵ Ibid., 182.

bargains, with those spirits just as people make a deals with other people. Some spirits ask for special offerings if people want to ask for help or offer apologies. For example, people in villages have to kill a chicken or a pig to apologize for their mistakes to their guardian spirits. From this belief, votive offerings are the most common practice of Thai people. They promise to do something or offer something to thank to the spirits that helped them gaining what they want.

Belief in Benefits for Present Life. Thai people's relation to spirits is for their benefits of this present life. People would ask for prosperity and protection from danger for their present life. Kirti Bunchua writes that they do not think much beyond this life. He writes that people believe that "the status of the life beyond follows the last status of this life."¹⁶ It means that if in this present life people have prosperity or wealth, the life after their death will be the same as now. Srichampa mentions seven common purposes why people wear amulets and also worship spirits. These are power, prosperity, mercy or love, fertility, protection, happiness, and luck.¹⁷ All of these are benefits for this present life. Moreover, Kriengkraipetch mentions that people perform rituals and ceremonies to happiness and productivity of their life.¹⁸ Thus, almost all practices of those beliefs above are for the benefits of their present life.

These are some common characteristics of local Thai beliefs and practices that have persisted among Thai people for generations. Indeed, there are also other characteristics that are specific to some certain groups or ethnics. Nonetheless, those common characteristics are believed and practiced by Thai people in general without regard to gender, age, social status, and even religion.

¹⁶ Kirti Bunchua, *Contextual Religions*, 16.

¹⁷ Sophana Srichampa, "Thai Amulets: Symbol of the Practice of Multi-faiths and Cultures" in Pranee Liamputtong. (Ed.). *Contemporary Socio-Cultural and Political Perspectives in Thailand*. London: Springer, 2014, 63.

¹⁸ Suvanna Kriengkraipetch, "Folksong and Socio-Cultural Change in Village Life," 144.

Split-Level Christianity in Thailand

Some Thai Catholics, even though they confess themselves as Catholics, still hold those common characteristics of local Thai beliefs and practices in their daily lives. The phenomenon of Catholics holding two belief systems at the same time is called split-level Christianity. Split-level Christianity is a term coined by Jaime Bulatao in the 1960s. Bulatao talks about this split-level Christianity when he describes how many Christians in the Philippines confess themselves as Christians, but in their daily lives, consciously or unconsciously, they practice many things that are not 'Christian.' Here, Bulatao defines split-level Christianity as the coexistence of two or more belief or value systems that are seemingly inconsistent with each other within one person.¹⁹ Moreover, Bulatao says:

“So it is with the split-leveled person; at one level he professes allegiance to ideas, attitudes and ways of behaving which are mainly borrowed from the Christian West, at another level he holds convictions which are more properly his ‘own’ ways of living and believing which were handed down from his ancestors, which do not always find their way into an explicit philosophical system, but nevertheless now and then flow into action.”²⁰

He argues that Christians in the Philippines hold two value or belief systems. One is a Christian belief system and the other a local

¹⁹ Not only Bulatao who notices this situation, but also Williamson, who sees this situation among many Christians in Africa. He writes: “Most Christians live on two unreconciled levels. They are members of a church and ascribe to a statement of faith. But below the system of conscious beliefs are deeply embedded traditions and customs implying quite a different interpretation of the universe and the world of spirit from the Christian interpretation. In the crises of life and rites of passage the Church is an alien thing.” (quoted in Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou. “Responding to Split-Level Christianity and Folk Religion.” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*. 16, no. 4 (Winter 1999/2000), 173

²⁰ Jaime Bulatao, *Split-Level Christianity*, Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 1966, 2.

belief system, and they believe that both value systems are right. The Christian belief or value system is something that is taught formally and systematically. People accept this as a formal education. Yet, the local value system is something that they inherited from their ancestors in their daily life and action, something that cannot be abandoned. And these value or belief systems exist side by side within the same person. So, this split-level Christianity is a term pointing at Christians who claim and confess themselves as Christians, but at the same time, they still hold and practice some traditional values and practices they inherited from their ancestors.

Bulatao mentions two important characteristics of split-level Christianity. The first characteristic is the conviction of the fitness of both value or belief systems, which are inconsistent. The second characteristic is that the inconsistency of the two systems is not perceived or remains unconscious.²¹ Christians, with split-level Christianity, believe that both systems are right. They do not consider whether those two systems are inconsistent. Because there is no awareness of this inconsistency, there is no effort to reconcile both systems.

