A Study of the Belief Systems and Decision Making of the Isan People of Northeast Thailand with a View Towards Making Use of These Insights in Christian Evangelism

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Proefschrift ter verkrijging van de graad van

Doctor in de Godgeleerdheid en de Godsdienstwetenschappen

aan de Evangelische Theologische Faculteit

te Heverlee (Leuven), België

openbaar te verdedigen September 2007

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a dissertation submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D), in Theology and Religious Studies

from the Evangelical Theological Faculty

of Heverlee (Leuven), Belgium

to be publicly defended September 2007

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ABSTRACT

Saiyasak, Chansamone.
  2007 "A Study of the Belief Systems and Decision Making of the Isan People of Northeast Thailand with a View Towards Making Use of These Insights in Christian Evangelism." Evangelische Theologische Faculteit. Doctor of Philosophy in Theology and Religious Studies. 379 pp. (single space)

For over 170 years Protestant Christianity has endeavored to evangelize the people of Thailand. Roman Catholicism's efforts date back even farther, with over 400 years of evangelism work. However, after almost 500 years of combined ministry time, hundreds of missionaries, thousands of dollars, and countless pages of translation and text, the results have been rather disappointing. Among the Isan people, who are the dominant group in Northeast Thailand, the number of converts to Protestant Christianity is even more discouraging than statistical records of converts throughout the remaining regions of Thailand. Among the total 263,729 Protestant Christians in the whole country in 2004, there were only 20,620 of these reportedly located in the Isan region of Northeast Thailand. However, the number could be lower than indicated because a large number of those reported are no longer practicing Christians. In addition, from 1992 to 2002 the author's work of evangelism and church planting among the Isan people of Ubonratchatani province in Northeast Thailand endured tremendous challenges and protests from the community. As a result of this resistance and lack of response to the gospel message, the author decided to undertake this study in order to discover ways to effectively communicate the gospel message and plant churches among the Isan people of Northeast Thailand.

Chapter 1 gives a review of the geographical, historical, anthropological and political aspects of Isan (Thai-Lao) Buddhism as it merged with the animistic religion of the Isan region. Especially important was an examination of the diffusion of Buddhism from its place of origin in Northern India to the Isan region of Northeast Thailand and adjoining Laos.

Chapter 2 first focuses on the Isan belief systems as they pertain to the concepts relating to the universe. These include the creation of the earth and the creation of man as well as the doctrines of hell, heaven, and nirvana. It then considers their animistic concept of the spirits (*phi*) and the concept of the divinities (*thevada*). Also considered are the belief systems relating to Isan doctrines and practices. These include their doctrine of sin in its relationship to their belief in karma, reincarnation, and the spirits and the notions of auspicious time, evil omens, and superstitions. Their practices of traditional customs and rituals (*chareet prapaynee*) focus on the Isan's observances which relate to the calendar and are of two types--life cycle customs and rituals on the one hand and occasional customs and rituals on the other. The study of Isan's *chareet prapaynee* is of special importance because it reveals factors which work to prohibit the Isan people from converting to Christianity.

Chapter 3 analyzes the decision-making process of the Isan of Northeast Thailand with an in-depth study of the Isan value system with emphasis on those values which directly influence that process as they relate to religious change. Those values of the Isan's social value system are derived mainly from combining the Buddhist religious values with the traditional and customary values known as *chareet prapaynee* which were discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 4 explains in detail the five-level decision-making process of the Isan. It is so-called because the decisions made are directly related to the status and authority of five main decision makers in Isan society together with their approaches to or means of arriving at those decisions. The five main decision makers are: (1) the village community; (2) the kin group; (3) the household; (4) the individual self; and, (5) significant others. The three main approaches or ways that these five important decision makers use in arriving at a decision are: (1) deference; (2) consensus; and, (3) piecemeal. The two types of decision-making interview research results are also included in this chapter.

Chapter 5 gives the major conclusions of the study and reasons why there has been a general lack of responsiveness among the Isan people to conversion to Christianity. Also, it shows that even among those who do take the first step in the conversion process, many do not continue after they reach adulthood. Reasons are suggested which helps to explain this inconsistency among those who profess to convert early on but then abandon the faith as they grow older.

The study presents eight characteristics of the Isan society which have proved to be obstacles, hindrances, or barriers for the penetration of the the gospel to the Isan. Finally, twelve missiological implications of the study are presented as suggested approaches for those working with the Isan people of the Northeast and other groups with a similar culture and way of life.

Mentor: Prof. Dr. William Wagner   753 words

NOTES FOR THE READER ON THAI WORDS

       This study utilizes the spelling *Isan*, although *Isaan* and *Esarn* have been used in various documents. Also, the author chooses to employ the word *decsion making* (without the hyphen) to indicate its use as a noun and *decision-making* (with a hyphen) as an adjective. However, when the words *decision-making* and *decision making* are used in a direct quotation, the author left them as they are.

DEDICATION

To my Lord and Savior
Jesus Christ

To my wife
Piyapon

To my parents
Desa and Pheng

To my mentors
Dr. Alfred G. Henson, Dr. Lee I. Bruckner and Dr. William Wagner

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

responsibilities and also the ministry responsibilities for the last two years in order to free me to fully pursue my academic study until its completion. Her companionship, friendship and co-laborship as well as her assistance in the Thai language provided very crucial elements for the completion of this long academic project.

Finally, my deepest indebtedness goes to my Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Without Him, I would not have the chance of hope, life and the realizations of all my dreams. He gave me the chance to live again and all academic achievement at the Evangelical Theological Faculty is a small appreciative response to the great mercy and grace of Him who deserves it all.

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INTRODUCTION

Rationale for the Study

American anthropologist Charles F. Keyes composed a paper entitled, "Why the Thai Are Not Christians." The paper was then included as a chapter in *Conversion to Christianity*, edited by Robert W. Hefner, and published by the University of California Press in 1993. Keyes' question has burned in the mind of the author since the beginning of his ministry in Northeast Thailand in 1992.

The author's father is Isan of the Ubonratchatani province of Northeast Thailand, and his mother is a native of Pakse in southern Laos. Although he was born in Pakse during the Vietnam War, he was primarily raised as a Buddhist-Animist by his grandparents who resided in the Nathan minor-district of Ubonratchatani. In 1979, as a young teenager, he migrated with his parents to the United States of America. The author experienced a drastic conversion in 1983, after Dr. Alfred G. Henson of Nashville, Tennessee, introduced him to Christianity. He became an ardent disciple of the Word of God under the ministry of Dr. Alfred G. Henson. In these early years of discipleship, the call to return to Northeast Thailand and to share this new found faith began germinating in his mind and heart. In 1987, he met Dr. Lee I. Bruckner, who was then Mission Professor and Chairman of the Missions Department at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. The influence of Dr. Lee I. Bruckner's sharing his cross-cultural experiences and taking his classes in missions and church planting greatly shaped the author's career path.

In 1992, the author and his wife had the opportunity to visit his grandfather in Nonprasert village in the Nathan minor-district of Northeast Thailand and shared his own conversion story. A month later he returned from Laos with Dr. Lee I. Bruckner. Dr. Lee I. Bruckner preached and the author translated and shared with his Buddhist-Animist grandfather, Grandpa Phimpha and many other relatives, the Creation story of Genesis, the Incarnational story of John, and the good news of Jesus Christ. Fifteen Isan relatives converted, and thus began the process of forming this first little congregation. These converts began meeting for prayer and Bible study in the home of Grandpa Phimpha until 1994, when the author and Dr. Alfred G. Henson returned to Nathan minor-district in Northeast Thailand to encourage and strengthen the new converts in Nonprasert village. Dr. Lee I. Bruckner, who was already in Thailand, joined Chansamone and helped baptize the first group of nine believers in Nonprasert village. Subsequently, the Mekong Church Nonprasert was organized, and to this day it serves as the mother church for all the Mekong churches.

Soon after its dynamic beginning, the ministry in Northeast Thailand (led by the author) began to face discouraging challenges. Evangelism was difficult and church growth was slow. As a result, the author began to investigate why the Isan people did not eagerly respond to the gospel. There were two important factors which persuaded the author to undertake this study.

The first factor stemmed from the author's personal ministry experience. From 1994 through 2002 (a span of 8 years) the author diligently pursued methods of

expanding the work of evangelism and church planting beyond the borders of Nonprasert village. However, each step faced much resistance and gained little response.

The second factor which prompted this study was the statistical results of a review of Protestant missionary work in Thailand as a whole, and in the Northeast in particular. According to this national survey conducted by the Thailand Evangelism Committee in 2004, there were a total of 263,729 Protestant Christians in the whole of Thailand but only 20,620 in the Isan region of Northeast Thailand.[1] While these numbers are probably much less than the survey indicated, due to a large number of Thai Christians who were no longer practicing Christianity, the author is satisfied to use these numbers for the purpose of this study. When considered in relation to Thailand's overall population, Protestant Christians account for only .42% of the entire population after 177 years (1828-2004) of Protestant work. However, Christians in the Isan region of Northeast Thailand account for only .097% of the population after 76 years (1929-2004) of Protestant ministry in the area. These numbers do not take into consideration over 400 years of Roman Catholicism in Thailand.

Although eight years of experience working among the Isan of the Northeast gave some measure of explanation for the general non-responsiveness of the people as a whole and the inconsistency among those who became followers of the Christian faith, the author decided to undertake an academic study in order to gain a fuller and richer understanding of these behaviors. The author decided to focus his research on the belief systems, the core values, and the decision-making processes of the Isan people in order to discover whether or not these fundamental aspects of the Isan lifestyle affect their ability and willingness to begin and sustain life as followers of Christianity, as the author suspects.

The Goal and Objectives of the Study

The goal of this study is to analyze the belief systems, the worldview values, and the social dynamics of the Isan people to understand how they make their religious decisions in order to adapt these insights for doing more effective evangelism, discipleship, and church planting among the Isan of Northeast Thailand.

The objectives of the study can be summarized as follows:

(1) To study the background of the Isan people and Isan Buddhism in respect to their decision-making process;

(2) To investigate the belief systems of the Isan people in respect to their decision-making process;

(3) To analyze the relationships between their belief systems and their value system in respect to their decision-making process;

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[1]Thailand Evangelism Committee, *TEC Survey 2004* (Bangkok: Thailand Evangelism Committee, 2004).

(4) To draw conclusions related to the decision-making process of the Isan people; and,

(5) To suggest what the missiological implications and recommendations are for future evangelistic work among the Isan of Northeast Thailand.[2]

Research Methodology

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the belief systems and resulting values which influence the decision-making processes of the Isan people (and especially the decision for conversion). In order to do this, the author has chosen literature reviews, personal observations, and Isan (Thai-Lao) interviews as his main research methodologies.

The literature research, including studies conducted in subject matters related to the author's study, are extensive. However, the author found that the needed research materials had not been translated into English and were only available in the Thai and Lao languages. It was therefore necessary for the author to locate relevant documents in the Thai and Lao archives and university libraries and translate them into English. For example, in order to trace the earliest Isan (Thai-Lao) worldview and traditional customary beliefs concerning creation and the afterlife, it was necessary to go back to the important ancient Isan plam-leaf manuscript *patommoon* (ปฐมมูล) which was written in a *Thainoi* (Lao-ไทน้อย) script consisting of 32 palm-leaf sheets. These manuscripts, found in a village in Northeast Thailand in 1984 by Supon Somjitsripunya, became the basis for his Master's thesis (in the Thai language). Unfortunately, since the palm-leaf manuscript had only been translated into Thai, it was necessary for the author to translate the Thai into English for this dissertation. Throughout this study, the author has cited the conclusions of noted Thai, Isan (Thai-Lao), and Lao anthropologists and other scholars in their conclusions but has had to translate them into English from the Thai documents. In doing so, he has helped to make the English speaking world more aware of these important contributions.

The research based on personal interviews with native Thai, Isan (Thai-Lao), and Lao speakers involved two large sampling groups—one among both rural and urban dwellers in four of Ubonratchatani's districts, and the other confined only to rural villagers in three of Ubonratchatani's districts. The two sample interview groups were conducted in the Thai, Isan (Thai-Lao) and Lao languages in order to investigate the Isan decision-making process and its motivation.

The personal observations of the author have served to validate the research findings with reality in two ways. First, by being able to compare one's own experiences and observations with those recorded in the vast literature of centuries, helps confirm certain impressions as being valid or not. Also, secondly, by being able

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[2]The comparison of the growth of Christianity between other regions of Thailand and the Isan region of Northeast Thailand will not be covered in the dissertation because it will take the dissertation beyond the scope of the goal and objectives of the study.

to compare one's personal observations and impressions with those of 153 rural and urban interviewees on certain key issues, the study provides important information. This is especially important as they relate to conversion to or from another religion. Though limited to seven rural and urban districts in only one province (Ubonratchatani), they provide the foundation for future more detailed studies.

Data Collection

The data was collected through the three dfferent methodologies mentioned above: literature reviews, personal observations, and Thai, Isan (Thai-Lao) and Lao interviews. Then this data was recorded according to the interview schedule and questionnaires in the Appendices.

The first interview sampling group consisted of 64 rural and urban dwellers from four districts in Ubonratchatani province: Nathan, Phosai, Khemarat, and Muang districts. The second interview sampling group included 89 rural villagers from only three districts in Ubonratchatani province: Nathan, Phosai, and Khemarat.

Data Analysis

Both of the interview sampling groups used open-ended questionnaires and the information collected was almost all qualitative rather than quantitative. The data collected in the interview groups was then critically studied in order to discover the reasons and factors involved in their decision-making process, especially in regard to conversion to Christianity.

Research Procedures

In order to provide structure to the study, the author divides the research into different stages:

(1) Reviews of related literature and studies (including reports, journals, magazine articles, theses and dissertations, books, and on-line publications) were conducted to understand the belief systems and decision-making processes of the Isan.

(2) Presentation of the research results related to the background of the Isan people and syncretistic religions (Chapters 1); the Isan's five belief systems which provide the foundation for their value system and their decision-making process (Chapters 2); the Isan's values including the three aspects of social values, Buddhist religious values, and traditional customary values which directly influence the decision-making (Chapter 3); and the Isan's decision-making process itself, including the importance of male leadership, the five male-level decision-making process and approaches to it (Chapters 4); the study conclusions and missiological implictions (Chapters 5). Some of the results of the interview research are incorporated into the presentation starting from Chapters 3 on the Isan's values.

(3) Interviews and personal observations were conducted among the Isan people in Ubonratchatani. The first interview research groups involved 64 rural and urban dwellers from four districts (Nathan, Phosai, Khemarat, and Muang) in

Ubonratchatani province, Northeast Thailand. The 64 interviewees were divided into three categories: (a) those who had heard the Christian message and had converted to Christianity (a total of 20 people from 4 districts); (b) those who had heard the Christian message and were still interested (a total of 25 people from 4 districts); and (c) those who had heard the Christian message and had decided to reject it (a total of 19 people from 4 districts).

The second interview group included 89 rural villagers and focused on only three districts (Nathan, Phosai, and Khemarat) in Ubonratchatani province. The interview questionnaires were open-ended in order to allow a more in-depth understanding of the responses.

(4) The collected data was analyzed in order to uncover the correlation between beliefs and the decision-making processes of the Isan people.

(5) Study conclusions were drawn and missiological implications were recommended for future working strategies in the Isan region of Northeast Thailand.

CHAPTER 1

THE BACKGROUND OF THE ISAN PEOPLE AND THE DIFFUSION OF
BUDDHISM FROM INDIA INTO ISAN CULTURE

Introduction

   In order to properly investigate the belief systems of the Isan people one
must fully understand their origin and background. Thus, it is important to
thoroughly explore their historical, religious, and cultural roots so as to gain insight
into their value system and to properly discern the Isan decision-making process.
Their history, together with the history of the region, will provide a framework on
which to build a study of the Isan way of life.   Buddhism has contributed more
historically to the belief and value systems of the Isan people and their ancestors than
any other outside influence. Therefore, the origins of Buddhism in Northeast
Thailand needs to be assessed in its relationship to the traditional customary practices
of the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี) and to the people of the Lan Chang kingdom
who were the forerunners of the Isan people in Northeast Thailand and the Lao of
present-day Laos.

The Background of the Isan People

   Thailand is one of the six nations along with Laos, Cambodia, Burma,
Vietnam, and Malaysia that are included in Mainland Southeast Asia or the Indo-
China peninsula. This entire region is called *Indo-China* because it includes all the
land between India and China. According to Sila Viravong, a renowned Lao historian
and scholar, there were two original groups of people in the Indo-China peninsula: the
Chawa (ชวา) and the Lawa (ละว้า) or Lor (ล้วะ). The Chawa became the ancestors of the
Malay and Indonesian peoples, and the Lawa or Lor perhaps became the ancestors of
the Lao peoples.[1]

   The earliest settlers in Mainland Southeast Asia or Indo-China were the
Khmer, an Austro-Asiatic people, who came from western China. The Khmer first
settled in northern Burma, near India. There they intermarried with the Southern
Indian peoples and became the Mon-Khmer, Khmer, or Khmu. These Mon-Khmer
then pushed the Chawa people to the Chawa islands (modern-day Indonesia) and
assimilated the Lawa into their own culture.

   The Mon-Khmer subsequently divided the Indo-China Peninsula into two
kingdoms: the *Dvaravati* (ทวารวดี) and the *Kothaboon* (โคตรบูร). The Dvaravati kingdom

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[1]Sila Viravong, *Prawatsat lao* (History of Laos - ประวัติศาสตร์ลาว) (in Thai),
translated from Lao into Thai by Somai Pramchit (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Social
Research Institute, Chiang Mai University, 1992), 6.

encompassed the eastern part of the Indo-China peninsula from *Dongphayayen* (ดงพญา เย็น), which is south of what is now Nakon Ratchasima, to the eastern border of Burma and up to the Malay Peninsula. Archeological findings show that the Dvaravati kingdom was based in Nakon Pratom, Thailand. In 325 B.C. or 307 B.C., Asoaka, an Indian king, sent a delegation of monks led by Pra Sona (พระโสณะ) and Pra Ottra (พระ อุตตระ), to spread Buddhism into the Dvaravati kingdom. This region was known as *Suvannapummeprathat* (สุวรรณภูมิประเทศ).[2]

The Kothaboon kingdom (also called Sri Kothabong) spanned the area from Muang Nakon Ratchasima (Korat) to the Isan region and into Laos (from today's Vientiane to Champasak). The capital of the Kothaboon kingdom was Takek. It was located near the borders of modern-day Savannakhet and Khammoun, which are provinces in modern Laos. Kothaboon was in power from the first century B.C. until the latter part of the 7th century A.D. The Khmer kings governing Kothaboon bore the title *pra suriyavongsasittidet* (พระสุริยวงศาสิทธิเดช).[3]

Geographical Factors

Thailand is divided into four major regions: (1) the Central region, comprising mainly the Chao Phaya River and all of the lower valleys of the Wang-Ping, Yom, Nan, and Pasak rivers; (2) the South, spanning areas of the Malay Peninsula from Phetburi to the border of Malaysia; (3) the North, including the northern hills and the northern valleys of the Ping, Wang, Tom, and Nan rivers; and (4) the Northeast (also known as the Isan region), consisting of the Korat Plateau, the areas southwest of the Mekong Valley bordering Laos.