There are some historical reasons why this split-level Christianity developed. Paul Hiebert explains that it is due to an attitude of superiority of Western and Christian civilization and culture. Through colonialization, Western people believed Christianity was a means of civilizing other people in other cultures.²² This ‘civilization’ through Christianity was sometimes done by force and imposition. Moreover, Christian missionaries felt that Christianity was the truest religion. They rejected and suppressed other beliefs and cultures that were considered primitive and superstitious, and not in accordance with Christianity. Hiebert quotes John Pobee, who says that many missionaries rejected local beliefs and cultures in their missions:

²¹ Ibid., 7.

²² Paul Hiebert, et.al. “Responding to Split-Level Christianity and Folk Religion,” 19.

“All the historical churches by and large implemented the doctrine of the tabula rasa, i.e., the missionary doctrine that there is nothing in the non-Christian culture on which the Christian missionary can build and, therefore, every aspect of the traditional non-Christian culture had to be destroyed before Christianity could be built up”²³

Since the new Christians did not accept Christianity wholeheartedly, those local beliefs and cultures did not die, but survive latently in the people’s daily beliefs and practices. Many new Christians still hold their local beliefs and practices. Some of them still see Christianity as a foreign religion, and some just add this new belief into their old beliefs and practices.

Some Beliefs and Practices among Thai Catholics: Uniqueness of Thai Catholicism

Split-level Christianity also happens in Thailand. There are some reasons why this split happened. One of the reasons is as what Hiebert mentioned above about the attitude of superiority of Western and Christian civilization. In earlier times, Catholic missionaries only emphasized on converting people, and rejected Thai culture and beliefs. This led to the resistance to conversion of Thai people because they believed that the missionaries were undermining their cultures and beliefs, including Buddhism.²⁴ For example, Pallegoix writes that those local beliefs and practices with their superstitions were considered as “the cult of idols.”²⁵ Moreover, he says that the Catholics took pleasure in ridiculing what they considered superstitions.²⁶ This feeling and attitude made it difficult

²³ Ibid., 19.

²⁴ Dusadee Angsumethangkur, Dusadee. “Catholicism and Thailand: A Review Article.” *Inter-Religio*. 11, (Summer 1987), 11.

²⁵ Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, *Description of the Thai Kingdom or Siam: Thailand under King Mongkut*. 308.

²⁶ Ibid., 282.

for Thai people to accept Catholicism whole-heartily. They considered Catholicism as a foreign religion (unlike Hinduism and Buddhism). Moreover, in the beginning, Catholicism did not enter into Thailand in a cultural way. There was no proper accommodation to local Thai beliefs and practices in Catholicism that makes people do not want to abandon their older beliefs and practices totally. Even as Thai people became Catholics, they still hold local Thai beliefs and practices in their daily lives. This is why split-level Christianity persists in Thailand.

There are some examples of some local Thai beliefs and practices practiced among Thai Catholics, which make Catholicism in Thailand unique. Some Catholics wear religious objects as amulets for their luck and protection. They wear amulet representing saints. Some believe that statues of Jesus, Mary or saints, have power to protect their houses from evil, so they put them on small altars at the center of the houses or above the doors. They put some offerings, such as food, drink or flowers in front of the statues. Some Catholics even still have spirit houses in their gardens. Some Catholics go to fortune tellers to ask about their lives or to ask for auspicious days or numbers for special events. They believe that those days or numbers will give them fortune. For example, in a church in the Bangkok diocese, they raise funds by making statues of saints and put some special or auspicious numbers on those statues for luck. These statues with auspicious numbers sell for high prices. Moreover, some Catholics make merit by giving donations to priests or churches or other people for the purpose of their prosperity and health. Some even make votive offerings to saints, for example, offering to St. Anthony in the Ratchaburi diocese. Some Catholics in the villages go to priests for healing. If the priests cannot heal, they go to shamans or elder people in the villages for healing. Some Catholics have tattoos for protection from evil. Some families go to certain rivers or sea to float the ashes of their deceased family members. These are just some examples of how Thai Catholics still hold local Thai beliefs and practices in their daily lives. Of course, not all Thai Catholics practice all beliefs and practices mentioned above. Nevertheless, many Thai Catholics, especially in the

villages, still hold these local Thai beliefs and practices, and these beliefs and practices make Catholicism in Thailand unique and different from Catholicism in general.