The Northeast or Isan region is positioned between latitude 4 degrees and 18 degrees north and between longitude 101 degrees and 105 degrees east. The Petchabun range, the Donphrayayen (jungle), and Phanom Dong Rek (jungle) separate the Korat Plateau from the rest of Thailand. Excluding a few hills in the northeast, the Isan region is primarily a territory of gently rising and falling terrain, varying in altitude from 300 to 600 feet above sea level. The whole region is drained by the Mekong, and smaller rivers, namely the Mun and Chi, which run into the Mekong.

The Northeast or Isan is the largest of Thailand's four regions. Today it covers one-third of the country's land area, consisting of 170,266 square kilometers. In addition, according to a recent population statistical research report conducted on the 16th of August, 2005, the Isan region has a population of 21,292,944 – one third of the country's total population of 62,219,969.[4] About 95 percent of the people in the Northeast speak the Isan dialect (mainly, the Thai-Lao language). According to Charles F. Keyes, Professor of Anthropology and International Studies and Director of Northwest Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Washington, the

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[2]Ibid., 6-7.

[3]Ibid., 7.

[4]Thai Department of Local Administration, 2005.

Isan possess linguistic and cultural traits distinct from the Central Thai and closely related to the Lao living across the Mekong in Laos.[5]

The common designation for the Northeast region is "Isan," referring to the people living in the region of Northeast Thailand. The word "Isan" is a translation of the Pali-Sanskrit word meaning "northeast."[6] According to Paitoon Mikusol, a Thai socio-cultural anthropologist and historian from Sukhothai Thammathirat University, Bangkok, archeological findings in Ban Chang in modern-day Udonthani province indicate that ancient civilizations may have existed in the Northeast as long as 5,000 years ago.[7]

The Northeast has been considered strategic politically since 1960. Because the northern and eastern Isan areas border Communist Laos, Thailand has considered this area a security risk. In order to secure its borders against the spread of communism from Laos and from government rebel groups seeking safe ground, Thailand signed an agreement with the United States of America in 1963. This agreement provided a way for the two countries to work together closely to secure the stability of Isan, to prevent any spread of communist ideologies, and to hinder any political movements against the Thai government.[8] The Thai government declared the provinces and districts bordering Laos to be "security sensitive" areas and has been pouring resources into the area to promote development. The government hopes to create an economically stable area and, therefore, prevent the possible spread of communism into the region.

Suthep Sounthonpesat, an anthropologist from Chulalongkorn University, described the people living in the Northeast as characteristically different from the people living in Central Thailand; they are much more similar to the Lao people in Laos.[9] This marked similarity to the Lao has led some to call the Isan, "Thai-Lao," meaning that they are Lao individuals living in Thailand. Sounthonpesat expressed this idea as follows:

> Even though history shows a separation of land (where the Lao people were living) between Thailand and the French region that separated the Lao people, the main characteristics of the Lao people in Laos and the Isan (Thai-Lao) people in Thailand remain the same (trans. from the Thai by the author).[10]

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[5]Charles F. Keyes, "Peasant and Nation: A Thai-Lao Village in a Thai State" (Ph. D. diss., Cornell University, 1966), 23.

[6]Phaitoon Mikusol, "Social and Cultural History of Northeastern Thailand from 1868-1910: A Case Study of the Huamuang Khamen Podong" (Ph. D. diss., University of Washington, 1984), 23.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Suthep Sounthonpesat, "*Punha pak tawun auk chiang nua* (The Problems of the Northeast - ปัญหาภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ)," (in Thai) ed. Suthep Sounthonpesat (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1968), 1-2.

[9]Ibid., 3.

[10]Ibid., 7.

The Isan in the Northeast and the Lao in present-day Laos have almost indistinguishable linguistic and cultural traits. Historically, the ancestors of both the Thai-Lao (also called the Isan) and the Lao living in present-day Laos lived together in different Lao kingdoms.[11]

The majority of the Northeast population is Isan (Thai-Lao), with 95 percent related to the Lao across the Mekong. The other minority groups include the Thai-Khmer, Mon-Khmer, Meo-Yao, Kui, Phutahi, Saek, Yo, So, Black Tai, White Tai, and others.[12] The Isan are more similar to the Lao than any other minority group living in the Northeast.

Twat Punnotok, an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok, stated: "The Lao of the Lower Mekong Valley are similar to the Thai in language, religion, and ancient governing system, but the two races differ in their present culture" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[13] The majority of Isan inherited the culture of the Mekong Valley. Afterward, they resettled and mixed with the original local peoples in the Isan region. The native local peoples in Isan also received some cultural influences from the Mekong Valley.

During the Rottanakosin period, the Lao from east of the Mekong (modern-day Laos) migrated for two primary reasons. One was primarily political, the other stemmed from occupational needs. This resettlement during the Rottanakosin period included most of the present-day Northeast region of Thailand, and resulted in an Isan people who still retain most of the Mekong Valley culture.

To fully understand the Isan of the Northeast, it is therefore important to understand the *chareet prapaynee* (traditions or customs-จารีตประเพณี) – the beliefs, social norms, and philosophy of life of the Mekong Valley culture. These customs continue to form the basis for the common practices of Isan daily life in the Northeast. The development of the Mekong Valley culture has continued to flow from the kingdom of Lan Chang in Laos. It is interesting to note that most Isan literature and writing produced by local Isan scholars of the Mekong Valley continues to retain the pattern or model of Lan Chang's literature, especially regarding *kwamchua* (beliefs-ความเชื่อ) and *prapaynee* (customs-ประเพณี).

Prior to the advent of Buddhism, there are indications that the early Lan Chang people may have had a form of monotheism as implied by the quote below by Mayoury Ngaosrivathana and Kennon Breazeate. Mayoury Ngaosrivathana, who earned a Ph.D. in Law from the University of Paris and serves as the general manager of Drs. Mayoury, Pheuiphanh and Sons, Legal Counsel Office, Vientaine, Lao PDR, and Kennon Breazeate, who earned his D.Phil. in Southeast Asian history from the University of Oxford and serves as Projects Coordinator, East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, describe Lan Chang's primitive religion:

> The worship of images was, in those times, unknown to them; uncorrupted as
> they were with the superstitions of other nations. The open sky was their

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[11]Keyes, "Peasant and Nation," 25.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Tawat Punnotok, *Wanakam tongtin* (Regional Literature - วรรณกรรมท้องถิ่น) (in Thai) (Bangkok: Ordean Store Publisher, 1982), 155.

temple; and they adored one being, whom they esteemed above all things, under the name *commander*. They had some imperfect notion touching the origin of things; but held that this inferior world would be renewed; and that there were sixteen other worlds or kingdoms under heaven, one subordinate to the other.[14]

Ngaosrivathana and Breazeate indicate in the quotation above describing the Lan Chang's early religion that the worship of images was unknown to them and that the open sky was their temple. Also, they adored One Being (caps added) whom they called *commander* and esteemed above all things. This description, however, appears to the author to be closer to monotheism than to nature worship. If, however, their early religion was monotheistic in form, it could have over time deteriorated into nature worship. Ngaosrivathana and Breazeate then go on to describe the subsequent transition from nature worship to Buddhism as follows:

> Presently after the disciples of Shaka (the Buddha) arrived in this [Lan Chang] kingdom, the Lanjans [Lan Chang] saw themselves surrounded with temples consecrated to idols, priests named *Talapoy* [Buddhist monks], destined to their service.[15]

After the arrival of Buddhism, the Lan Chang and the Mekong Valley culture intermingled the religious beliefs and practices of Animism (the worship of spirits) with those of Buddhism. Archeological findings of the *hin thang* (horizontal stones-หินตั้ง) and the *hie hin* (jar stones-ไหหิน) in Thailand and adjacent Laos indicate that the worship of spirits in the Indo-China region was practiced from the pre-historic period until the arrival of Buddhism.

According to Tatsua Hoshino, an independent researcher, it was a common pre-historic practice of the peoples of the Indo-China peninsula to use the *hin thang* (หินตั้ง) (horizontal stones) to fence off areas for conducting animistic ceremonies or for burial grounds for people of their tribes or groups.[16] After the introduction of Buddhism into the Indo-China region, the animistic sacred areas of the *hin thang* (หินตั้ง) were replaced with holy places in which to perform Buddhist ceremonies.[17]

Centuries before receiving Buddhism, the Isan people used the *hin thang* (หินตั้ง) to set boundaries for sacred areas. Yet, most significantly, the Isan used the *hin thang* (หินตั้ง) as a place for burying the dead, especially those of importance within the group. Viravong explains that 3,000 years prior to the arrival of Buddhism, the belief systems of the different ethnic groups in the Indo-China peninsula were based on ancestral worship.

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[14]"The Kingdom of Laos: An Edited Reprint of the 1759 Universal History," in *Breaking New Ground in Lao History*, ed. Mayoury Ngaosrivathana, and Kennon Breazeale (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2002), 191.

[15]Ibid., 192.

[16]Tatsuo Hoshino, "Wen Dan and Its Neighbors: The Central Mekong Valley in the Seventh and Eight Centuries," in *Breaking New Ground in Lao History*, ed. Mayoury Ngaosrivathan and Kennon Breazeate (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2002), 28.

[17]Ibid., 31.

After Buddhism had established itself in the Isan area, the worship of ancestors became integrated into the Buddhist-animistic belief systems of both peoples as well as other ethnic groups throughout Southeast Asia. Viravong further states that the finding of the *hin thang* (หินตั้ง) throughout Thailand and Laos has led to the conclusion that people groups on both sides of the Mekong continually interacted with one another from the pre-historic period up to the present time.[18]

The *hie hin* (ไหหิน), or jar stones, were discovered in 1884 during a map survey by James Fitzroy McCarthy. The age of the *hie hin* (ไหหิน) (jar stones) was estimated to be about 3,000 years old. Human remains and other tools found in the jar stones led to the conclusion that the people of the Isan region used the *hie hin* (ไหหิน) for the ceremonial burial of their dead.[19] Both the *hin thang* (หินตั้ง) (horizontal stones) and the *hie hin* (ไหหิน--jar stones) suggest that ethnic groups in Laos and Thailand, including the Isan, have been practicing spirit and ancestral worship from early on in their history, as they do today. The arrival of Buddhism in Lan Chang and Isan did not erase this practice.

The Four Stage Diffussion of Buddhism from India into Isan Culture

In this section, the key phases of Buddhism's diffusion from India to the Isan region and an inquiry into the factors related to this religious expansion will be presented. An exploration into the integration of Buddhism into the Lan Chang's religious belief systems will provide the groundwork for understanding today's Isan belief systems and their resulting worldview values which are tied directly to the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี) or the *hiit-kong* (customary laws-ฮีตคองประเพณี) of the Isan's predecessors in the Lan Chang kingdom.

The First Diffusion Phase

This study will begin with the initial entrance of Buddhism into Laos. Isan was formerly considered part of Lan Chang; therefore, Buddhism's appearance in Lan Chang truly marks the beginnings of the Isan's Buddhist history. Evidence seems to indicate that these initial encounters with Buddhism began in Lan Chang's early recorded history.

The Laos' first exposure to Buddhism occurred when they were still in the Muang Ngailao of the Nongse kingdom in southern China. At that time the Nongse kingdom was ruled by China. In A.D. 57, the Chinese sent a diplomatic delegation to India to study Buddhism and to bring it to China. Three years later, the Chinese diplomats returned from India with Buddhist statues, Buddhist scriptures, and Buddhist Mahayana monks.

According to Martin Stuart-Fox, Professor of History and Head of the Department of History, University of Queensland, Australia, shortly after Buddhism's arrival in China, the Chinese ruler, Mingthi, converted and became a strong supporter

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[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid., 33.

of Buddhism and promoted it throughout China and its neighboring kingdoms. The Lao king of the Nongse (หนองแส) kingdom, Khun Luang Leamou (ขุนหลวงลีเมา), also became a Buddhist in A.D. 69. He became the first recorded Lao king to accept Buddhism. After Nongse fell under the complete control of China, the Lao people continued moving southward.[20]

During the 6th and 7th centuries A.D., Indo-China (or Mainland Southeast Asia) was dominated by the Khmer. The power of the Khmer empire extended even to Chiang Saen, which is modern-day Northern Thailand. The Khmer ruler of Chiang Saen was Khun Chuang (ขุนเจือง), who battled the Vietnamese over Chiang Kwang (modern-day Northern Laos) and eventually conquered and controlled the region. The Vietnamese unsuccessfully tried to retake Chiang Kwang and then requested the assistance of Khun Lo from Muang Tan. Khun Lo consented and met the military forces of Khun Chuang. After killing Khun Chuang in battle, Khun Lo pursued his forces to Luang Prabang. Khun Lo then attacked and took Luang Prabang and established the Lan Chang kingdom in 757 A.D.

In 731 A.D., a Lao ruler, Khun Barom Ratchachao (ขุนบรมราชาราชเจ้า), established a kingdom in Muang Kalong (เมืองกาหลง) or Muang Tan (เมืองแถน). After Khun Barom Ratchacho's death, his son Khun Lo (ขุนลอ), became the ruler of Muang Tan.

Subsequently, the Lao moved southward from southern China and resettled in Luang Prabang. Most of the Khmer were pushed back to Muang Nan and some to Vientiane. The Khmer who remained in the mountains when the Lao forced the Khmer from the area were called Khmu, Ka, or highland Lao.

The Lao have been in the region of Indo-China under the kingdom of Lan Chang (ล้านช้าง) since the Khun Lo period. Yet, there is no historic evidence of Buddhism among the Lao who migrated from the kingdom of Nongse or Muang Tan.

Lan Chang established their capital in Luang Prabang (formerly called Chiang Thong or Muang Sua) and enthroned kings to rule over the Lao and other ethnic peoples within their territory. Lan Chang prospered and flourished for 500 years under the rule of 22 Lao kings.

In 1316, Fa Ngiew (เจ้าฟ้าเงี้ยว), the 22nd king of Lan Chang, had a son named Fa Ngum (เจ้าฟ้างุ้ม). Because of strange circumstances surrounding his birth, Fa Ngum was placed in a raft with his care-takers and floated down the Mekong until he reached Cambodia. The Khmer king of Cambodia adopted him at the age of 6 or 7 and reared him in the king's court according to the teachings of the Theravada branch of Buddhism.[21] When Fa Ngum came of age, the Khmer king gave one of his daughters, Keaw Kengya, in marriage to him.

It was during this same period, in 1257, that Muang Sukhothai (a former city in the Khmer sovereign territory) was made the capital of the Thai kingdom.

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[20]Martin Stuart-Fox, "On The Writing of Lao History: Continuities and Discontinuities," in *Breaking New Ground in Lao History*, ed. Mayoury Ngaosrivathan and Kennon Breazeate (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2002), 19.

[21]Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 29.

Soon after its establishment, Sukhothai became increasingly more and more powerful and began pushing the Khmer southward.

In 1282, under the strong leadership of Ramkhamhaeng (ขุนรามกำแหง), Sukhothai expanded its power, replacing the Khmer domination over the eastern *muang* (provinces-เมือง), such as Korat and Roi Et. The Khmer continued to lose ground until eventually they could no longer defend themselves against the expansion of the Thai kingdom. The Khmer empire was finally pushed back to the tip of the Indo-China peninsula, known today as Cambodia. The Thai kingdom began replacing the Khmer empire as the dominant power and ruling Central Thailand and the Northeast.

In the capital city of Sukhothai, Ramkhamhaeng declared Pali Buddhism as the official Thai religion. D.G.E. Hall, Professor Emeritus of the History of Southeast Asia, University of London, makes the following statement to describe religious life in Sukhothai:

> The king, we were told, with his Court and all his magnates, practiced the religion of the Buddha with devotion. From all this, however, it is not surprising to learn that on the south side of the city there is a hill (Khao Luang) on which dwelt the most important of all the spirits in the country, P'ra Khap'ung, and that the ruler of Sukhot'ai made regular ritual offerings at this shrine in order to ensure the prosperity of the realm.[22]

It is evident by Hall's remarks that the Sukhothai people and their ruler worshipped Buddha in combination with the worship of spirits. The syncretism of Buddhism and Animism (the worship of spirits) has been commonly practiced throughout the history of Thailand.

Quoting Coedes, De Casparis and Mabbett describe the combination of spirit worship and Buddhism in Sukhothai in the thirteenth century, referring to the hill site where the spirit, Phra Kapung, resided beside a spring that issued from a mountain:

> If the prince who is sovereign in Muang Sukhothai worships this spirit properly and presents it ritual offerings, then this country will be stable and prosperous; but if he does not present ritual offerings, then the spirit of this hill will no longer protect or respect this country, which will go into decline.[23]

Meanwhile, in 1349, the Khmer king in Angkor, Cambodia, gave 33 year old Fa Ngum an army of 10,000 men at his request. His mission was to reclaim his father's kingdom in Luang Prabang. He conquered the principalities successfully and organized them into *muang* (provinces-เมือง) and was crowned king of Lan Chang in June 1354.

Fa Ngum expanded Lan Chang and formed a vast kingdom. It extended from the border of China to Samlor, below the Mekong rapids at Kong Island, and

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[22]D.G.E. Hall, "Early Siam: Mons and T'ai," in *A History of South-East Asia*, Macmillan Asian Histories Series (London: Macmillan, 1981), 190-191.

[23]J. G. De Casparis and I. W. Mabbett, "Religion and Popular Beliefs of Southeast Asia Before c. 1500," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tarling (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 284.

from the Vietnamese border to the eastern escarpment of the Korat Plateau. The Isan region, which had been taken by force from the Khmer by the Thai kingdom of Sukhothai, was surrendered to Fa Ngum by Uthong, the Thai king of Ayuttaya. He had founded Ayuttaya in 1350, after Sukhothai was rendered powerless against the Burmese. Punnotok agrees that during the period of Ayuttaya, Thailand did not directly include the Isan region. However, he mentions the land of Lan Chang in the context of its political relationship with Ayuttaya. Therefore, it appears that the Isan region was under the rule of Lan Chang during the reign of Fa Ngum.[24]

After expanding Lan Chang as far as he possibly could, Fa Ngum established five laws for the people living there, including those dwelling within the Isan region. The rules were given in Vientiane in 1358, after the conquest of the entire territory - including Lan Chang and the Isan region.[25] One of these five laws required that all villages and *muang* (เมือง) in Lan Chang send a representative to report to the Lan Chang king and pay homage to him every two months.

Each citizen was required to travel to Chiang Dong and Chiang Thong Pown (Luang Prabang) every third year to pay homage to the king. While there they worshipped and offered sacrifices to the various spirits as required by the Lao law. Some of the spirits mentioned were the assorted spirits of *tan* (sky-แถน), spirits of *fa* (heaven-ฟ้า), spirits of the Lao ancestors, witches, guardian spirits of mountains and rice fields, and other sundry spirits.[26]

In the second month of every year, the law required that each person in Lan Chang return to his village or town. In the third month of every year, each person was required to travel to Muang Chawa. If anyone disobeyed, he or she was labeled a renegade and considered to be deceiving and disrespecting the king. Worship and offerings to the spirits (*phi*) of *fa* (ฟ้า) and *tan* (แถน) were demanded by the king's paternal ancestor, Fa Luang Ngom (*puchao faluang ngam*-ปู่เจ้าฟ้าหลวงโง่ม).[27] Thus, the decree mandating nationwide spirit worship and obligatory respect for the Lan Chang kings was given by Fa Ngum.

Since prehistoric times, the Lao have participated in the *phi fa* (ผีฟ้า), the *phi tan* (ผีแถน), and ancestral worship as a direct result of the Chinese who greatly influenced the Lao when the two lived together in China. The Lao embraced Buddhism while living in China in the Lao Nongse kingdom in A.D. 69. Many generations later after the migration southward from southern China to Lan Chang (Luang Prabang), the Lao Mahayana Buddhist beliefs began to disintegrate. Eventually the Lao returned to their animistic beliefs and practices which involved the worship of diverse spirits.

The worship of the *phi fa* (ผีฟ้า), the *phi tan* (ผีแถน), and ancestor worship all gained popularity and flourished during the reign of Fang Ngum. Commoners from each ethnic group, government officials, and the royal families regularly worshipped and made offerings to the various *phi* (spirits). Daily religious sacrifices were offered both inside the king's court and throughout the kingdom. These sacrifices included

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[24]Punnotok, *Wanakam tongtin*, 26.

[25]Viravong, *Prawatsat lao*, 52.

[26]Ibid., 54.

[27]Ibid.

the killing of elephants and water buffaloes in order to appease the *phi dom* (the spirit - ผีด้ำ).

These ceremonies dedicated to the worship of spirits grieved Keaw Kengya, the queen of Lan Chang. As a former Buddhist originally from Cambodia, she was only familiar with worshipping Buddha and making offerings to the Buddhist statues and monks. She observed the people of Lan Chang worshipping spirits and offering animal sacrifices, and Keaw Kengya decided that she could not participate in these Lao religious practices.

The queen, therefore, demanded that Fa Ngum give her permission to go to Angkor, Cambodia, and to bring Buddhism to Lan Chang so that she might practice Buddhism. If Fa Ngum refused she promised to return to Angkor, the land of her father. Fa Ngum approved and sent a delegation to the Khmer king, who was his father-in-law. He requested that the Khmer king send monks to propagate Buddhism in Lan Chang. Upon receiving the request, the Khmer king responded favorably. In 1359, he sent two Buddhist teachers, Maha Pasamonthataratchao (พระมหาปาสมันตเถระเจ้า) and Maha Thep Lanka (พระมหาเมพลังกา), along with 20 other monks and three scholars of Buddhist scriptures, to take Buddhism to Lan Chang and to propagate this religion throughout the region.

The Second Diffusion Phase

The king of Angkor donated a Buddhist statue named *prabang* (พระบาง) for the people of Lan Chang to worship. The king also sent Buddhist scriptures, a plant from a Bo tree, and a variety of skilled artisans to craft Buddhist statues, pagodas, and temples from cement, steel, and gold. He also sent 5,000 other Khmer people to assist and serve the monks, the Buddhist teachers and scholars, and his daughter, Keaw Kengya, the queen of Lan Chang. This encompassed the largest Buddhist missionary undertaking in Southeast Asia at that time.

When the delegation arrived in Luang Prabang, Fa Ngum began by constructing a temple for the Buddhist teachers and monks. The temple was to be used as a center from which to propagate the teachings of Buddhism. The king named it Pasamun Temple (วัดปาสมันต์) after the first Buddhist teacher, and this name remains today. When the temple was completed, the Buddhist teacher, Maha Thep Lanka, began to instruct the people of Lan Chang to worship Buddha and to follow his teaching. As the queen of Lan Chang, Keaw Kengya was designated as the upholder and propagator of the Buddhist religion. Shortly after its arrival, Buddhism was firmly established in the Lan Chang kingdom and has continued to thrive up through the modern era.[28] This event marks the second advent of Buddhism into the Lan Chang kingdom and culture.

Toward the end of his reign, Fa Ngum encountered numerous problems. He was challenged in both the political and religious realms. Popular resentment toward Fa Ngum continued to build, and in 1373 he was exiled to nearby Muang Nan where he remained until his death.

In 1393, Fa Ngum died, and his son inherited the throne and the title King Samsenethai. Samsenethai became a very powerful king and enthusiastically propagated the teachings of Buddhism. He built the Buddhist temple *Wat Keo* (วัดแก้ว),

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[28]Ibid., 57.

which remained a strong religious center for propagating Buddhism for many years. He also built a pagoda to store the bones of his father which had been carried back from Muang Nan.[29]

The Third Diffusion Phase

From 1516 to 1548, Photisarat reigned in the Lan Chang and once again Buddhism was emphasized in the region. Many of the beliefs (*kwamchua*-ความ เชื่อ) and customs (*prapaynee*-พระเพณี) of Buddhism in Lan Chang originated from the Lana kingdom (which today is modern-day Northern Thailand) during the reign of the Mongrai dynasty. The religious and cultural art forms found in the temples of Lan Chang were also inherited from the Lana kingdom (which is today's Northern Thailand).

The Lana kingdom learned the tenets of Buddhism from the royal court of Sri Lanka. It is interesting to note that even after receiving Buddhism, the Lana local beliefs in Animism remained strong.[30] This syncretism was especially evident during the reign of the Lao king, Fangkaen, when the people's beliefs in Buddhism were mixed with Animism. Fangkaen held to and regularly practiced Animism.[31]

According to the Lao chronology, while Buddhism was spreading from the Lana to the Lan Chang, two Lana kings - Muangkeo (1487-1525) and Muangkesklao (1525-1538) - were ruling over the Lana kingdom. These kingdoms shared a close relationship, and Buddhism in Chiang Mai (the capital of Lana) was growing to its apex. The monks became great scholars of the Buddhist scriptures and much Buddhist scriptural knowledge was dissimilated among the religious followers.

Buddhist Literature and Culture

Buddhist literature and writing were also at their peak in popularity.[32] During this time there was extensive cultural exchange between the two kingdoms; and the citizens of both kingdoms were intimately involved with one another. Accentuating these already close ties, Photisarat married the daughter of Mungkesklao, the king of Lana, and had a son named Lord Chaisetthathirath, who later ruled over Lana. This strengthened the unity between the two kingdoms.

During his reign, Photisarat sent a petition to Lana requesting that the famous monk Thepmonkkontara (พระเทพมงคลเถระ) relocate to Lan Chang to live and work. He also asked that he bring with him the important 60 volume Buddhist Scripture known as the *Tripitaka* (three baskets-พระไตรปิฎก). Photisarat's goal was to spread Buddhism throughout Lan Chang. Because of this religious endeavor, Photisarat was considered to be the most devout of all Lao kings.

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[29]Ibid., 62.

[30]Punnotok, *Wanakam tongtin*, 22.

[31]Ibid., 19

[32]Ibid., 20.

Intensifying his religious fervor, Photisarat proclaimed a tighter ban on spirit worship in 1527, particularly the *phi tan* (ผีแถน) and the *phi fa* (ผีฟ้า) spirits. Though the prohibition against these spirits had been in place since pre-historic times, it had never been enforced. Furthermore, he built Buddhist temples on the sites of the spirit shrines.[33] Buddhism experienced its greatest growth in Lana during this period, surpassing even the period of its origination in Lan Chang.

In 1548, when Photisarat died, his son, Chaisetthathirath, decided to abdicate his throne in Lana and return to Lan Chang to succeed his father. Chaisetthathirath came back to Lan Chang with an entourage of important Buddhist scholars, the Emerald Buddha, and the Lana way of life. To enable Lan Chang to gain a sturdy foundation in Buddhism, the kings had large numbers of Lan Chang's religious scholars study Buddhist scriptures from the Lana scholars.[34] Most of the Buddhist scholars in Lan Chang were tutored in Lana.

Three Main Sources of Religion: Animism, Buddhism and Brahmanism

In this same era, the Lana writing system also infiltrated Lan Chang, particularly the Isan region. It is, therefore, not uncommon to hear Isan stories which are identical to stories told in Northern Thailand and derived from the former Lana kingdom. These stories were not as popular in Central Thailand as they were in the Northeast. The regional popularity of the Isan literature stems from local approval of the beliefs of the Isan. These writings expressed popular attitudes and values.[35]

It is important to note that Isan writings and literature were derived from three main sources and influences. The first main source was Animism, emphasizing belief in invisible spirit entities. The second main source was Buddhism, emphasizing monks, written Scriptures, and ostentatious idols and temples.[36] The third very siginificant source was Brahmanism from the Khmer Empire since most of the cosmology and spiritual power issues are rooted in it. Not surprisingly, spirit worship, Buddhist philosophies, and Brahmanistic cosmology harmonized and syncretized (*kromkrun*-กลมกลืน) well among the Isan of the Northeast. De Casparis and Mabbett make a similar observation: "It is possible to see small-scale territorial cults of this sort surviving beneath the mantle of imported Indian religion in other parts of the region [Southeast Asia]."[37] Then they explain this syncretism in more detail: "With the advent of Buddhism, burial mounds turned into Buddhist stupas and the tree spirits, blithely integrated into Buddhist observance, turned into *sodaban* (โสดาบัน), followers of the Buddhist teaching who were on the path to salvation."[38]

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[33]Wikepedia, *Photisarath*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/ index.phd?title=Photisarath&printable=yes>.

[34]Punnotok, *Wanakam tongtin*, 156.

[35]Ibid., 176.

[36]Ibid., 175.

[37]De Casparis and Mabbett, "Religion and Popular Beliefs of Southeast Asia Before c. 1500," 282.

[38]Ibid., 283.

The fourth time Buddhism appears in the Lan Chang and the Isan region of the Northeast was with the arrival of Dvaravati culture which brought the ideas of Brahman statecraft to Southeast Asia throughout the Isan region on both sides of the Mekong. Historian D.G.E. Hall described Dvaravati's artistic remains as "unmatched by anything produced in mainland South-East Asia as early as the fifth and sixth century A.D."[39] Hall further states that the Dvaravati culture exerted tremendous influence in Lan Chang and that it was the earliest radiating center from Southeast Asia of Hinayana (Pali) Buddhism(พุทธศาสนา นิกาย หินยาน).

The Fourth Diffusion Phase

From Nakon Pathom, the earliest capital of the Mon civilization some sixty-five kilometers west of Bangkok, the Dvaravati's Buddhist culture spread all over Thailand and over parts of Burma where the Mon settled.[40] The oldest Mon Buddhist inscription was found near Nakon Pathom, no later than 600 A.D.[41]

From the eleventh century, early Mon states shared their Theravada Buddhism with the various expanding kingdoms which they conquered throughout Southeast Asia and the Indo-China peninsula.[42] As Thai kingdoms were born they naturally inherited the Mon cultural and religious Theravada Buddhism. Thus, from the beginning Theravada Buddhism predominated.

Since A.D. 557, Buddhism had spread from the Central region of Thailand to the area of Nong Han Noy (Udonthani) and Nong Han Luang (Sakon Nakon). From Nong Han Luang, Buddhism stretched into the district of That Panom, Nakon Panom province in Northeast Thailand. A recognized historian on Isan history, Therm Wipakpanokich believes that the Panom stupa was constructed to house the bones of Buddha, and it also became the center of Buddhism during its earliest expansion into the Mekong Valley.[43] According to Viravong, Buddhism provided

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[39]Hall, "Early Siam: Mons and T'ai," 183.

[40]Ibid.

[41]De Casparis and Mabbett, "Religion and Popular Beliefs of Southeast Asia Before c. 1500," 294.

[42]Ibid., 295.

[43]According to Therm Wipakpanokich in *Prawatsat isan* (History of Isan-ประวัติศาสตร์อีสาน) (in Thai), the original name Nakon Panom was in Laos on the other side of the Mekong in modern-day Laos. In the past when the king of the Kothaboon kingdom ruled the old Nakon Panom, he received a religious founder (*somdet pra borom sasada*–สมเด็จพระบรมศาสดา). When the king of Kothaboon passed away, Phaya San became the ruler of Kothaboon. When *somdet pra borom sasada* (the Buddha) passed away, Phaya San gathered four phaya (wise rulers) to build a tomb to keep the remains (relics-อุรังคธาตุ) of *somdet pra borom sasada* (สมเด็จพระบรมศาสดา) in *phu khampa* (orphan mountain-ภูกำพร้า), the present site of the That Panom stupa (Nakon Panom province, Northeast Thailand), under a Bo tree. According to the legendary record, there existed a small kingdom or city called Muang Maruk Nakon (มรุกขนคร). Around B.C. 43, the last king of Maruk Nakon dishonored the That Panom stupa and was

cohesion. It pulled together different ethnic groups, who naturally worshipped various kinds of spirits, and enabled them to come together as worshippers of Buddha – living as one religious people group. Therefore, Buddhism became the rallying point where diverse societies and lifestyles formed one Mekong Valley culture.[44] The ethnic groups in the Isan and Mekong Valley included the Lao, the Thai, and other hill tribes.

One interesting aspect of Indian civilization's influence on Southeast Asia can be observed in the way it was introduced. In each historic period Buddhism was first sponsored by a royal family or a member of the ruling class. De Caparis and Mabbett agree with this assessment: "It is now generally thought that the influence of Indian civilization, including religion, should mainly be attributed to endeavors by some Southeast Asian elites to assimilate important elements of Indian culture."[45] De Caparis and Mabbett further explain that by the beginning of the Christian era, Southeast Asian countries, particularly Thailand and Lan Chang (Laos), had reached a level of civilization that allowed the local kings or chieftains to choose those forms of Indian religion which were consistent with, or could be adapted to, their own beliefs and practices.[46]

The Franco-Siamese Treaty

Under the bold leadership of Auguste Pavie, the French consular official in Luang Prabang, the French planned to acquire the Lao territories which were under the control of Bangkok by appealing to the claim that some of the Lao regions had been part of Vietnam.[47] In 1907, under military pressure by the French, Bangkok was forced to sign a treaty called the Franco-Siamese Treaty giving the territories on the east side of the Mekong over to the control of the French.

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cursed. Now every March, the peoples on both sides of the Mekong (Isan and Laos) come together for festivals, offerings, and to conduct worship of the That Panom stupa.

When the Buddha passed away in India, Pra Mahakaspatara (พระมหากัสสปะ เถระ), (the chief of Buddha followers) together with his 500 disciples, took his bones to be buried in *phu khampa* (orphan mountain-ภูกำพร้า). The followers were happy to build the stupa and challenged all the people in the area, both in the villages and in the *muang*, to participate in the construction. The That Panom stupa is now over 2,500 years old. Afterwards, there was a famine for seven years and the people had nothing to eat because they could not produce or raise animals; and, therefore, the ruler of Nong Han Luang moved the Khmer people back to Cambodia until not one Khmer village was left.

[44]Viravong, *Prawatsat lao*, 40.

[45]De Casparis and Mabbett, "Religion and Popular Beliefs of Southeast Asia Before c. 1500," 281.

[46]Ibid., 282.

[47]Keyes, "Peasant and Nation," 28.

The treaty, however, did exclude the area west of the Mekong which was territory formerly belonging to the Central Lao kingdom, now present-day Isan.[48] Nevertheless, this treaty caused the separation of what was once Central Lan Chang into two territories: the Lao area on the east side of the Mekong and the Thai area on the west side of the Mekong, which became known as the Northeast region of Thailand. With the Franco-Siamese Treaty, however, the Isan region of the Northeast finally passed into the undisputed political control of the Thai kingdom.[49]

Since the location of Champasak and the area opposite Luang Prabang were on the right side of the Mekong, these two locations remained under Thai control. Subsequently, the French included these two areas in their protectorate. In 1907, while under French rule, the territories of the three former Lan Chang kingdoms--the Northern Luang Prabang region, the Central Vientiane region, and the Southern Champasak region, united to form a new country. That new country, *Laos,* was not recognized as a legal, single national entity until 1954, after World War II.[50]

Political Developments in the Twentieth Century

After the areas of the Mekong Valley were divided between the Thai and the French, the western half or right side of the Mekong (known as Central Lan Chang) remained under the rule of the Thai kingdom, and it became the Northeast region of Thailand. The eastern half of the former Central Lan Chang came under French control. The treaty of 1907 defined the boundaries between the Northeast and Laos and it remains the same today.

In spite of this separation, the Isan (Thai-Lao) of the Northeast and the Lao in Laos have remained closely related. Although all three former Lan Chang kingdoms have united to form the country of Laos, the total population of all the Lao (Isan or Thai-Lao) living in the Northeast remains seven times greater than of the Lao living in Laos.[51]

Since 1893, the Thai government has taken a special interest in the development of the Northeast in order to establish a secure and stable Thai national presence there. Nevertheless, the Northeast has remained an area of special concern for the Thai kingdom because of past problems involving its history, ethnicity, and geography. The Thai fear that these problems might lead to instability and weaken Thai national integrity.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the French threatened possible encroachment into Thai territory, and this was weakening the unity of the Thai nation. Since 1954, however, events developing in Vietnam and Laos seemed to indicate that the Communists might be using the

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[48]Sounthonpesat, "*Punha pak tawun auk chiang nua,*" 11.

[49]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 31.

[50]Keyes, "Peasant and Nation," 28.

[51]Keyes, "Peasant and Nation," 29; Sounthonpesat, "*Punha pak tawun auk chiang nua,*" 12.

separation of the Northeast and Laos as a vehicle for spreading Communism into the Thai kingdom.[52]

In 1932 Thailand became a constitutional monarchy, and therefore the people of Thailand began to take a more active role in governing their country. However, the constitutional monarchy lasted only seven years, and in 1939 the military took over and ruled the country again. However, with the parliamentary system in place for the first time, the people and leaders in every region of the country now had opportunities to voice various ideas, needs, and concerns. Since 1933, the parliament has been used as a political stage where the people can voice their concerns and grievances.

A new Thai constitution was approved in 1997, and the political condition of Thailand has been quickly evolving into a true democracy. As such, the people have been actively involved in the government and with their representatives. The political system based on power is gradually being replaced by a true democracy with the king as its main chief.[53] However, in September 2006, the progress toward true demoncracy had gone backward with Thailand's first military coup in 15 years when a faction of the military took control of Bangkok and suspended the 1997 constitution and declared martial law. In addition, both houses of parliament, the cabinet, and the Constitution Court were terminated.

Next to the political setback, the Isan region also experience social hindrances. According to the Prime Minister's Office, the social problems facing all of Thailand, including the Northeast, are poverty, drug addiction, family breakdown, crime, child abuse, and teenage violence.[54] Materialism and consumerism are now main characteristics of Thai society with many people preferring personal gain rather than pursuits that would benefit all.[55]

Economic Problems

When compared to other regions of Thailand, the Isan area experiences the greatest economic disadvantages. The standard or quality of living is much lower than in other parts of the country, especially as compared to the Central region of Thailand, which includes Bangkok. The annual gross national product for the Northeast is lower when judged against other regions, but the population growth rate in the Northeast is higher. This results in additional economic and social problems.

Lack of Water, Poor Soil, and Natural Resources

The alleged reasons for lower agricultural production in Isan are first, the porous lower soil that can not hold water and lacks proper nutrients; secondly, the

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[52]Sounthonpesat, "*Punha pak tawun auk chiang nua*," 13.

[53]*Rai ngan satatiti dan sasna kong pratet thai pe 2542* (Statistical Report on Religions in Thailand 1999 - รายงานสถิติด้านศาสนาของประเทศไทย ปี 2542), Report (Bangkok: Office of National Education, Prime Minister's Office, 1999), 21.

[54]Ibid., 37.

[55]Ibid., 40.

lack of water resources due to annual rainfall patterns. The Northeast has very little rain even during the rainy season.[56] The normal rainy or monsoon season begins in May and ends in September. Throughout the year, there is almost no rainfall at all. In some years, there is not sufficient rainfall for rice to germinate even once a year. In other years, there are floods because of too much rain in a short period of time, thus farmers are often unable to even plant rice.