Illustration 2: Statues on altar above a door (photo by authors)

Some Limitations of the Concept of Split-Level Christianity

Split-level Christianity happens when someone holds two belief systems at the same time. As a psychologist, it is understandable that Bulatao uses split-level in his theory as a psychological term. Nevertheless, there are some matters to be taken into consideration regarding this term. The term split-level may signify two different levels, where one level is considered higher than the other. Indeed, if it is talking about Christianity, many Christians will claim that Christianity is higher than other belief systems, in this case local beliefs and practices. And for those who hold local beliefs and practices, some of them may also claim that their beliefs are higher. There is a certain inequality implied in the use of the term split-level. Moreover, this term may not be proper to be used in Thai context. In fact, with the foundation and background of religious



Illustration 3: Thai Catholic Amulet (photo by authors)

tolerance mentioned above, many Thai people consider all religions are good as long as they help them to have better lives and to relate to the spirit world. For many Thais, there is no inequality between religions; they are all at the same level. Yet, there are scholars who use other terms besides the term split-level. Kirti Bunchua, uses the phrase “modern people with primitive paradigm.”²⁷ Indeed, the word ‘primitive’ itself can be called into question. Furthermore, Amaladoss, writing from the Indian context, uses a term ‘double religiosity’ or ‘double religious identity’ when he

²⁷ Kirti Bunchua, *Contextual Religions*, 19.

talks about Indian Catholics who, at a certain level, use Hindu practices to encounter God in their daily lives.²⁸ Nevertheless, this has led to some disputes and debates concerning this term in the part of Catholic Church. The Catholic Church does not agree with this term because it believes that it obscures the teachings of Catholicism. Nonetheless, even though each term may have its limitations, each term recognizes that it is a common phenomenon, especially in Southeast Asia, for people to hold two or more belief systems or practices at the same time. It is the spiritual reality on the ground, so to speak. A more proper term for this phenomenon may still be found in the future.

Another matter that should be taken into consideration is about the characteristics of split-level Christianity. Bulatao says that people with split-level Christianity believe the fitness of both belief systems, which are nevertheless inconsistent. Moreover, the inconsistency of the two systems is not perceived or remains unconscious. While some may argue about this inconsistency, it is undeniable that this inconsistency is usually seen from the Catholic or Western perspective. Some Catholics may see this inconsistency because they use the 'logic' of Catholic teachings or faith as a standard, and those beliefs and practices that are not in line with Catholic teachings may be considered as inconsistent, illogical and even contradictory to Catholicism. It is unlikely that this inconsistency is seen from people who hold local beliefs and practices, especially in Thailand. As mentioned above, Thai people will follow, adopt or abandon beliefs or practices as they wish. If they are seen as inconsistent, they will not follow them. Some Thai Catholics believe in both the 'logic' of Catholicism and local Thai beliefs and practices. They do not consider inconsistency. It does not mean that it is not perceived or unconscious, but there is the awareness that Catholicism does not accept some local Thai beliefs and practices that are not in line with Catholic teachings. Nevertheless, some Thai Catholics still hold those local beliefs and practices because they

²⁸ Michael Amaladoss, "Double Religious Identity: Is it Possible? Is it Necessary? The Indian Experience." *Vidyajyoti: Journal of Theological Reflection*. 73, no. 7 (July 2009), 529.

believe that those local Thai beliefs and practices can exist side by side with Catholicism. Those beliefs and practices are considered from the perspective of how well they can help Thai Catholics express their faith. Thus, the idea of unconscious inconsistencies that one finds in the concept of split-level Christianity is not really applicable in Thai context.^{29,30}

The belief that local Thai beliefs and practices can exist side by side with Catholicism is not new for Thai people. As Pallegoix mentioned above, religious tolerance is one of the characteristics of Thai people. This is part of their way of life, part of their culture. Using Amaladoss' term, it is very common for Thai people to have double religiosity, or even multi religiosity. They adopt and accept any religious systems they wish, especially if those systems can help them and give benefits in their present life. This atmosphere of religious tolerance influences also the religiosity of Thai Catholics. Thai Catholics appreciate local Thai beliefs and practices and Catholicism, and believe that they can hold both systems together at the same time, because it is part of their tradition of religious tolerance, and part of their way of life. Moreover, this religious tolerance exists strongly among ordinary people in the villages, hill-tribe people, who are mostly converted to Catholicism directly from animism.³¹ It is

²⁹ Moreover, this inconsistency may not also be applicable in some parts of Southeast Asia. When Sprenger talks about animism, which is local beliefs and practices, in Southeast Asia, he says that they are mostly practical; their coexistence with world religions is not by necessity a contradiction. (See Guido Sprenger, "Dimensions of Animism in Southeast Asia." in Kaj Arhem and Guido Sprenger. (Ed.). *Animism in Southeast Asia*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016, 32)

³⁰ Furthermore, Amaladoss says that even though things are different, contradiction is not necessary in the context of Asian religio-philosophical traditions, which is different from Greek (West) philosophical tradition. (Michael Amaladoss, "Double Religious Identity: Is it Possible? Is it Necessary? The Indian Experience," 532)

³¹ Dina Frolidi follows Rossi and Scott, contending that those people who became Catholic in Thailand were mostly from the hill tribe people, who mostly converted from animism and not from Buddhism. (Dina Frolidi, *The Local Parishioners, the Italian Missionaries and 'Thainess': The Everyday Practice and Conflicts of Inculturation in a Catholic Parish in Northern Thailand*. MA Thesis. The University of Leeds, 2020, 21.

because people with animistic beliefs have no system that really binds them. They can easily cross religious boundaries without any problem. They still hold their local beliefs and practices because those are part of their lives; those are the way they express their beliefs and faith. Thus, holding local Thai beliefs and practices and Catholicism together at the same time is rooted in a common form of religious expression.

Inculturation: Meeting Between Local Thai Beliefs and Catholic Faith

The Catholic Church has tried to understand local beliefs and practices, which are part of local cultures. It has realized that it cannot suppress local beliefs and practices, and change the faith and practices of the believers completely to Catholic beliefs and practices. The Catholic Church is also aware that Catholics should respect and not judge other cultures with their beliefs and practices, because each culture has its own values, and people in that culture have their own dignity. The Catholic Church in 1970 introduced the term inculturation. This term was introduced during the meeting of the Asian bishops with the Pope Paul VI in Manila.³² The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) supports this idea of dialogue between Christianity and local culture. FABC says that dialogue is a primary means and necessary condition for inculturation.³³ Moreover, FABC defines inculturation as a dialogical encounter process between Christianity and cultures.³⁴ Pope John Paul II (1979), in his apostolic exhortation entitled *Catechesi Tradendae* (Catechesis in Our Time), describes inculturation as a way "to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures." (Art. 53) Christians should learn other beliefs and cultures, not for the purpose of claiming Christian's superiority, but for inculturating Christianity into

³² James H. Kroeger, *Asia's Dynamic Local Churches: Serving Dialogue and Mission*. Manila: Kadena Press Foundation-Asia, 2014, 56.

³³ James H. Kroeger, "Dialogue: Interpretive Key for the Life of the Church in Asia." *FABC Papers*. No. 130. Hong Kong: FABC, 2010, 12.

³⁴ Kroeger, James H. *Asia's Dynamic Local Churches: Serving Dialogue and Mission*, 58.

those beliefs and cultures, so that local Christians can express their belief in the context of their own cultures and experiences.³⁵ This inculturation can be a bridge between Christianity and other local beliefs and practices, so that Christians find a new identity while losing nothing of their cultural richness.³⁶ In the context of split-level Christianity, it should be pointed out, that inculturation does not involve destroying one level of the split-level belief system, but to give both levels a certain dignity, and to make both religious systems consistent and conform to each other.

Accommodation as Dialogue

Inculturation is a complex and controversial term in Catholicism because it includes many positive and negative aspects depending upon the cultures involved. There is no exact form of inculturation. It depends on each local church and each culture how they can relate to each other. In the context of Thailand, missionaries have learned Thai culture, with its beliefs and practices, and tried to interact deeply with Thai culture. At a certain level, Catholics use Thai symbols in practicing their faith. For example, Catholics have used Thai language and Thai gestures during prayers, which is *pranom mue wai* (put hand together in front of chest). At a deeper level, Catholics infuse some new meanings or even beliefs into earlier local Thai beliefs and practices. When talking about split-level Christianity, Bulatao suggests a dialogue to reconcile local beliefs and practices and Catholicism. As Bulatao says, this reconciliation through dialogue can make Filipino Christians be fully Christian and fully Filipino at the same time.³⁷ In the context of Thailand, through dialogue, it can make Thai Catholics be fully Catholic and fully Thai at the same time. As mentioned above, FABC supports this dialogue because dialogue is a primary means and necessary condition for inculturation. This

³⁵ Parmananda R. Divarkar, "The Encounter of the Gospel with Culture." *FABC Papers*. No. 7. Hong Kong: FABC, 1978, 3.

³⁶ James H. Kroeger, "Dialogue: Interpretive Key for the Life of the Church in Asia," 10.