Deficient water supply causes Isan farmers to consistently maintain a lower agricultural production rate and, thus, a lower rate of income. This subsequently creates a greater higher poverty level in the Northeast than in other regions of Thailand.[57] The Thai Office of National Education states: "Poverty still exists in families with children at the age of primary and secondary education" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[58] This Office further comments that poverty has become a barrier preventing these children from obtaining government-provided educational services. In 1999, 6.8 million people, making up 11.4 percent of the population, were considered to be in poverty. These facts are supported by the research done in 1995 by the Department of Social Science and Humanities, University of Khon Kaen, in Northeast Thailand, which states: "Even though the Isan culture serves as their distinct identity, the majority in the Isan region are living in poverty-stricken condition. This territory has the lowest income in the country, the lowest level of education, and does not have good health" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[59]

Low Standard of Living

In addition to having a comparatively lower income level and a lower standard of living than other regions of Thailand, the Northeast is experiencing a more rapid population growth than other regions. The lack of natural resources and the increased population have added tremendous pressures to the Isan economy and livelihood.[60]

Social Problems

Another main characteristic of the Isan people is that they are migratory by nature. In his research, Sounthonpesat found that the Isan have a clear tendency to

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[56]Keyes,"Peasant and Nation," 33.

[57]Sounthonpesat, "*Punha pak tawun auk chiang nua*," 19.

[58]*Rai ngan satatiti dan sasna kong pratet thai pe 2542*, 16.

[59]Sukanya Patrachai, Chob Dessuankoke, Sunee Leopenwong, Vilaiwon Somsoon, and Udom Buasri, "*Ong prakob nai kan dumnern chiwit kong chaoban moo ban pet dumbon ban pet amphoe muang chanwat khonkaen* (The Components of Life at Ban Ped, Ban Phet sub-district, Muang district, Khon Kaen province - องค์ประกอบในการ ดำเนินชีวิตของชาวบ้านหมู่บ้านเป็ด. ต บ้านเป็ด.อ เมือง จังหวัดขอนแก่น)," (in Thai) (A Research Report, Social Science and Humanities, Khon Kaen University, 1995), 1.

[60]Sounthonpesat, "*Punha pak tawun auk chiang nua*," 22.

migrate and resettle in new areas. The causes of their migration seem to be rooted in social and economic factors. This migration takes place within districts, provinces, and regions of Isan, as well as to other territories. Socially, the Isan migrate because of population density. Due to rapid population growth, the demand for living space increases. Economically, the Isan region has been suffering from low agricultural output due largely to the poor condition of the terrain, resulting in low-income generation.

As many parts of the region lack the natural resources needed to sustain the population, many Isan families periodically move to other locations where they can find alternative ways to support their families. The Darunee Funds for Education in Asia, an organization providing scholarships to students, has greatly helped the economic situation in all 19 provinces in Northeast Thailand. From 1992 to 1998, this organization has been able to provide annual scholarships to more than 14,500 children, thus allowing them to continue their education. This organization summarizes the situation in the Northeast as follows:

> The northeastern provinces of Thailand, known as the Isan Region, are among the most populated areas in the country but also the poorest economically. In the past, due to unequal distribution of income, people were forced to migrate to Bangkok hoping to find work.[61]

Because of the economic pressures and the lack of economic development in the Northeast, the Isan are forced to migrate to urban centers to find jobs.

Twelve Summary Conclusions

To better understand the present belief systems and resulting values of the Isan, the author has drawn twelve major conclusions from the background factors (historical, geographical, cultural, political, and religious as well as from the four-stage diffusion of Buddhism from India into Isan [Thai-Lao] culture). These conclusions help us to understand the background and cultural development of the Isan belief systems and their value system which together influence their decision making.

1. The significance of historical findings can not be overstated if one is to understand the development of the Isan belief systems. Realizing that Lao kings had embraced Buddhism in the Lao kingdom of Nongse in southern China as far back as A.D. 69 helps us to see that Buddhism was well received by the highest ranking ruler of the kingdom. Clearly he was not threatened by Buddhism, but rather viewed it as a potential benefit to his rule and people.

2. In Maung Tan and its founder Khun Barom, one sees the significance of holding on to the ancient beliefs of one's ancestors (animistic spirit worship) and honoring the religion of those who are directly related to the reigning king. In Isan culture, because of the cultural pattern established by Muang Tan, those empowered

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[61]*Isan – Northeast Thailand* 30 August 2005, Darunee Foundation <http://www.daruneefund.org/thailand.htm>

by birth to rule must also strive to honor their ancestors by encouraging ancestor/spirit worship.

3. Brahmanistic beliefs and practices are an integral part of the Isan belief systems. The background information provided describes how they came to the Isan region. Today the Isan belief systems contain elements of all three historic, religious streams of thought: Buddhism, Animism, and Brahmanism.

4. In this chapter, clarification is made as to how animist beliefs and practices were law in the Lan Chang kingdom for 500 years and how the kingdom flourished and prospered. As an official religion of Lan Chang, Animism became well established in Lan Chang kingdom, including the region of Isan. This point is extremely significant as the Isan and Lao people often refer to the *hiit-kong* (a customary law-ฮีตคอง) which was probably formed during those periods in Lan Chang. The command to carry on the traditions of the spirit cults was included in this customary law.

5. Understanding the Ramkhamhaeng's declaration of Pali Buddhism as the official religion of the Thai state, which at that time included part of the Isan region of Northeast Thailand, allows us to grasp the Isan's belief systems related to Buddhism which might have been influenced by the Pali Buddhism of Sukhothai. It also gives us the earliest account of how syncretistic or Popular Buddhism for the Thai and Isan people might have started. Additionally, it presents the real contrast between the Thai national religion of Buddhism and the Lan Chang (Lao) national religion of Animism.

6. An understanding regarding Fa Ngum provides a clear view of the development of the animistic beliefs of the spirit cults and the introduction of Buddhism in Lan Chang. While enforcing the worship of the spirit cults, Fa Nguan allowed the construction of temples and the development of Luang Prabang as the center of Buddhism. Again, the Lao of Lan Chang, a forerunner of the Isan of Northeast Thailand, seemed to be at ease with the syncretism of the animist beliefs of spirit cults and the religion of Theravada Buddhism. As a result, today's Isan possess a syncretistic mentality in their approach to religion. Another significant finding in regard to Fa Ngum was the custom of respecting, obeying, and living honestly and sincerely toward the king or ruler of the kingdom, which was displayed by willingly following the religion of the king. In this case, worshipping and sacrificing to the spirits which the king worshipped was required as an outward expression of one's respect, obedience, honesty, and sincerity to the king. To ignore the king's requirement to worship the animist spirits would be regarded as rebellion. Consequently, this sentiment still exists in the belief systems of the Isan of Northeast Thailand and the Lao of present-day Laos.

7. It can be easily inferred that because Queen Keaw Kengya had the title of The Defender and Propagator of the Buddhist faith, most of today's government officials or rulers at all levels of Isan or Thai society are equally perceived as the defenders and propagators of the Buddhist national religion. The king of Thailand also assumes this title.

8. Even though the Lao have always mixed Animism, Brahmanism, and Buddhism since at least the 13th Century, it was Samsenethai's policy to officially

recognize and allow animistic beliefs of the spirit cults while promoting Buddhism that helps us to understand the present-day Isan's religious behaviors. In today's Isan village communities, towns, and cities, the reality of spirit worship is recognized and allowed but the official religion encouraged by the government is Buddhism.

9. Potisarat's treatment of religions also gives valuable insight as to how the Isan expect their authorities to change. When Potisarat banned the animistic worship of spirit cults and favored only Buddhism as the official and recognized religion of the kingdom, the people did not rebel against his authority. To change or reduce the number of religious faiths was probably seen as the prerogative of the ruler of the kingdom. Authority in religious matters is entrusted to the ruler of the kingdom and not the citizens. This may explain the reluctance of the general population of Isan or Thailand to adopt a new religion or to convert to Christianity when the ruler of the country has not personally advocated the change. Even though Potisarat might try to ban the animist beliefs in the spirit cults, the *chareet prapaynee* (traditional customs) developed through the Isan's writing and literature recognized the two main sources of the religion of the people: Buddhism and Animism. Another significant finding involves the sponsors of the Buddhist religion. In almost every case, the sponsors of the Buddhist religion were the kings or rulers of the country. The "local" kings chose and imported the religion (Buddhism) which was consistent with or adapted to their own beliefs and practices. By way of contrast, Christianity was brought to Thailand by neither "local" people nor the "local" kings. In addition, the exclusive nature of the Christian religion is not consistent with or adaptable to the Isan's syncretistic Animistic-Buddhistic beliefs and practices.

10. One significant finding was that Buddhism provided cohesion to all the different groups who worshipped different spirits and yet were willing to worship only the Buddha until their nation developed into one political unit. The Isan's belief systems effectively reflect the function of Buddhism as a cohesive force to unify or harmonize the peoples. No religion has been able to unite the peoples of the Isan region in the way that Buddhism has. Thus, any religion which tries to replace Buddhism or animist beliefs in the spirit cults is perceived as the destroyer of unity and harmony.

11. Another important observation was that the Isan region has historically been ruled by a multiplicity of fluctuating kingdoms and in modern times has had multiple claimants - Cambodia, Thailand, and even Burma. This fact helps us to appreciate why the Isan people maintain only superficial relationships with those outside their own household, kinsmen, or village community. As a result, their religious belief systems and their decision-making processes seem shallow to many outsiders.

12. Finally, there is the significance of the Thai kingdom, which reclaimed the Isan region from Laos (formerly Lan Chang) but allowed it to continue governing itself according to the governing structure of the Lan Chang. As a consequence, the Isan region of Northeast Thailand demonstrates characteristics similar to the Lan Chang kingdom. This includes embracing both Buddhism and the animist beliefs of the spirit cults. Also, it relates decision making concerning religious matters to the domain of those in power and recognizes the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* or the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)* as the authority and stable force in the Isan's present village life

CHAPTER 2

THE BELIEF SYSTEMS OF THE ISAN PEOPLE

Introduction

Having inherited unique beliefs and concepts from the Mekong Valley and Lan Chang cultures, the Isan region of Northeast Thailand remains distinct from other regions of Thailand. Although the Isan people share a Buddhist religious heritage with other parts of Thailand, a number of their pre-Buddhism beliefs and traditional customs make them unique from the rest of Thailand. In order to gain an accurate understanding of the Isan people of Northeast Thailand, it is necessary to carefully analyze and evaluate their belief systems.

The Isan adhere to a folk religion which is comprised of the following rudimentary religious components: primitive animistic beliefs; ancestral worship; belief in supernatural powers, magic, amulets, auspicious time, and superstitions; Brahmanism; and Buddhism. These folk belief systems have helped the Isan to effectively organize, govern and control their society. The Isan developed these folk beliefs from their immediate natural surroundings and from the people they have had contact with. The Isan folk belief systems, therefore, has tremendous influence upon the Isan's way of life. Keyes describes the belief systems of an Isan (Thai-Lao) villager:

> If asked his religion, the Thai-Lao villager will reply without hesitation that he is a Buddhist (*phuttasatsanikason*-พุทธศาสนิกชน) or that he 'respects Buddhism' (*napthu phutthasatsana*-นับถือพุทธศาสนา). He sees no conflict between claiming to be a Buddhist and following other beliefs and practices that have no connection with the Triple Gems of Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. To him, religion (*satsana*-ศาสนา) is by definition otherworldly, concerned with one's cosmic destiny. In the Thai-Lao villager's belief system the various supernatural beings, soul-stuff, divination and manipulation of omens all belong to a this-worldly sphere and pose no challenge to Buddhism which belongs almost entirely to other-worldly considerations.[1]

To cope with their present existence, the Isan have implemented the traditional religious customs and beliefs of their ancestors. These beliefs include managing the world of the spirits or the *phi* (ผี) and other supernatural powers and beings that have immediate influence on the Isan's well being.

In this chapter the focus is on the Isan belief systems as they relate to the social and the governing values of the Isan people. These were derived from their religious belief systems and greatly influenced their decision-making process and various other concepts. Among them were the concept of the universe which included

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[1]Keyes, "Peasant and Nation," 192.

the creation of the earth and the creation of man as well as the concept of hell, heaven, and nirvana. In addition, their belief systems include both their animistic concept of the spirits (*phi*-ผี) and the divinities (*thevada*-เทวดา) as well as their Buddhistic concepts concerning karma, merit, reincarnation, and sin.

Another aspect of their belief systems is how their doctrine of sin relates to the doctrine of karma, reincarnation and the spirits as well as the meaning and practices of auspicious time, evil omens, and superstitions. Their sin doctrine also pertains to the practices of traditional customs and rituals (*chareet prapaynee*-จารีต ประเพณี). These traditional customs and rituals focus on three aspects of the Isan's observances: (1) those that relate to the calendar: (2) those that relate to life-cycle customs and rituals; and (3) those that are occasional customs and rituals. A study of the Isan's *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* is especially important because it reveals factors which make it extremely difficult for Isan people to convert to Christianity.

Beliefs Relating to the Universe

The focus of the study will be given to the Isan beliefs about the origin of the universe, relating particularly to the creation of the earth, man, heaven, hell, and nirvana. These beliefs form the basis of their value system and thus affect their decision making regarding religious matters.

The Creation of the Earth

The Isan received the majority of their worldview and beliefs from the Mekong Valley culture, and they share the same cultural heritage as the present day Lao. In the remote past, the Isan and the Lao belonged to the same kingdom called Lan Chang. Because of similar backgrounds, the Isan's view of heaven is closer to the views held by the Lao and the peoples of the Mekong Valley than the peoples of Central Thailand.

In regard to the origin of the earth, the past and present generations hold to three different views. The first view was passed down by the Isan ancestors who once occupied the kingdom of Lan Chang. The second view was influenced by Buddhism; and, the third view was probably lost in the process of oral transmission.

Phi-Tan Creation View (ผีแถน)

The first view states that the earth was created by the *phi tan (ผีแถน)*, which also is called the spirit of *tan* (แถน), *phaya tan* (พญาแถน), *tan fa luang* (แถนฟ้าหลวง), and *tan fa keun* (แถน). This view is held by Sengaroon Konkaponchai.[2]

According to Punnotok, this view was not influenced by Buddhism or Brahmanism but is a belief that has always been a part of the culture of the people of

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[2]Sengaroon Konkapongchai, *Wattanatam nai sungkom thai* (Culture in Thai Society - วัฒนธรรมในสังคมไทย) (in Thai) (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2005), 83.

the Mekong Valley.[3] Punnotok further states that when Buddhism first entered Thailand, it tried to combine Buddhism with the local Isan beliefs by stating that *phaya tan (พญาแถน)* or *phi tan (ผีแถน)*, who was believed to be the creator god, was the same person as Indra, the Hindu god, who rules over the second heaven, according to both the Buddhist and Hindu beliefs.[4]

This *phi tan (ผีแถน)* creation story was originally passed down by the Isan ancestors in the ancient period in the form of an oral tradition which is now recorded as an Isan legendary tale. This creation story was mainly held by Isan living in the region of the Mekong Valley.

The *phi tan (ผีแถน)* creation story differs drastically from the creation story of the people of the Chao Paya Valley, which includes Sukhothai, Ayuttaya, Thonburi, and Bangkok. Because of the influence from India, the culture of Chao Paya Valley maintains that Brahmin created the world.[5] There is also another creation story from the people of the Chao Paya Valley which has its base in Buddhism. This story states that before the earth came into existence, there was a compilation of basic elements in the form of a hot fluid substance. When the substance cooled down, it became the earth. When the *thevada (เทวดา)* sensed the odor of the land, they descended upon the earth and tasted the soil. The soil made the *thevada (เทวดา)* lose their supernatural power. As a result they could not return to *nirvana* (the highest level of heaven-นิพาน) and they became the first humans.[6]

Nature-Creation View

The second view of creation is represented by Supon Somjitsripunya, the Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the Ratchabut University of Mahasarakham in Northeast Thailand, who researched the worldview and beliefs of the Isan people. In 1984, Somjitsripunya found an important ancient Isan palm-leaf manuscript *patommoon* (ปฐมมูล), along with other manuscripts. During his research in the Isan provinces of Mahasarakham and Kalasin, he obtained valuable information on early Isan beliefs regarding the origin of the universe which embraced the spheres of earth, man, heaven, and hell.[7] Although the dates and authors of the manuscripts remain unknown, other information, such as the language and content of the writings, seems

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[3]Tawat Punnotok, "*Kwanchua peunban unsumpun kup witee chiwit nai sung kom isan* (A Local Belief Relating to Way of Life in Isan Society - ความเชื่อพื้นบ้านอัน สัมพันธ์กับวิถีชีวิตในสังคมอีสาน)," ed. Paitoon Sinlarat Pensri Dook, Piyanat Boonnak (in Thai) (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1985), 355.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid., 358.

[7]Supon Somjitsripunya, "*Lokkatat chow ban pak tawan auk sieng nua chak nung seu karm* (A Worldview of Rural Society from Short Palm-leaf Manuscripts in Northeastern Thailand - โลกทัศน์ชาวบ้านภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือจากหนังสือก้อม)," (in Thai) (Master's thesis, Srinakalinvirot Unversity, 1987), 43-49.

to give relative credibility to the authenticity of the manuscripts. The inscription on the *patommoon* (ปฐมมูล) was written in a *Thainoi* (Lao-ไทน้อย) script on palm leaves consisting of 32 sheets. Quoting Dr. Precha Pintong, an Isan scholar and linguist, who edited the *Isan-Thai-English Encyclopedia of 1989*, Somjitsripunya summarized their significance for information on early Isan life, customs and beliefs:

> The short palm-leaf manuscripts have a significant role for the Isan society because they have inscribed traditional customs that had been corporately prescribed or decreed in the form of *hiit-kong* [customary laws, regulations, or traditional customs-ฮีตคอง] as the Isan's way of life from the past to the present time (trans. from the Thai by the author).[8]

The manuscript *patommoon* (ปฐมมูล) describes the universe as being made up of three worlds—heaven, earth, and hell. The earth, consisting of water, land, and sky, was caused to come into existence by either the Word and/or by nature. Human and animal life forms were the next creation after the earth. According to those holding this view, hell had not yet been formed during the creation of the earth and mankind.

It has been suggested in the research that the first human beings neither had a religion nor held to any religious beliefs, but this would need to be verified from further research and study. At the beginning, human beings may not have been aware of a hell. The research additionally suggests that only after Brahmanism and Buddhism had arrived in Northeast Thailand did the Isan people become aware of the concept of hell.

Word-Creation View

The Word-Creation Theory is taken from the ancient palm-leaf manuscript *patommoon* (ปฐมมูล), which indicates that the *pratum* (Word – พระธรรม) caused the wind to blow on the space to bring forth the water and the land (This information is available in a translated form on Table 1). The *patommoon (ปฐมมูล)* manuscript seems to imply that the ancient Isan and Lao ancestors held to the Word-Creation View. The evidence seems to support the view that the belief in the Word-Creation View had existed and was held by the Isan ancestors from the ancient period as authenticated by the fact that it had been recorded on palm leaves in the *patommoon (ปฐมมูล)* manuscript.

Could it not be that the later Isan generations had shifted their focus to nature by reinterpreting the "blowing of the wind," as the cause for the creation rather than to the power of the Word? Further examination of the process of creation as stated in the *patommoon (ปฐมมูล)* gives support for the view that the cause of the wind blowing on the space and bringing forth the earth is attributed to the Word (*partum* - พระธรรม). If this were true, the Word would be the true force or power in the origin of all life forms and nature itself. This view, therefore, was probably lost in the transmission period from the ancient Isan period to later generations over the centuries.

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[8]Ibid., 3.

The Isan, along with the people of the Mekong Valley, believe that there was a first man and woman from whom all other Isan originated. This view is similar to the Christian belief regarding the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, who became parents to the human race.

According to Punnotok, the story of the creation of the first human couple "was not clearly explained and was not of importance in Buddhism" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[9] However, research findings show that different indigenous groups living in Thailand still have their creation stories concerning the first man and woman. These stories have been passed down from past generations to the present by word of mouth.

Although the people of the Isan and the Mekong Valley hold that the first man and woman were named Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasee, they do not all agree on how these human beings were created.[10] Here, the Isan mainly held to three views: (1) the Bottle-Gourd Theory; (2) the Nature-Creation Theory; and (3) Word-Creation Theory.

Bottle-Gourd View

The Bottle-Gourd Theory states that the first humans and the first animals were born from two large bottle gourds.[11] A large number of men, women, and all sorts of animals came through a hole from within the two gourds through which *phaya tan (พญาแถน)* or *phi tan (ผีแถน)*, who is the creator god and rain god, had chiseled. This creation account was indigenous to the region of the Mekong Valley prior to the arrival of Buddhism which then introduced another creation story.

The research findings also indicate that most Isan people believe that Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasee were the first human couple. In addition to believing that the first human ancestors were Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasee, the Isan also have stories of other lesser important ancestors, such as Pu Eum and Ya Perng. Even though the story of the original human ancestors existed in the memory of almost every Isan person, these first ancestors did not seem to have any role in providing protection for the Isan people. As a result, those original ancestors have had no lasting influence in the lives of the Isan people or of those in the Mekong Valley region. Today there is no trace of any ritual or festival still existing in the religious experience of the Isan that indicates that worship or offerings had ever been made to these first ancestors.

In terms of being reverent and fearful, the Isan seem to fear the *phi puta* (a spirit of a village founder-ผีปู่ตา), the *phi tan* (creator god and rain god-ผีแถน), and the *phi fa* (gods of heaven-ผีฟ้า) more than their first ancestors, Pu Sangkasa (ปู่สังกะสา) and Ya Sangkasee (ย่าสังกะสี). This fear is clearly demonstrated by their seasonal and annual offerings and their sacrifices to these *phi (ผี)* or spirits.

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[9]Punnotok, "*Kwanchua peunban*," 355

[10]Ibid., 359.

[11]Ibid., 356.

In addition, another group of Isan ancestors that have been remembered from the past by some Isan are Tao Lai, Tao Yer, Mae Yangam, and Mae Mot.[12] These ancestors are believed to be the spirits which are half *phi* (spirit) and half *thevada* (divinity). Since humans are thought to be created by *(ผีแถน)*, it is believed that he had ordered these ancestors to be born on earth in order to provide protection for humans from the oppression of evil spirits (*phi pret* – ผีเปรต) and monsters (*phi yuk* - ผียักษ์) and to prevent any natural catastrophies.

Nature-Creation View

The Nature-Creation View is based on evidence from the palm-leaf *patommoon (ปฐมมูล)* manuscript and the beliefs of the Isan villagers of Ban Nonglom village in Maha Sarakham province in Northeast Thailand. This view maintains that after the wind had caused the water and earth to be brought forth, other life forms such as humans, plants, and animals, were also caused to come into existence.[13] (Supporting information is available in Table 1.) The life forms included the first man and woman, Pu Sangkasa (ปู่สังกะสา) and Ya Sangkasee (ย่าสังกะสี).

Word-Creation View (เจ้าองค์พระธรรม)

The ancient Isan palm-leaf manuscript *patommoon (ปฐมมูล)* (ปฐมมูล sheet Number 2) found in the Ban Nonglom village reveals the worldview of the Isan ancestors regarding the origin of the first man and the first woman.[14] Verification of the Isan belief in the origins of the first human beings is found in the manuscript *patommoon* (ปฐมมูล), which was written in an Isan poetic style. The translation from Thai into English by the author of this dissertation is found in Table 1.[15] The Isan ancestors in the distant past had a creation account of the first man and woman. This ancient account found in the *patommoon (ปฐมมูล)* manuscript has many similarities to the creation account of the Bible. Man was created by the action of the Word (*partum* – พระธรรม) who caused the wind to blow on the water and the land in order to bring forth the first man and woman (according to Table 1).

The first man and woman are still known by the Isan as Pu Sangkasa (ปู่สังกะ สา) and Ya Sangkasee (ย่าสังกะสี). The knowledge of Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasee is preserved among the elders of the Isan village community. As the years passed, it would appear that the Word-Creation View was probably lost, swallowed, or overpowered by the Nature-Creation View and other prominent theories over the centuries.

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[12]Ibid., 360.

[13]Somjitsripunya, "*Lokkatat chow ban*," 84, 169.

[14]Ibid., 84

[15]Ibid.

TABLE 1

THE TRANSLATION OF THE *PATOMMOON* MANUSCRIPT

…มีแต่   อากาศกว้าง   มีอาจสังขยา   ได้นั้น

(There was only undeterminable vast space and void)

ไผอาจ   ปุนแปลนับ   เปรียบเพียง   พอยั้ง

(whoever has dared to calculate and compare it only comes to a halt)

มีแต่   วาโยเจ้า   องค์พระธรรม   เกิดก่อน

(There was only the wind but the Word was born first)

พัดเปล่งเปรี้ยง   อากาศไปมา

(causing the wind to blow the space back and forth like thunder)

บังเกิด   เป็นอาไป   ทั่วแดนเฟือนพื้น

(to bring forth water throughout the face of the earth)

จึงได้ว่า   สมุทรทัดสาน้ำ   องค์พระธรรมตกแต่ง …

(This was called the ocean which the Word had adorned.

(ปฐมมูล แผ่นที่ 1 / *patommoon* sheet Number 1)

…ลมพัดน้ำ   บังเกิดเป็นดิน

(The wind blew on the water to bring forth land)

แต่แผ่นดิน   แผ่นท่อฮอยไก้

(but the land was about the size of a *kai* shell)

พัดให้   เป็นต้นไม้   ต้นท่อลำเทียน

(The wind blew to bring forth trees the sizes of a candle)

พัดให้   เป็นคนหญิงชาย   อยู่ดินนำไม้

(The wind blew to bring forth woman and man who stayed within the land and the trees.)

ลมพัดน้ำ   เป็นดินสองแผ่น

(The wind blew on the water to bring two continents.)

(ปฐมมูล แผ่นที่ 2 / *patommoon* sheet Number 2)

(trans. from the Thai by the author)

The Concept of Hell

According to the ancient palm-leaf manuscript research findings of Somjitsripunya, the Isan of past generations believed in hell.[16] They believed that hell had many regions of different sizes and that it was designed for the *phi pret* (evil spirits-ผีเปรต) of the dead who had bad karma and lacked sufficient merit. The relatives who are alive on earth have to make merit by giving to and serving the Buddhist temples and monks in order to transfer that merit to them. The hope is that they can escape from hell and then be reborn on earth or in heaven.

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[16]Ibid., 169.

It was recorded in the manuscript *moonpatompunna* (มูลปฐมปันนา sheet Number 60) that the keeper of hell has a clerk who has two manuscripts for keeping daily records of the deeds of every human living on the earth. One gold manuscript is used for recording the names of every person who is participating in merit making. The other manuscript is made of steel paper and is for recording the names of those who are committing sin or *bap* (บาป).

The survey conducted by Somjitsripunya in 1984 at the Ban Nonglom village in Northeast Thailand shows that 100% of the people in that village believe in hell and were trying to avoid committing sin or *bap* (บาป) so that they could escape from it.[17] In addition, the findings reveal that 71% of the villagers of the Ban Nonglom village believe that if one has committed sin or *bap* (บาป), he will go to hell after he dies.[18] Therefore, the fear of being punished or suffering in hell is preventing the villagers of Ban Nonglom from committing sin or *bap* (บาป).

Another important indication of the consciousness of hell came from the elementary school children at the Mercy Christian School (established by the author in Nonprasert village in Ubonratchatani province in 2004) which became manifested during the chapel meeting on the 28th of November in 2006. The Mercy Christian School's director Piyapon Saiyasak was given a speech on the subject of hell to the student body of around 250, ranging from 1st through 5th grade. When asked who knew they would go to heaven, only about 20 children raised their hands. All of the children who raised their hands were children who attended church. However, when the school director asked those who thought that they would go to hell, surprisingly, approximately 70% of the children indicated by raising their hands that they would go to hell. When asked for reasons why they thought that they would go to hell, the children responded that they are not good children and did not commit good deeds (merit).[19] This shows that the children are being taught by their parents and others that hell is reserved for people who are bad and do not have enough merit or good deeds.

The Concept of Heaven

The Isan believe in heaven in addition to their belief in hell. Heaven is understood to be a dwelling place for the *phi fa* (ผีฟ้า) or the *thevada* (divinities or deities-เทวดา). Those who have acquired lots of merit are believed to be reborn as *thevada* (เทวดา) when they pass away.[20] The Isan call heaven *sawan* (สวรรค์) and also *muang fa* (เมืองฟ้า) and believe that heaven has many levels and is located above Mount Meru. The *Britannica Student Encyclopedia* explains Mount Meru:

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[17]Ibid., 170.

[18]Ibid., 182.

[19]Piyapon Saiyasak, "What Is Death?" in *Chapel's Meeting*, a Message (Ubonratchatani, Thailand: Mercy Christian School's Sanctuary Hall, 28 November 2006).

[20]Ibid., 91.

> In Hindu mythology a golden mountain stands in the center of the universe and is the axis of the world. This mountain, Mount Meru, is the abode of the gods. Its foothills are the Himalayas, to the south of which extends Bharatavarsha (Land of the Sons of Bharata), the ancient name for India.[21]

Heaven is a place of extreme happiness. However, according to their beliefs, those in heaven are still subject to the law of karma and the cycle of rebirth as much as those on earth and in hell. Komjitsripunya agrees: "Heaven is a land of ultimate happiness but still under the cycle of reincarnation. Heaven is not permanent but is still part of the cycle of death and rebirth" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[22]

Any human being who desires being reborn in heaven or any *thevada* (เทวดา) already in heaven should continue making meritorious deeds to insure that they will either be reborn as *thevada* (เทวดา) or remain as *thevada* (เทวดา) in heaven. As indicated in the *patommoon* (ปฐมมูล), anyone who observes religious precepts and performs meritorious works in a religion will be reborn in his next life as a *thevada* (เทวดา). Those who attain to this level will then dwell in one of the levels of heaven commensurate to his karmic power. Explaining the meaning of the manuscript *patommakup* (ปฐมกัปป์, sheet Number 11), Komjitsripunya states:

> Anyone who performs a small amount of meritorious deeds will be reborn in a lower level of heaven after death. Whoever has accumulated much merit will be reborn in a higher level of heaven when he dies (trans. from the Thai by the author).[23]

The 1984 findings of Komjitsripunya's research in Maha Sarakham province of Northeast Thailand conclude that 100% of the villagers of Bon Nonglan believe that merit they performed while alive on earth will continue to have efficacy by allowing them to be reborn in heaven.[24]

Also, the findings disclose another important ancient Isan belief which is that the making of merit was done in hope of attaining a better future life. Basing his position on the Isan manuscript *patomkup* (ปฐมกัปป์, sheet Numbers 10 and 11), Komjitsripunya asserts that "whoever performs and accumulates much meritorious deeds, if he is not reborn in heaven, will be reborn on earth as someone who is completely equipped with wealth, a respectable status, a noble rank, and a long life" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[25] This view is still shared by the Isan villagers of Ban Nonglom and also other parts of Isan.

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[21]Britannica Student Encyclopedia, *Mount Meru*. 23 October 2005, Britannica Encyclopedia Premium Service <<http://www.britannica.com/ebi/article-9329871>>.

[22]Komjitsripunya, "*Lokkatat chow ban*," 92.

[23]Ibid., 94.

[24]Ibid., 184.

[25]Ibid.

The universe, consisting of heaven, earth, and hell, is still under karmic power and is subject to the cycle of rebirth or reincarnation. At the same time it does not provide a final secure, happy place for either humans or the *thevada (เทวดา)*. All are still under the power and cycle of suffering, sorrow, and living on earth. The ultimate answer for the *thevada (เทวดา)* and humans is believed by Isan and other Buddhists to be nirvana. The Isan call it *nipan (นิพพาน)*, and it is considered to be the place of bliss without any desire, attachment, or suffering. *Nipan (นิพพาน)* is held to be a place beyond the power of karma, and it is not subjected to the cycle of death and rebirth. Basing his view of *nipan (นิพพาน)* or nirvana on the Isan ancient manuscript *moonpatompunna* (มูลปฐมปันนา), Komjitsripunya concludes that:

> *Nipan (นิพพาน)* is a place where all desire and suffering is extinguished. It is the highest ideal place in Buddhism because humans and animals in the three places, which are hell, earth, and heaven, still remain subjected to the endless cycle of death and rebirth. Whoever keeps accumulating merit will eventually reach *nipan (นิพพาน)* or nirvana, which is the highest place without the endless cycle of birth, aging, pain, and death (trans. from the Thai by the author).[26]

According to his survey, only 22% of the Isan villagers of Ban Nonglom even attempt to accumulate merit sufficient for reaching *nipan (นิพพาน)* or nirvana.[27] It is believed that one has to accumulate more merit than a *thevada (เทวดา)* in order to be able to reach *nipan (นิพพาน)* or nirvana. Also, before a person can reach *nipan (นิพพาน)* or nirvana, he has to be a Buddhist saint or a buddha.

In summary, the research on the belief systems relating to the concept of the universe indicates five significant points. First of all, the earth was believed to have been created by the *Phi-Tan*, caused by natural evolution, or caused by the wind which was caused by the Word. Second, the first man and women, Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasee, were believed to either be born from two large bottle gourds chiseled by *Phi Tan*, by cause of a wind, or by the action of the Word. Third, the Isan believe that hell was created for spirits of the dead humans who lack sufficient merit and have bad karma. The relatives or kinsmen can make merit and transfer merit to their dead loved ones in hell so that they can escape hell and be reborn on earth or heaven. Fourth, the Isan believe that only those who make merit can be reborn as one of the deities in heaven. However, those who are in heaven are subjected to the law of karma and the cycle of rebirth as are those on earth and those in hell. (The universe, consisting of heaven, earth, and hell, is still under the power of karma and those who dwell in any of them are still subject to the cycle of rebirth.) Fifth, the Isan believe that nirvana to be a place beyond the power of karma and those who dwell in it are not subjected to the cycle of death and rebirth. Not only does a person have to accumulate sufficient merit but also he has to be a Buddhist saint or a buddha in order to reach nirvana.

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[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid.

Beliefs Relating to their Concept of the Divinities (*thevada*) and the Spirits (*phi*)

As an ongoing part of the investigation into the belief systems of the Isan, the Isan's concept of the spirits (or *phi-*ผี) and the divinities (or *thevada-*เทวดา) will now be considered. A clear understanding of these concepts is important to further comprehend their effects on the formation of the Isan's core values or value system. These values consequently in turn directly influence the decision-making process for conversion to Christianity.

The Meaning of the Concept of Divinities (Thevada) and Spirits (Phi) and Its Syncretism with Buddhism

The belief in the *phi* (spirits-ผี) and the *thevada* (divinities-เทวดา) has its root in the ancient days of Isan during the Lan Chang kingdom when the Isan's ancestors migrated from Southern China. These animistic beliefs are connected to the Isan's basic need for survival, safety, and prosperity.[28] Commenting on the Isan's beliefs in the *phi (*ผี*)* or spirts, Seri Phongphit, Director of the Thai Institute for Development and a Lecturer at Thammasart University in Bangkok, and Kevin Hewison, a Lecturer at Hong City University, conclude the following:

> Villagers believe that *phi (*ผี*)* exist, even if they have not seen them. They will say that '*phi (*ผี*)* exist because they have meaning', rather than '*phi (*ผี*)* exist because they can be scientifically proven.' The meaning of *phi (*ผี*)* is essential to individual, family, and community.[29]

The meaning that a belief in the *phi (*ผี*)* can give is enormous in terms of security, assurance, and survival for an individual, his family, and his community. The belief in the *phi (*ผี*)* provides the gateway back to the ancient Isan way of life. Thus, they serve as the continuum between the ancestors and the great-grandchildren, which are the present-day Isan and Lao people. In addition, the *phi (*ผี*)* has become a reminder and major enforcer of the Isan way of life according to the hope and aspiration of their ancestors. Instead of looking forward to a precarious future, the Isan are looking to the ancient past for answers to their present survival. Waranan Boonnak, a Thai graduate student who was conducting research on the *phi pob (*ผีปอบ*)* in 1990 in the Isan region of Northeast Thailand, explains this very clearly:

> The villagers' belief has a connection to their way of life which leads to happiness. The establishment of the village's regulations or rules regarding *phi (*ผี*)* and the performances of different rituals were for the purpose of control. It is

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[28]Praariyanoowat Khemchareetera, "*Katti kwanchua kong chow isan* (The Beliefs of the Isan - คติความเชื่อของชาวอีสาน)," ed. Pensri Dook, Paitoon Sinlarat, Piyanat Boonnak, and Warapon Chiewchaiyasak (in Thai) (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press), 6.

[29]Seri Phongphit and Kevin Hewison, *Village Life: Culture and Transition in Thailand's Northeast* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001), 55.

believed they will help a society to survive as long as the people in that community still hold and keep the relationship from dying out.[30]

As inherited from the Isan ancient belief, handed down from the Isan's ancestors, the Isan of modern-day Northeast Thailand continue the traditional beliefs in the *phi* (ผี) and the *thevada* (เทวดา) in every aspect of daily life. As survival and safety became the basic instinct of the Lan Chang and Isan peoples, the belief in the *phi* (ผี) and the *thevada* (เทวดา) today provides security and assurance to the Isan people as they endeavor to make their homes in Northeast Thailand. This view is shared by Praariyanoowat Khemchareetera, Buddhist abbot of the Mahachai Buddhist Temple in Mahasarakham province in Northeast Thailand and a reputable authority on Isan beliefs, who expresses the reason for the Isan's belief in the *phi* (ผี) as follows:

> The need for safety became the basis for the beginning of a belief in *thevada* [divinities-เทวดา] and spirits [*phi*-ผี]. This then causes the Isan to hold to a belief in the spirits and to pray to the spirit of the forest, the spirit of the land, and the spirit of the woods (trans. from the Thai by the author).[31]

The belief in the *phi* (ผี) and the *thevada* (เทวดา) was present from the Isan ancient period prior to the acceptance of Buddhism as the religion of the Isan people. Before the arrival of Brahmanism and Buddhism, the Isan region, as well as the whole of Thailand, had Animism or the worship of spirit cults as the dominant belief. Konkapongchai agrees that "the spirits and mysterious powers in nature are an ancient belief of the Thai people that has existed prior to the spread of Brahmanism and Buddhism into this region" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[32]

When Buddhism arrived on the scene in the Lan Chang and Isan regions, it adapted itself to the local religion and many of their beliefs were integrated almost without any change to the Isan belief systems. As Buddhism accommodated itself to answer the Isan basic instinct for survival, safety, and prosperity (happiness), it provided additional support for the continuation of the ancient Isan beliefs in the *phi* (ผี) and the *thevada* (เทวดา). It almost seems incomprehensible to think that Buddhism will survive in the Isan region apart from Animism with its belief in the *phi* (ผี) and the *thevada* (เทวดา). The two streams of belief uphold each other. Khemchareeter seems to support this idea:

> In Buddhism, when conducting a ritual for bringing happiness or good luck, there will be an invitation for the monks to come and chant the Buddhist sacred verses [mantras]. As part of and prior to the Buddhist ritual, there would be first a ceremony for assembling the *thevada* (เทวดา) in order to announce and invite

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[30]Waranan Boonnak, *Wattanatam kwamchua peunban isan phi pob* (Isan Indigenous Religous Culture: Phipob Spirit), Srinakalinvirot Unversity (Mahasarakham, Thailand, 1989), 8.