³⁷ Jaime Bulatao, *Split-Level Christianity*, 14.

dialogue can be conducted in the same way that Hinduism and Buddhism in Thailand have been in dialogue with earlier local Thai beliefs and practices. Hinduism and Buddhism did not reject local Thai beliefs and practices, but have accommodated those beliefs and practices into their own traditions and practices. In this dialogue, Hinduism and Buddhism enrich themselves with new practices while retaining their own traditions and beliefs, while local Thai beliefs and practices gain a new structure for their older beliefs. The Catholic Church in Thailand has made efforts to dialogue with local Thai beliefs and practices, so that Thai Catholics find a new identity as Catholics while losing nothing of their traditional cultural richness, by expressing their Catholic faith through their own cultures and practices.³⁸ For Bunchua, this dialogue is easier in the Thai context because, as mentioned above, those converted to Catholicism mostly are ordinary people in the villages and hill tribe people who believed and practiced animism and ancestor worship. Bunchua says that those villagers who confess a certain advanced religion, such as Catholicism, but still hold primitive paradigm, “can be good religionists if the religious leaders know how to guide them with prudence and love.”³⁹ It is the duty of Catholic leaders to accommodate those local beliefs and cultures into Catholicism as a part of their dialogue with cultures.

Some Examples

There are some examples how Catholic Church in Thailand accommodate some local Thai beliefs and practices through inculturation. One example is from Karen people. As mentioned above, in the Karen villages, they had a tradition of making offerings to the Goddess or *Khwan* of paddy fields. The offerings consist of the first fruits of their harvest. It is to show their thankfulness to the Goddess or *Khwan* of the paddy fields for her help and protection, and to ensure an abundant harvest. This offering usually was done with the participation of the whole

³⁸ James H. Kroeger, “Dialogue: Interpretive Key for the Life of the Church in Asia,” 10.

³⁹ Kirti Bunchua, *Contextual Religions*, 19.

village with a shaman leading the ceremony. Karen Catholics adapted this tradition into Catholicism. After harvest, they will have a Mass — presided by a priest — in the village, and each family will bring their first fruits of harvest as offering to God during the Eucharist. Later, those offerings are given to the priests or to poorer people of the community. This ceremony is called *Kong Bun Khao* (กองบุญข้าว). Nevertheless, the concept and idea of this Catholic offering is similar to the traditional concept. Karen Catholics want to thank God for God's blessing for their paddy fields and for the abundant harvest. Indeed, there are some deeper meanings behind this tradition for Karen Catholics, even though at first glance it seems that they just changed deities, and changed the ritual from traditional prayers to Eucharist. Nevertheless, the point is that on the one hand, they do not need to discard their traditional beliefs and practices, but they can practice them in new ways. On the other hand, Catholicism still retains its core teaching.

Another example is from Akha people. One of the biggest festivals for Akha people is a swing festival or *Lo Ching Cha* (โล้ชิงช้า) festival, which is considered as a new year celebration for Akha. This festival is held during the month of August. Some villagers claim that this festival is to honor and respect Goddess *Imchayae*, who gives fertility to the soil and abundant harvest. Besides this, this festival is to honor Akha's ancestors who always accompany Akha people in their lives. Moreover, this festival gives a special place for women, not only because it is to honor Goddess *Imchayae*, but also to honor and give time for women to take rest after working hard during the whole year. There are some rituals and feasts during this festival, where the women become the center. Nevertheless, Catholic Church in the North took this festival and adapted it to a Catholic practice. Akha Catholics celebrate this festival on August 15, on the feast of the Assumption of Mary to heaven. There are some Catholic rituals and feasts during this time. Yet, the most important thing is that this feast is also dedicated to honor women, not only Mary, but also all women for their works and dedication to their families. Again, this Catholic festival is more or less similar to the more traditional Akha

festivals, even though it is less complicated. However, the Catholic Church gives Catholic meanings to that festival to accommodate local Akha's beliefs and practices, so that Akha people, on the one hand can hold their faith as Catholics, and on the other hand they do not need to abandon their deeper culture and beliefs. These are only two examples how Catholic Church in Thailand inculturates itself into local beliefs and cultures by accommodating those beliefs and cultures into its own practices. Yet, there are still many other practices that can potentially be accommodated into Catholicism properly.

Conclusion

Indeed, there are many examples of the practice of split-level Christianity among Thai Catholics. While Thai Catholics profess their faith, they still follow some local Thai beliefs and practices in their daily lives. There have been some efforts in the Catholic Church in Thailand to recognize and accommodate those local beliefs and practices through inculturation.

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