[31]Ibid., 4.

[32]Konkapongchai, *Wattanatam nai sungkom thai*, 82.

the *thevada* (เทวดา) to come and listen to the chanting (trans. from the Thai by the author).[33]

The inseparable syncretism between the belief in the *phi* (ผี) and Buddhism is further seen in a comment by Boonnak. The phi *pob* (ผีปอบ) is an evil spirit that enters a person's body and consumes the host's entrails. Boonnok's research shows the importance of the *phi* in both religions when he says, "Holding Buddhism as a national religion does not lessen the importance of the belief in the *phi* (ผี). On the contrary, Buddhism supports the belief in the *phi* (ผี)" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[34] The two belief systems are believed to fit together nicely without any discrepancies. In regard to the co-existence and the complementary state of the belief in the *phi* (ผี) and Buddhism, Sathiane Koset, a recognized Thai scholar in Thai angelology and demonology, expresses this:

> In the former days, the reason people lived together in happiness was because they believed that the *phi* (ผี) provided protection for them. Afterward, when they began to embrace Buddhism, they still were holding on to the belief in the *phi* (ผี). Even though Buddhism teaches that the dead will be reborn in heaven or in hell according to the effect of their karma which they have accumulated, the villagers still hold that the dead paternal and maternal grandparents will not go anywhere [not even to be reborn]. They believe that the spirits of the dead grandparents remain in their house....The villagers do not perceive that there is a conflict in holding to Buddhism and the *phi* (ผี) at the same time because, when their grandparents were alive, they were Buddhists. Even after they have passed away and became the *phi* (ผี), they are still the *phi* (ผี) which hold to Buddhism (trans. from the Thai by the author).[35]

A further description of Thai spiritual beings—both the *thervada* (divinities-เทวดา) and the *phi* (ผี) good and evil spirits—is given in the remaining part of this section. This is done in order to provide important background information on their belief systems. The three categories of the thevada (divinities) will be discussed briefly first. Then a consideration of the many diverse kinds of good and evil *phi* spirits will be dealt with in some detail.

The Thevada (Divinities)

The word *thevada* (เทวดา) derives from Indian terminology to designate a divinity or deity of some sort which dwells in one of the heavens. Prior to the introduction of Indian influence and the arrival of Buddhism into Thailand, the Isan and the Lan Chang peoples were already familiar with the *phi fa* (ผีฟ้า). These spiritual

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[33]Khemchareetera, "*Katti kwanchua kong chow isan*," 5.

[34]Boonnak, *Wattanatam kwamchua peunban isan phi pob*, 9.

[35]Sathiane Koset, *Muang sawan le phi sang thevada* (Heaven, Spirits, and *Thevada* - เมืองสวรรค์ และผีสางเทวดา) (in Thai) (Thonburi: Rung Wattana Press, 1972), 309.

forms designate any form of divinity, deity, or good spirit, which lives in heaven. Koset agrees with this position when she says:

> Originally, we called the good *phi* (ผี) as the *phi fa* (ผีฟ้า) because they reside in heaven. Afterward, we received the terminology *thevada* (เทวดา) from India; and, therefore, we replace the word *phi fa* (ผีฟ้า) with the word *thevada* (เทวดา) to refer to the good *phi* (ผี) (trans. from the Thai by the author).[36]

Since the Isan region and other parts of Thailand were once former territories of the Khmer empire, they have thus inherited much of the irreligious and governing influence from Cambodia. One of these is the concept of the king as a divinity or deity. The spirits of the dead kings are considered the *phi fa* (ผีฟ้า) or the *thevada* (เทวดา). Koset cites an ancient inscription as support for this view as follows:

> In the ancient time, the Khmer kings were held as the *thevada* (เทวดา) as appears in the inscription of Khun Ramkhamhaeng [a Thai king of Ayuttaya] who referred to the Khmer king during that period as the '*phi fa chaomuang* (ผีฟ้าเจ้าเมือง) Srirasothon Pura.' The *phi fa* (ผีฟ้า) in this case is the *thevada* (เทวดา) (trans. from the Thai by the author).[37]

Authorities such as Koset state that there are three categories of the *thevada* (เทวดา) that dwell in heaven.[38] These categories are generally accepted by Isan scholars and religious leaders, though the common Isan villager would not discern these categories. The interest of the villagers lies in the effects of the powers of the *thevada* (เทวดา) or the *phi* (ผี) rather than in their origin.

The first category of *thevada* (เทวดา) is the *visoothep* (วิสุทธิเทพ) which consists of the Buddha and his saints. They are placed in this category because they are believed to possess beauty and holiness as the *thevada* (เทวดา). The second category of the *thevada* (เทวดา) is the *sommatithep* (สมมติเทพ) which is comprised entirely of earthly kings. They are held as possessors of powers similar or equivalent to the *thevada* (เทวดา). The third category of the *thevada* (เทวดา) is the actual *thevada* (เทวดา) who are dwelling in heaven.

The Phi (Good and Evil Spirits)

The term *phi* (ผี) refers to spirits which have power over human beings and includes both the beings of supernatural powers and also the spirits of dead human beings. At death, the soul (*winyan*-วิญญาณ) of every human being is believed to turn into the *phi* (ผี). As opposed to the *thevada* (เทวดา), which are perceived to have only a benevolent nature and behavior, the *phi* (ผี) can be both benevolent and malevolent.

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[36]Koset, *Muang sawan le phi sang thevada*, 355-56.

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid., 311.

The law of the village is sometimes referred to by the Isan as the "custom or way of the spirits." The Isan call it the *prapaynee phi (ประเพณีผี)*. The *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* in this instance means traditional customs. The Isan villagers will generally fear the *prapaynee phi* (ประเพณีผี) more than they will fear the statutory law or the legal codes of Thailand. This fear stems from the fact that if they displease the *phi (ผี)*, they will immediately experience the effects of their actions which may be a sickness, an accident, a disaster, or even death.

It is believed in Isan that when a young female virgin in a village is sexually violated, the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* will be enraged and will cause the parents of the young woman to become seriously ill. A proper ceremony or ritual must be conducted to soothe the anger of the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* and to request forgiveness. Thus, in this case, the *prapaynee phi (ประเพณีผี)* becomes the law for controlling the behavior of people in the *phi*'s territory. Regarding the *prapaynee phi (ประเพณีผี)*, Boonnak notes:

> If we look beyond the belief [of the *prapaynee-ประเพณี*] we will see a law. A regulation or a *phid phi* (offending the spirits-ผิดผี) will be the controller or determinant for relationship between humans....Thus one can apply this regulation [of *phid phi-ผิดผี*] to govern a village (trans. from the Thai by the author).[39]

The use of the belief in the *phi (ผี)* as a controller or rule for regulating the behavior of the Isan people is fairly widespread. It is common to hear an Isan mother who is trying to silence her crying baby say, "Don't cry! If a *phi (ผี)* hears your cry, it will come and devour your liver, kidney, intestines, and stomach." Surasak Siri, Director of Latboaluang Ratchawittayalai School, conducted graduate research on the Isan rice farming people in the Don Du village of Na Du district in Maha Sarakham province in Northeast Thailand. He makes a similar observation in the following quote:

> The rice-farming work of the Isan is a productive system that must depend on nature. Since the rice farmers could not bring equilibrium to nature, they came up with a large number of ceremonies regarding agricultural production....These ceremonies reveal the underlying beliefs in the *phi (ผี)* and the supernatural. These beliefs not only create a motivation for their work but also serve as something to which to fasten one's life. Thus it is comparable to an apparatus for controlling behavior and for the performance of ceremony so that the villagers will not conduct themselves in violation of the *chareet prapaynee* [traditional customs-จารีตประเพณี] (trans. from the Thai by the author).[40]

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[39]Ibid.

[40]Surasak Siri, "*Wattatam kan tum na kong chow isan* (The Culture of Isan Rice Farming: A Case Study of Ban Don Du, Tambon Hua Dong, Amphoe Na Dun, Maha Sarakham - วัฒนธรรมการทำนาของชาวอีสาน)," (in Thai) (Masters' thesis, Srinakalinvirot Unversity, 1989), 57.

In summary, the belief systems of the Isan in regard to the concept of the spirits and divinities are enormously important to the understanding of the traditional core values of the Isan in relation to the supernatural world. First of all, these animistic belief systems meet the Isan's basic need for present survival, safety and security and prosperity as well as tie them back to their ancient past to the teaching and practices of their ancestors (which originated in Muang Tan), while Buddhism primarily addresses future needs. Second, the concept of the *phi fa* or the *phi tan*, given by the Isan's ancestor prior to Buddhism, and the *thevada*, borrowed from India, form the Isan's concept of heavenly spiritual beings. However, the Isan's belief in the general *phi* (spirits) has always been part of the culture which is necessitated more by the need for their existence than by the reality of these spiritual beings. The *phi* serves specific functions in order to respond to the needs or to regulate and control their behavior. Third, the Isan schedule different merit-making activities which include those rituals or ceremonies to the *phi* because of the Isan's belief that proper relationships through rituals or ceremonies to the *phi (ผี)* or the *thevada (เทวดา)* can result in enormous benefits in terms of protection and prosperity. At the same time, ignoring certain rituals or ceremonies to placate the *phi* or the *thevada* can result in misfortune.

Beliefs Relating to the Concepts of Karma, Merit, Reincarnation and Sin

The examination of the belief systems of the Isan will proceed on at this time relating to their Buddhist concepts. The areas under analysis will be the relevancy of practical Buddhism, the concepts of karma, merit and reincarnation, and the concept of sin. These concepts play an important role in forming their religious core values or value system which in turn directly influences how the Isan people make daily life decisions, including the decision to convert to Christianity.

The Relevancy of Practical Buddhism

Instead of approaching the subject of Buddhism philosophically, the author of this dissertation will briefly deal with Buddhism from a practical standpoint. Only a small number of Buddhist concepts which are relevant to the topic under investigation will be dealt with here.

As a philosophical religion, Buddhism is quite elaborate and intricately involved. However, the Isan region of Northeast Thailand does not perceive or practice philosophical Buddhism. Rather, the Isan only view Buddhism as a way or means to continue the teaching of their ancestors and to acquire a better position for life in the next world. The Office of the National Cultural Commission of the Ministry of Education in Thailand, simply defines the essence of Buddhism as follows:

> In Buddhism man is as he has made himself; man will be as he makes himself;
> the individual has to strive by himself to be pure of heart and deed for his own

salvation without the intervention of God or any other divine being. This is the gist of Buddhism.[41]

Buddhism in its syncretistic form with Animism, spirit worship, and Brahmanism, which is called Popular Buddhism in Northeast Thailand, has a tremendous influence upon the worldview and way of life of the Isan people. In 1978, Pornsak Pongpao, the Associate Professor of Political Science at Chulalongkorn University, conducted a study on the worldview of the people of Northeast Thailand. His research findings show that Buddhism has more influence on the present worldview of the Isan than the beliefs in omens, spirits, and other beliefs.[42]

In the following section, the author will look at four concepts of Buddhism as they relate to the Isan decision-making process. The first three concepts— karma, merit, reincarnation—will be considered in their relationship to each other; then the concept of sin will be considered separately.

The Concepts of Karma, Merit, and Reincarnation

Karma comes from a Sanskrit word meaning action. Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, an honorary director of Nalanda Pali Postgraduate Institute in Nalanda, India, defines karma as follows:

Karma means all good and bad actions. Karma refers to all kinds of intentional actions whether mental, verbal, or physical, that is, all thoughts, words, and deeds. In its ultimate sense karma means all moral and immoral volition.[43]

An American anthropologist, Jasper C. Ingersoll, Adjunct Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Catholic University of America, describes the meaning of karma in accordance to the understanding of a Thai villager:

When referring to his entire *bun* [merit-บุญ] and *bap* [sin-บาป] accumulated during all of his past lives, a villager speaks of his *gam* (karma) or of his *gam gao* (old gam). One's karma is both good (*gam dii-กรรมดี*) and evil (*gam mai dii-กรรมไม่ดี* or *gam chuea-กรรมชั่ว*).[44]

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[41]Tapanee Nakornthip, *Essays on Cultural Thailand*, (Bangkok: The Office of the National Culture Commission, 1990), 97.

[42] Waraporn Toona, "*Lokkatat nai wannakam isan ruang sang sin chai* (The Worldviews in Isan Literature: Sang Sin Chai - โลกทัศน์ในวรรณกรรมอีสานเรื่องสังข์ศิลป์ชัย)," (in Thai) (Master's thesis, Mahasarakham University, 2000), 24.

[43]Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, "The Orgin and Expansion of Buddhism," in *The Path of the Buddha*, ed. Kenneth W. Morgan (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956), 85.

[44]Jasper C. Ingersoll, "The Priest and the Path" (Ph. D. diss., Cornell University, 1963), 185.

Contributions, offerings, and services to the Buddhist monks and temples are believed to result in merit or good karma.[45] The general belief among the Isan Buddhists is that this merit is mainly acquired in relation to a service or donation given to a Buddhist monk or a temple. There is still a controversy over how much, if any, merit a person acquires by giving and helping another human being. However, Ingersoll seems to think that a person may be able to obtain merit from helping or giving to another human being as long as the action is done "within some sort of ritual context."[46] Nevertheless, an impovished Isan farmer can acquire the most merit through ordination as a Buddhist monk.

The sponsoring of the entire enclosure of a Buddhist temple, which is believed to result in the most merit, is reserved for wealthy individuals. Tambiah ranks six merit-making activities which are held to result in the highest quantity of merit. The ranking for the activities, beginning with the highest merit are the following: (1) completely financing the building of a Buddhist temple; (2) either becoming a monk oneself or having a son become a monk; (3) contributing money to the repair of a Buddhist temple or holding a *katin (กฐิน)* festival; (4) giving food daily to the monks; (5) observing every *wunpra* (Buddhist holy days-วันพระ); and (6) strictly observing the five Buddhist precepts for laymen.[47]

According to the worldview of the Isan, a person naturally has an endless number of rebirths; and his karma covers all his prior lives and also his present life. The karma from his previous and present lives will determine his future life which he has no control over. It is held that a person's condition or disposition in any given moment is a product of his accumulated karma. On the one hand, a person's bad karma (*bap* or sin-บาป) will drive him to be reborn at a lower status or at a disadvantaged position in his next life. On the other hand, his good karma (*bun* or merit-บุญ) will elevate him to be reborn at a higher status or at an advantageous position in his next life.

In theory, a person does not need to improve on his present conditions since they are determined by his past karma. His present good deeds or merit (*bun-*บุญ) are believed to be applied to the total accumulation of merit which will then determine his position in his next life or in further rebirths. Instead of improving one's present-life misfortune or suffering, an Isan normally will emphasize the act of merit making by giving to and offering services to a Buddhist monk or temple. By so doing, he believes that he will not have to experience the same present-life misfortunes or sufferings in future lives and rebirth.

Thus, many Isan believe that nothing can be done to change one's present condition as it has already been determined by his past karma. However, Maha Thera U Thaittila, the Professor in Buddhist Philosophy at the University of Rangoon in Burma, points out three classifications of karma:

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[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid., 186.

[47]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 146-47.

There is karma which ripens in the same life-time, karma which ripens in the next life, and karma which ripens in successive births. These three types of karma are bound to produce results as a seed is to sprout.[48]

Even though, philosophically, karma can direct its effects on the present life, the Isan of Northeast Thailand still perceive and place a heavy emphasis on storing up good karma (merit or *bun*-บุญ) for their next life.

The Isan make merit (*bun*-บุญ) in the hope of being reborn into a higher status or in a more favorable disposition in their next life as well as desiring to avoid being reborn as an evil *phi* (ผี) or spirit. Phongphit and Hewison testify to this fact that "people have to make merit during this life in order to be reborn as good *phi* (ผี) or as human again, and not as a bad *phi* (ผี), wandering around, causing trouble wherever they go."[49]

The Isan seem to have another important motivation and benefit for merit making in this present life: to transfer the merit they have aquired to their deceased family members or ancestors. This would then allow the departed ones to be reborn into a better condition. If enough merit is transferred to them, they can then be reborn as a *thevada* (เทวดา) in heaven.

This karmic process affects one's past, present, and future life, and, it is additionally applied to all beings, whether they are *manoot* (human-มนุษย์), the *phi* (spirits or ghosts-ผี) or the *thevada* (divinities-เทวดา), in heaven, earth, or hell. Ingersoll agrees:

> Covering the entire spectrum of living creatures in heaven, on earth, and in hell, the karmic process…continues for any given creature through countless lives as it moves up and down the scale according to its merit [*bun*-ผี]. The Thai term *chiwid* (ชีวิต) means life in a secular sense, referring only to the present earthly life, whether it be good or bad, long or short, easy or difficult. The term *chaad* (ชาติ) is used to refer to a past, present, or future life in the long karmic sequence. The events of a person's previous *chaad* (ชาติ) are as important as those of his current *chaad* (ชาติ) in determining his fortunes. Similarly, one's deeds in his current *chaad* (ชาติ) will become important determinants of his future *chaad* (ชาติ).[50]

This view is also supported by Kashyap, who affirms, "The cycle of rebirths, in which all existent beings are caught, is governed by the law of karma."[51]

The Concept of Sin

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[48]Kashyap, "The Orgin and Expansion of Buddhism," 88.

[49]Phongphit and Hewison, *Village Life*, 55.

[50]Ingersoll, "The Priest and the Path," 189.

[51]Kashyap, "The Orgin and Expansion of Buddhism," 24.

The Isan define sin as it relates to the Buddhistic and animistic belief in the *phi (ผี)*. In its relation to Buddhism, sin is seen in terms of karma and reincarnation and in relation to the belief in the *phi (ผี)*, sin is perceived as displeasure to the *phi (ผี)*.

Sin as Viewed in Relation to Karma and Reincarnation

One of the fundamental ways prescribed by Buddhism for its Isan followers to avoid sin, which is bad karma or *bap (บาป)*, is to observe the five Buddhist religious precepts for laymen. These precepts given by Dutch anthropologist B. J. Terwiel, the Extraordinary Professor of Language and Cultures of South-East Asia and Oceania at Leiden University in the Netherlands and also the Chair of Thai and Lao Languages at the Universität Hamburg, are translated from the Thai into English as follows:

I undertake (to observe) the rule of abstinence from taking life.

I undertake (to observe) the rule of abstinence from taking what is not given.

I undertake (to observe) the rule of abstinence from wrong sensuous pleasure.

I undertake (to observe) the rule of abstinence from false speech.

I undertake (to observe) the rule of abstinence from intoxicants which cause a careless frame of mind. [52]

These precepts are intended to prevent the bad karma or *bap (บาป)* which will definitely have future consequences on one's disposition in his next life and future rebirths. In reality, however, the precepts are easily broken by any Isan who has undergone the ceremony in order to receive them. Once broken, the precepts will produce bad karma which will then have repercussions on his next life and further rebirths. Commenting on the attitude and motivation of the rural Thais for keeping the five Buddhist religious precepts, Terwiel states:

It is not for fear of breaking a precept that people refrain from killing animals or are rather embarrassed about doing so. After all, there is no apparent reluctance to break other precepts. The main reason why the killing of animals is surrounded with manifestations of guilt feelings appears to lie in the belief in the *karmic* repercussions of the act of killing.[53]

Terwiel further states another possible minor reason for keeping the first of these five religious precepts for laymen:

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[52]B. J. Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series, vol. 24 (Studentlitteratur: Curzon Press, unkown), 189-90.

[53]Ibid., 196-97.

The axioms regarding rebirth, which does not exclude the possibility that a human can be reborn in the form of a chicken, a dog, etc., certainly add to the uneasiness with regard to the act of killing animals of that size.[54]

Besides perceiving that the Buddhist religious precepts are a preventive measure against *bap (บาป)*, the Isan see the benefit of receiving the religious precepts in a practical way. This perception is again expressed by Terwiel who says, "Receiving the five precepts can be seen as a ritual cleansing, a purification which enables the laymen to receive the benefits of the ceremony in a proper manner."[55]

Sin as Viewed in Relation to the Sentiment or Sensibility to the Spirits or Phi

Not only is sin or *bap (บาป)* viewed in relation to one's karma and reincarnation but sin or *bap (บาป)* is also viewed in relation to the concept of the *phi (ผี)* and the ancestors. Since the ancestors have passed away and became the *phi (ผี)*, when an Isan transgresses or violates a teaching or traditional custom which was handed down from his ancestors, he is in reality transgressing against the *phi (ผี)* of his ancestors who gave the customs. Phongphit and Hewison agree on this point:

> For the community, the *phi (ผี)* represent the social rules and values transmitted through the generations, and villagers believe that these are given by ancestors, who are now the *phi (ผี)*. Failing to observe such rules or an intentional transgression is an act against the *phi (ผี)* and is referred to as the *phid phi (ผิดผี)*.[56]

The term *phid phi (ผิดผี)* means to "offend the spirits." When social rules or norms are broken, it is commonly referred to as the *phid phi (ผิดผี)*. If an Isan man sexually violates an Isan young lady, he would be considered as the *phid phi (ผิดผี)*. In order to make things right with the *phi (ผี)*, he has to bring proper offerings and sacrifices to propitiate the *phi (ผี)* or spirits through a *cham* (spirit doctor-จ้ำ). If his sinful action of the *phid phi (ผิดผี)* has not been made right, the *phi (ผี)* or spirits are believed potentially to be the cause of troubles, disasters, or sickness which might come upon the whole village or community. A person's sin is no longer viewed as personal since it affects the whole community. Koset expresses agreement on this issue:

> When something is being held and practiced for a long time in a village, it then becomes a custom (*prapaynee-ประเพณี*). Whoever infringes on and disobeys the custom is considered by the villagers to be *phid phi (ผิดผี)* and *phid prapaynee* [*violating the rules of the phi and the rules of traditional custom*]. That person in offense must perform a forgiveness ceremony called *kamalatort (ขมาลาโทษ)*, which is to seek for forgiveness, according to a prescribed manner. If the person

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[54]Ibid., 197.

[55]Ibid., 191.

[56]Phongphit and Hewison, *Village Life*, 52.

in offense ignores making the *kamalatort* (ขมาลาโทษ) ceremony, it is believed that many troubles will befall him. Not only the person in violation is considered to be a recipient of all the troubles, but also the troubles will come upon his entire group (trans. from the Thai by the author).[57]

The *phi* (ผี) are acknowledged to be spiritual beings who have omniscience over all the people in the village. A common expression among the Isan villagers is "People may not see an evil deed perpetrated, but the *ph (ผี)* do."[58] The Isan use this saying as a "warning to all villagers that they must observe traditional prescriptions, rules, and values."[59]

In summary, comprehending the relevancy of Buddhism for the Isan and their concepts of karma, merit, reincarnation, and sin is significant in understanding their decision-making process. Five important points can be drawn from this chapter. First of all, the Isan primarily practice syncretistic Buddhism as opposed to philosophical Buddhism. They view Buddhism as a means to continue the teaching of their ancestors and also to acquire a better position for the next life; and, thus, syncretistic Buddhism has a tremendous influence on the Isan's daily life decisions. Second, from the concepts of karma, merit and reincarnation, the Isan view present and future life as the byproduct of their total accumulation of karma or good merit. These notions create a fatalistic approach to life decisions and have left the Isan people to a karma-conscious and merit-oriented life philosophy. Third, the Isan still are able to repay gratitude to their dead loved parents and kinsmen by involving themselves with the Buddhist temples and monks. The merit gained through these merit-making activities can be transferred to help the deceased loved ones. Finally, the Isan view sins in relation to the observance of the five precepts and in relation to the observance of the teaching of one's ancestors. The breaking of any of the five precepts and the transgression of the will of the ancestors by not conducting traditional customs, rituals, or ceremonies prescribed them is considered sinful and, therefore, automatically results in sin

Beliefs Relating to their Concept of Auspicious Time, Evil Omens, Amulets and Magic

This section continues the investigation into the belief systems of the Isan of Northeast Thailand. The material in this section gives insights into the meaning and practices of what the Isan believe about auspicious time, evil omens, amulets, and magic because they affect the different decisions that the Isan people make on a daily basis.

The Meaning and Practices concerning Auspicious Time

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[57]Koset, *Muang sawan le phi sang thevada*, 355.

[58]Phongphit and Hewison, *Village Life*, 53.

[59]Ibid.

The Isan strongly hold to a belief in auspicious time and occasion. Since the first man and woman, who were regarded as being created from nature, the Isan believe that the natural orderliness requires that the practices concerning favorable or propitious timing be strictly observed. Boongoet Pimwaramaytakun, Director of the Khon Kaen Provincial Cultural Council, agrees:

> Auspicious time is important to the Isan and has significant influence on the Isan's daily living from the ancient period until the present time. This is because any performance of an important ritual to bring prosperity or good luck to the life of the Isan people is only successful if it is conducted in accordance to the set rules and within the confined period of auspicious time (trans. from the Thai by the author).[60]

The "right" or auspicious timing is thought to bring "right" or positive consequences. The person who is knowledgeable on the matter of auspicious or "right" timing is an astrologer or fortune-teller. The services of these practitioners have to be sought out in order to bring about the desirable effects upon one's life. If the auspicious timing is not carefully observed, the Isan think that a catastrophe or misfortune, which could include death, will befall a person.

The Isan usually will seek the auspicious time from an astrologer or a fortune-teller prior to commencing important events such as constructing a new home, moving into a new home, conducting a wedding, or moving to another province. After the astrologer or fortune-teller has prescribed the auspicious time to begin such an event, the Isan will follow the prescription strictly. This is done to avoid the occurrence of any catastrophe or calamity and, additionally, to bring happiness and good luck to themselves and their families.[61]

The Meaning and Practices Concerning Evil Omens

The Isan have a steadfast belief in omens and superstitions. When a bad omen or superstition occurs, the Isan hold that it forecasts a bad event or catastrophe. If the omen is ignored, it is thought that a calamity will certainly befall a person or his family. In order to reverse and invalidate the effects of the omen, a person has to perform a ritual called *siakraw* (averting the catastrophe-เสียเคราะห์). If the *siakraw (เสียเคราะห์)* is not performed, the Isan believe that, consequently, a misfortune or disaster will then occur in that person's life or in his family.

Chansoongnern agrees with this view as indicated in his research in the village of Nong Lai:

> A large number of Nong Lai villagers hold firmly to a belief concerning bad omens or superstitions. This belief came out of their past experiences of having ignored bad omens without conducting a ritual to invalidate their effects, and the

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[60]Boonkoet Pimwaramaytakun, *Prapaynee isan le kret boran nakadee tai isan* (Isan Customs and Thai Isan Literature - ประเพณีอีสานและเกร็ดโบราณคดีไทอีสาน) (in Thai) (Khon Kaen, Thailand: Khon Kaen Klang Nanatham Company Limited, 2001), 355.

[61]Khemchareetera, "*Katti kwanchua kong chow isan*," 4.

villagers, therefore, all had to face the consequences of illnesses, failures in business, and/or deaths (trans. from the Thai by the author).[62]

The purpose of the *siakraw (เสียเคราะห์)* ritual is to cancel any forthcoming catastrophes or misfortunes by the use of magic formulas. It is an act of wiping away or warding off any malignance and wickedness in one's life. The Isan believe that a catastrophe or misfortune will definitely occur when there is an evil omen or sign. For instance, bad omens or signs can be interpreted from such common or uncommon events like a vulture landing on the roof of a house or leaves dropping on a person's head, the rice plants in the paddies turning red as blood, an elephant having sexual intercourse with a water buffalo, a lighting bolt striking the steps of a house, a rock turning into a turtle, a cobra getting into a house, a spider hitting its chest, or a mouse kissing a person's mouth.

The ceremony to invalidate the effect of an evil omen or prophetic sign is fairly involved. An Isan usually chooses one of two courses of action: one is to perform a ceremony by offering a sacrifice to avert a catastrophe; other is either by the use of magic power or by requesting the Buddhist monks to come and chant the Buddhist magic formula or incantation specifically named for nullifying any evil effects.

For example, according to Khemchareetera, when a vulture lands on the roof of a house, it is believed to be an ill omen and that a disaster is imminent and forthcoming. The disaster will be in the form of the destruction or separation of a home or village where there will be conflict between people and, as a result, each will go their separate way. [63] The only way to cancel or annul the effect of this evil omen is to conduct a special ceremony specifically prepared for this occasion. Khemchareetera further explains that when a village encounters an ill omen it should take the course of action as follows:

> They should consult and get help from the experts in dealing with bad omens and request them to come and help perform a ritual to diminish the effect of the severe omen…Along with the ritual, they should invite the Buddhist monks to come and chant to undo any forthcoming misfortune (trans. from the Thai by the author).[64]

Together with the chanting, the Buddhist monks will preach a sermon which they will take from the Buddhist books of *oobahtkunt*, *oonahuswinai*, *sarakarawichasoot*, or *choontalookrisoot*. They also use *daisaisin (ด้ายสายสิญจน์)*, which are magic threads, and sacred water which has been prepared through a special ritual of incantation. After completing all these ritualistic steps, the Isan believe that the ill omen will be invalidated or cancelled.

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[62]Poonsin Chansoongnern, "*Pittikum ti kiawkong kup chokrang kong chow ban nong lai tambon khok see amphoe munag changwat khon kaen*" (The Ritual Concerning Superstitions of the People in Ban Nong Lai, Tambon Khok See, Amohoe Munag, Khon Kaen - พิธีกรรมที่เกี่ยวกับโชคลางของชาวบ้านหนองไหล ตำบลโคกสี อำเภอเมือง จังหวัดอนแก่น) (in Thai) (Master's thesis, Mahasarakham University, 1997), 50.

[63]Khemchareetera, "*Katti kwanchua kong chow isan*," 23.

[64]Ibid.

It is also important to carefully examine the nature of the ill omen prior to taking any course of action. Chansoongnern shares more information on this point:

> When one sees an ill omen, he must examine the day and time when he has seen the omen and whether it is a good or bad omen. Also, he must consider whom the omen will affect and whether it will be necessary to avert the catastrophe. If it is necessary, he must then have the ritual performed [by *mau siakraw* or omen ritual performer-หมอเสียเคราะห์] to avert any effect of the forthcoming misfortune (trans. from the Thai by the author).[65]

The ritual for averting the effects of the catastrophe because of a bad omen is not exceedingly involved. When an Isan is ready to make an offering to *siakraw* (averting the evil omen-เสียเคราะห์), he must prepare a *siakraw (เสียเคราะห์)* tray. This tray is a square or rectangular tray filled with such items as a variety of candles, white rice, black rice, red rice, yellow rice, popped rice, flowers, *daisaisin (ด้ายสายสิญจน์)*, perfume, money coins, and the like. The tray is then given to the ill omen ritual practitioner or *mau kiakraw (หมอเสียเคราะห์)*. The practitioner then places the tray in front of the person who has seen the ill omen or who is believed to have received the effects of the ill omen, and the practitioner will recite the magic formula to invalidate any effect of a bad omen. While reciting the formula, the practitioner turns to face the east and motions his right hand back and forth like the sweeping of a broom in order to sweep away any ill effects of the bad omen.

When the recital of the formula is completed, the practitioner will pick up two or three food items from the *siakraw (เสียเคราะห์)* tray, and cast them towards the east. While food items are being released from his hand, the practitioner will utter a few words to command any forthcoming catastrophe to diminish. He will then recite another formula for driving away the effects of a bad omen. After he is finished, the ritual is considered done, and the effect of the bad omen is then believed to have been cancelled.

The Meaning and Practices Concerning Amulets

The Isan always have had a special place for the supernatural, whether they are connected to the spirits or some other sort of power. Because they are agriculturalists, the Isan people continually come into contact with nature and with the spirits or powers that inhabit the natural objects or places. Nature provides the Isan villagers with the source of their belief in the supernatural power. The belief in the supernatural power is related to amulets or auspicious objects. These objects are either derived from nature or they are made by men. They are believed to possess special miraculous or sacred power enabling humans to be endowed with unique benefits.

When the author of this dissertation was a boy and was living in Northeast Thailand, he used to wear a Buddha image that was given to him by a famous monk in the Pakseng Buddhist Temple in Ubonratchatani province. The author was told that it had the power to ward off evil spirits and to prevent him from having any diseases or accidents. These Buddha images were cast with a magic spell or a magic formula.

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[65]Chansoongnern, "*Pittikum ti kiawkong kup chokrang*," 67.

The author was not the only one who made use of amulets or auspicious objects. Isan villagers wore them as a part of their daily clothing.

Presently in Isan, one of the most popular amulets for adolescents to wear on a necklace is the image of the Buddha. These amulets are cast from metal or are carved out of wood, ivory, or resin. These Buddha images are made by Buddhist monks who have cast them with a special magic formula so that they can provide protection for anyone who may wear them.

Other amulets that are extremely popular are medallions which portray the head of a sacred person, a famous monk, or one of the Thai kings. One of the admirable Thai kings who frequently appear on the medallions is King Chulalongkorn. These amulets are widely available in shops throughout Northeast Thailand. The images which have been made by a famous monk or a magic master are more expensive since they are capable of casting magic spells. The amulets of an unknown source or maker can be obtained for a small fee.

Since 1997, the author of this dissertation has been living and working in Nonprasert village, Palan sub-district, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani province in Northeast Thailand. One of his projects was a ministry to help disadvantaged children. The author founded a school, Mercy Christian School, for children ranging from ages three to ten. In the 2005 school year, student enrollment reached 280. Some of the Isan children came to school with a cotton thread wrapped around their wrists with a magical or auspicious object tied to the thread. When the students were asked to give a reason for wearing the amulets, the children sometimes did not have an answer. The amulets were basically given to them by their parents or one of their relatives who believed in the protective power emanating from the objects.

The kind of supernatural power deriving from an amulet or auspicious object is often connected with its object of association. Terwiel agrees:

> The amulets derive their protective power partly from the association with powerful things. The *phra phim* [พระพิม] are made from sacred ingredients. It may occur that a piece of wood or resin has naturally the shape of a Buddha figure, and such an object is highly valued for it miraculously takes this shape. A Buddha image made from a bullet is in this context not such a strange combination; this image will protect the wearer from bullet wounds. The use of the image of the Buddha or a highly revered king or of a famous monk is in itself understandable from this point of view; the innate sacredness of the objects is a guarantee for beneficial power. Similarly, a phallus or a tiger's tooth is obviously connected with force, and the use of these objects points to a belief that things which are associated with power can be used in order to protect humans magically.[66]

Graduate research was conducted in 1994 by Suchinda Khamdamrongkiat, a teacher at Borabu Schook in Maha Sarakham province in Northeast Thailand, on the topic of auspicious objects. Sixty-four subjects, including Buddhist monks, spirit mediums, and villagers, were observed and interviewed. The research findings show five forms of auspicious objects that were used by the villagers: sacred monk images, *daisaisin* (a sacred thread-ด้ายสายสิญจน์), *palat khik* (wooden Shiva Lingam), *matsaya*

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[66]Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, 76-77.

hup yua (fish snapping at the bait), and *nuat siphon* (magic lipstick made from beeswax and bulbs of herbs).[67]

The Meaning and Practices Concerning Magic

The Isan have special respect for nature and for supernatural power. Their belief in the supernatural has caused them to develop different ways in which to exercise control over the supernatural power. Apisak Som-In, an Associate Professor at Srinakralinvirot University responsible for teaching Isan worldviews, noted that the Isan believe that supernatural power can be influenced and manipulated for their own benefits by the use of *kata-akom* (magic spells, magic formulas, or religious verses - คาถาอาคม) or *wetmon* (magic or incantation – เวทมนต์).[68] The belief in *kata-akom* (คาถาอาคม) or *wetmon* (เวทมนต์) is derived from the influence of Brahmanism who used the Pravet Scripture.[69] It is believed that the followers of Brahmanism memorized and recited religious verses in their incantations in worshipping their deities.

In the ancient period, the Isan ancestors were keen on learning a variety of magic incantations such as magic for self-protection, magic for treatment of a disease, magic for warding off evil spirits, magic for fruitful rice planting, magic for curing a fish bone in one's throat, and magic for other daily occurrences or fears. Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou define and describe magic as follows:

> Magic is the control of this-worldly supernatural forces, such as *mana*, by the use of proper chants, amulets, and automatically effective rituals. It does not involve supplicating supernatural beings in the hope that they will respond. People believe that saying the right formulaic sounds causes the rain to come, or protects them from diseases or evil spirits. Thus magic is a specific attempt to force a response that will result in changing the status quo.[70]

In the ancient period, an Isan male was extremely fond of learning magic formulas or incantations because they were believed they would make make them into good, tough fighters.

The Isan believe that a miraculous or sacred power emanates from magic formulas or incantations. The person who desires to be a student of magic must have good morals and strong faith without any wavering doubt. A good student must

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[67]Suchinda Khamdamrongkiat, "*Piti kan plook sek wattu monkon kong chow ban kok rai noi tambon ngua ba amphoe wapi pathum mama sarakham* (The Ritual of Consecrating Auspicious Objects of the Villagers at Ban Khok Rai Noi, Tambon Ngua Ba, Amphoe Wapi Pathum, Maha Sarakham - พิธีการปลูกเศกวัตถุมงคลของ ชาวบ้านโคกไร่น้อย ตำบลงัวบา อำเภอวาปีปทุม จังหวัดมหาสารคาม)," (in Thai) (Master's thesis, Mahasarakham University, 1999), vi-vii.

[68]Apisak Som-In, *Lokkatat isan* (The Isan Worldview - โลกทัศน์อีสาน) (in Thai) (Mahasarakham, Thailand: Srinakalinvirot Unversity, 1991), 164.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 69.

always be in the mode of rehearsing magic formulas, and he must have a reverential respect for magic and follow all the required prescriptions for keeping the magic active.

It is essential that a person who has an interest in learning the *kata-akom* (คาถาอาคม) or *wetmon* (เวทมนต์) have a teacher. If one does not have a teacher, his magic will not have miraculous power and it will not be sacred. In addition, the Isan believes that if the person who is learning magic does not have a magic teacher or master, he can go insane or be turned into a *phi pob (ผีปอบ)* or *phi pong* (evil spirit-ผีโพง).

Therefore, it is very important that prior to the commencement of magic learning a student performs a ritual to worship the magic teacher or master. The materials to be used as part of the ritual are largely dependent on the requirements that are imposed by the teacher. Also, a generous fee for the teacher is usually included as part of the ritual.

Since ancient times, the Isan have believed that the person who possesses powerful or sacred magic is usually respected as the master or teacher, and, most likely, he will be held as the leader of the Isan community. The local Isan specialists who have mastered *kata-akom* (คาถาอาคม) or *wetmon* (เวทมนต์) and are ready to render service to the community are the following: *cham (จ้ำ)*, *mau phi (หมอผี)*, *mau sookwan (หมอสู่ขวัญ)*, *mau monchart kadook (หมอมนต์จ่วดกะดูก)*, *mau phao (หมอเป่า)*, *mau mon auk look ngai (หมอมนต์ออกลูกง่าย)*, *mau phi pob (หมอผีปอบ)*, and *mau phao tadeng (หมอเป่าตาแดง)*.

In summary, the Isan's beliefs relating to auspicious time, evil omens, amulets, and magic can be summarized in four major points. First of all, the Isan believe that if an auspicious time is chosen at the onset of an event, the outcome of the event, or occasion will bring happiness, fortune, or prosperity. If an auspicious time is not discerned, then the consequence of the event or occasion will be met with a misfortune or calamity, including even death. Second, the Isan hold that an evil omen must be met with a ritual or magic formula in order to invalidate its effect which comes in the form of a calamity, misfortune, or disaster. If the ill omen is not cancelled through a ritual or magic formula, then a calamity, misfortune, or disaster is believed to befall a person who has ignored the omen. Third, the Isan have the notion that an amulet, which is a small natural object or image, possesses special miraculous or sacred power so as to render the owner of the object its benefits in terms of power, protection, good luck, or prosperity. Finally, the Isan believe that miraculous or sacred power for protection, treatment, warding off evil, or nourishment comes from a magic formula, scriptural recital, or incantation.

Beliefs Relating to the Isan's Traditional Customs and Rituals

In concluding this investigation into the Isan's belief systems, it is of paramount significance to examine the Isan beliefs concerning their practices of traditional customs and rituals, which often have been referred to *as hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)*, *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)*, *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)*, *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*, *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)*, or *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsee (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่)*. Sometimes, the traditional customs are also referred to as *banmuang (บ้านเมือง)* or *tamban tammuang* (ทำตามบ้านตามเมือง). The main objective in studying these traditional customs (*hiit-kong*

prapaynee-ฮีตคองประเพณี) is to determine how much these *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคอง ประเพณี)* contribute to the formation of the Isan core values or value system.

The Meaning and Significance of the Hiit-Kong or Hiit-Sipsong Kong-Sipsee of the Isan People

The Isan have features which distinguish them from those in the Lana Kingdom (modern-day Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand) and in other regions of Thailand. Their distinctiveness is related to their natural environment that forces them to struggle for their survival. The customs of the ancient Isan (Thai-Lao) that were created, adapted, and handed down to new generations were the *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsee (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่)* codes of conduct. The observance of the *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsee (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่)* codes is one of the differences settting the Isan apart from other ethnic groups in Thailand.[71]

Hiit (ฮีต) is a Lao word, which was taken from the Pali word *chareet (จารีต)*, meaning "long-standing traditions or customs which have been observed or followed for a long period of time" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[72] The word *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* refers to the "popular traditions, customs, laws, rules, or inherited behaviors. Violating the *chareet prapaynee* will result in the transgressor being considered as an evil person" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[73] According to the Vientiane version of the Lao Dictionary (1992) by Dr. Thongkham Onmaneeson, the primary meaning of the word *hiit (ฮีต)* is "laws" or "regulations," while the secondary meaning is synonymous with the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* as defined above. A third meaning of the word is "long-standing behavior or conduct." From these three meanings, it may be summarized that the *hiit* were Lao traditions or customs in the period of the Lan Chang and the Isan living in the Isan region of Thailand at that time as well as the descendants of the Lao who resettled in different regions of Thailand. If any Isan or Lao person does not conduct himself according to these traditions or customs, he is considered a sinful and evil person. As a result, he will then be despised by the society and will be considered an outcast by any other group.[74]

Customs are "behavior norms" or standards of conduct for any member of the society, and these customs determine which behaviors are expected of each member of that society. They have been observed and handed down for many

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[71]Ekkawit Natalang, *Poum panya isan* (Local Isan Wisdom - ภูมิปัญญาอีสาน) (in Thai) (Bangkok: Amarin Printing Group Co. Ltd., 2001), 66.

[72]Sonan Phesluan, Chop Deesuankok, Wimon Chanaboon, and Kert Pimwaramaysakoon, *Maradok thai isan* (Thai Isan Heritage - มรดกไทอีสาน*)* (in Thai), (Khon Kaen, Thailand: Khon Kaen Klang Nanatham Company Limited, 2001), 99-100.

[73]Ibid., 100.

[74]Ibid.

generations and members of that society must abide by them for others in the society to be satisfied and for there to be a system of rules in a society.[75]

The Center for Isan Buddhist Monks in 17 Provinces believes that these *hiit* (long-standing customs or rules-ฮีต) came from Vientiane, Laos, which was the former Central Lan Chang kingdom. They also believe that the hiit were *chareet (จารีต)* or the customary laws which were specifically related to Buddhism.[76] Sometimes the *hiit (ฮีต)* are called "folk law" or "traditional laws."[77] American political scientist John S. Ambler, Professor Emeritus of the Department of Political Science at Rice University, Texas, explains that the concept of *hiit (ฮีต)* as the "customary law, like other forms of law, concerns itself with the distribution of resources and power, with equity and justice, as well as with social order and propriety in behavior."[78]

Ambler classified the concept of law into two types: the formal law, which includes the statutory law and the religious law; and the informal law, which comprises the customary law and the local living law.[79] The two classes are completely separate and distinct. The existing customary law may affect the shaping of the statutory law; and, likewise, the statutory law may cause modifications in the customary law. The state may consider the statutory law more authoritative than the informal law, which includes the customary law or local law; but the local villagers may recognize the power of the customary or local law to be more important for their daily life than the statutory law.

In small towns or villages far from administrative centers such as Bangkok or Vientiane, the customary law has more power and efficacy than the statutory law as a means of regulating behaviors in the society. An example of another Southeast Asian country where the customary law is considered important is Indonesia. Quoting Taufik Abdullah, a reputable Indonesian social scientist, Ambler describes the Indonesian customary law, which is called *adat*:

> *Adat* is the whole structural system of the society, of which local customs are only a component. *Adat* in this sense is supposed to form the entire value

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[75]Pramaha Tanoulit Deungdee, "*Kwam sumpan kong choomchon song fangkong nai prapenee hiit-sipsong* (The Relations Between Communities on Both Sides of the Mekong - ความสัมพันธ์ของชุมชนสองฝั่งโขง ในประเพณีฮีตสิบสอง))," (in Thai)(Master's thesis, Mahasarakham University, 2000), 46.

[76]Center for Isan Buddhist Monks 17 Provinces, *Maradok isan* (Isan Heritage - มรดกอีสาน) (in Thai) (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1991)*,* 35.

[77]John Ambler, "Customary Law and Natural Resources Management," translated by Isabel Cole, Oliver Raendchen, and Nguyen Chi Hieu, *Tai Culture: International Review on Thai Cultural Studies* (Berlin-Mitte, Germany) 6, no. 1 and 2 (2001): 41.

[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid., 42.

system, the basis of all ethical and legal judgment, as well as the source of social expectations. In short, it represents the ideal pattern of behavior.[80]

Ambler elaborates on the *adat* customary law as follows:

> The customary law is concerned not only with what is permitted and prohibited, but also with the ethical world in which actions and relationships take place. It has strong moral components that pass judgment on how people ought to behave. 'Customary law' is very much a moral system.[81]

For the people of the maritime Southeast Asian country of Indonesia, the customary law (*adat*) serves as the belief and guiding principles on how they can conduct their daily lives in the present world. As with the *adat* from Indonesia, the Isan *chareet prapaynee* is locally enforced. It includes all the long-standing traditional customs (*hiit-kong prapaynee-ฮีตคองประเพณี*) and its accumulated wisdom from previous centuries.

In the Isan region the customary law operates simultaneously with the statutory law. At times, the boundaries between the two laws differ, and at other times they overlap or coincide. It is important, therefore, to comprehend how the two laws are operative in the lives of the Isan people in order to gain a proper understanding of their influence on behavior. In his analysis of the customary law and the statutory law, Ambler presents a comparison between the two systems of law in Table 2 so they can be compared and verified.

The customary law in Thailand has its roots in the local community and its purpose is to respond to the needs and conditions of that community. In terms of continual development, the customary law can be revised and adapted through local discussions, and it can carry its own rewards and punishments. The statutory law, however, may only concern itself with bigger groups of people in the larger physical, cultural, and political areas.[82] In the local community, the customary law often educates individuals of their roles, rights, and obligations in that community. These roles frequently are connected with the positions that the individuals are occupying within that local social structure.

The customary law is derived locally from the social structure and the resources of the local community, and it is applied locally to regulate behavior and conduct in that community. In terms of local control, the customary law has an extremely powerful influence on the behavior and decision-making processes of the Isan people, more than the statutory law. More often than not, the statutory law is not fully understood by the people in the local villages or small towns. With both the customary law and statutory law operative simultaneously in the Northeast region of Thailand, a dispute sometimes arises because different groups in the region make their appeals to different legal frameworks. For example, the non-Buddhist groups may appeal to the constitution of Thailand, which is the statutory law, to guarantee their rights and privileges in exercising and propagating their freedom of religion.

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[80]Ibid., 43.

[81]Ibid.

[82]Ibid., 48.

However, the Buddhists, who hold to customary law, then may exert pressure on members of its community to observe local religious customs or face ostracism.

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF STATUTORY LAW AND CUSTOMARY LAW

	Statutory Law	Customary Law
Philosophy	Law as rule (an output) Law as prescription Rights of the State and/or individuals are highest Law facilitates exploitation of natural resources	Law as process Law as solution/compromise Rights of the group are the highest Law guides humans as stewards of intergenerational resources
Purpose	To benefit the public good To maintain State control	To benefit the local good To maintain the local social order
Scope	Universally accepted	Only locally applicable
Source of legitimacy	External to the site of application of the law	Internal to the site of application of the law
Knowledge basis	Generalizations, average or majority conditions	Detailed local knowledge Specific conditions
Promulgation	By decree or vote	By local consensus or other exercise of local power
Process of amendment	Episodic revision of the law	Behavioral change precedes new consensus; gradual, incremental change; informal re-negotiation
Rigidity	Seeks to be definitive	Flexible; often defined through informal (re-)negotiation
Reference for application	Depends on evidence	Depends on evidence and etiquette
Enforcement	Specialized State personnel	Specialized persons/general public
Adjudication	"Rights"-oriented rule-oriented	Negotiation-oriented, process-oriented
Sanctions	Relatively prescribed	Highly flexible; context-specific

In villages and small towns as well as less urbanized areas, it is not uncommon for religious minority groups to be ostracized for not participating in local traditional and customary events, which are known as *ngan prapaynee* (traditional customs-งานประเพณี). Nevertheless, the weakness in the system of the customary law is that it provides the elite within the village structure an opportunity to expand their own power at the expense of the poorer or less influential villagers.[83]

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[83]Ibid., 58.

Ngo Duc Thinh, Professor and Director of the Folklore Research Institute, Hanoi, Vietnam, discusses the different types of customary law in Vietnam, which shares many characteristics with the Isan region. Both areas are in the same Indo-China peninsula.[84] The first type is the customary law which was codified in oral poetry. This type is transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition, and the local customs are typical of this type. This customary law usually covers most facets of society: the community, marriage, and family relationships; the role and responsibilities of chiefs; customs and rituals; property ownership; and personal violence.

The second type is the customary law recorded in written form. It includes the village codes of the Vietnamese and the customary law of the Thai and Cham. The Viet's village codes deal with the social organization of a village and the administrative structures of that social organization. In addition, the codes also deal with regulations on social relationships, village security, agriculture, education, taxation and heavy labor for each person in the village.

The customary law of the Isan is of Lao origin (*hiit kong baan muang*-ฮีตคอง บ้านเมือง) and is divided into two kinds: the customary law of *muang (เมือง)* and the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)*. The customary law of *muang (เมือง)* deals with such areas as the history of the *muang (เมือง)*, the borders of the *muang (เมือง)*, the managment and organization of the *muang (เมือง)*, the tasks and responsibilities of residents, and ritual worship in the *muang (เมือง)*. It also includes the regulations on punishments and fines related to property ownership, marriage, and family relationships, physical violence, and the violations of customs. When the customary law of *muang (เมือง)* was written, it was considered the official code for managing all activities of the *muang (เมือง)*. It thus contained more legal stipulations than the traditional customs and habits.

The *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)*, the second kind of customary law among the Thai, is comprised of the rules of morality and conduct. Sayings, proverbs, and verses are the typical way of communicating the rules—concerning how to be a good person, adherence to marriage customs, funeral procedures and proper worship practices. The customary law of the Cham (*adat*) consisted mostly of rules practiced by the villages. Although the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)* was originally given in oral form, it later became a part of the rules and was converted into written form. The rules touch on subjects such as marriage and divorce, property division and inheritance, relationships between parents and the rights of men, women and children.

Ngo Duc Thinh presents four main characteristics of customary law.[85] First, customary law is not yet legal "law," and it is not totally a "custom." Yet, it is a transitional form between the law and the traditional customs. The customary law is considered to be the latest stage in the development of customs and habits. Second, the customary law is a part of the traditional system that produces and changes the behavior of individuals and also local communities. This law creates a legal culture to control individual behavior within the local community. Therefore, it can directly

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[84]Ngo Duc Thinh, "Customary Law and Rural Development in Vietnam Today," translated by Isabel Cole Oliver Raendchen, and Nguyen Chi Hieu, *Tai Culture: International Reveiw on Thai Cultural Studies* (Berlin-Mitte, Germany) 6, no. 1 and 2 (2001): 83.

[85]Ibid., 87.

reach into the consciences and feelings of the people. As a result, the villagers are voluntarily abiding by customary law without any coercion.

Third, customary law has specific local characteristics and diversity which set it apart from the statutory law. Fourth, the customary law is a part of the social and cultural system of a community, which was formed through a long historical process. As a result, customary law is ever changing so as to reflect specific social and cultural contexts. Thinh has further added:

> The customary law constitutes behavioral norms which were established and formed through a long historical process. Therefore, they are accepted by the people and are used as customs and habits. This is not like the legal law of a feudal dynasty, which is sometimes used to coerce citizens.[86]

The essential content of the customary laws and the codes of village regulations are a means of "harmonizing social relationships and building the cultural life of villages."[87]

The traditional Lao law existed in two forms: the formal *kotmai bohan* (ancient Buddhist Lao codes - กฎหมายโบฮาณ) and the informal *hiit-kong* (traditional Lao customary codes – ฮีตคอง).[88] The Buddhist Lao codes (*kotmai bohan*-กฎหมายโบราณ) were developed under the influence of Theravada Buddhism from the 14th century and had significant power in religious and political centers such as Luang Prabang and Vientiane, where the kings or rulers of the major *muang (เมือง)* were residing.

In the areas of minor *muang (เมือง)* or at a village level, however, where there was less influence or control from rulers because they were far removed from the administrative centers, the customary *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)* codes were much more important and relevant than the Buddhist Lao codes. Yet, in the religious and political centers, the Buddhist Lao codes continued to be authoritative, though a shorter version of *hiit sipsong - kong sipsee* (portions of *hiit-kong* codes) was included in the Lao Buddhist law codes (*kotmai bohan*-กฎหมายโบราณ).[89]

Although partially influenced by Buddhism, the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)* codes were believed to be pre-Buddhist in origin.[90] The exact period of the origination of the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)* codes can not be identified. Occasionally, the Buddhist law codes replace the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)* codes. At times, the Buddhist law codes have been added to the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)* codes, such as the Lao and the Isan code known as the *hiit-kong prapaynee* (customary laws or rules) or the *prapaynee bohan* (ancient customs-

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[86]Ibid., 89.

[87]Ibid., 95.

[88]Oliver Raendchen, "The *Hiit-Kong* Codes of the Lao," translated by Oliver Raendchen, Isabel Cole, and Nguyen Chi Hieu, *Tai Culture: International Review on Thai Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 and 2 (2001): 182.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Ibid.

ประเพณีโบราณ).[91] Raenchen elaborates on the Lao (and Isan) *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคอง ประเพณี)* codes as follows:

> The codes supposedly never had been written down as a whole complex, but were fragmentarily stored in the form of palm leaves in the Buddhist libraries and *wats* [วัด]. But the codes in general are known by village elders. Rules of behavior adequate to the codes are passed on orally from generation to generation in the form of *suphaasit phuun muang* (local proverbs-สุภาษิตพื้นเมือง), *khamkoon phuun muang* (local verses [คำคูณพื้นเมือง]), *kham sookwan* (ritualistic words for *sookwan* [คำสู่ขวัญ]) and *kham thawaai* (ritual verses [คำถวาย]), *nithaan* (tales [นิทาน]) and *luang* (stories [เลื่อง]).[92]

One of the codes relevant to people living in the areas historically under the former Lan Chang kingdom which today includes the Northeast region of Thailand and Laos, is called the *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsee (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่)*. This code outlines the twelve monthly customary rites and the fourteen conventional rules. The Isan *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites (also called the *hiit pee kong dua-ฮีตปีคองเดือน*), are a small part of the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)* codes. The codes are made up of fourteen *hiit (ฮีต)* and *kong (คอง)* as listed below.

1. *Hiit chao kong khun* (regulates the interrelationship between *chao* [rulers] and *ban* and *chao* of *muang* [เมือง] or *chao* of smaller *muang* [เมือง] and *chao* of superior *muang* [เมือง]).

2. *Hiit tao kong panya* (regulates the interrelationship between rulers).

3. *Hiit pai kong nai* (regulates the interrelationship between commoners and rulers).

4. *Hiit ban kong muang* (regulates the interrelationship between *baan* [village-บ้าน] and *muang* [province or city-เมือง]).

5. *Hiit pu kong ya* (regulates the interrelationship between the paternal grandparents).

6. *Hiit ta kong yai* (regulates the interrelationship between the maternal grandparents).

7. *Hiit poa kong mia* (regulates the interrelationship between husband and wife).

8. *Hiit pai kong koey* (regulates the interrelationship between in-laws).

9. *Hiit pa kong lueng* (regulates the interrelationship between relatives of the father's side).

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[91]Ibid., 183.

[92]Ibid.

10. *Hiit louk kong laan* (regulates the interrelationship between descendants of a family).

11. *Hiit tau kong kae* (regulates the interrelationship between people of different ages – old and very old).

12. *Hiit pee kong duan* – also called *hiit-sipsong* (regulates the annual rites and ceremonies which are determined by the lunar cycle).

13. *Hiit hai kong na* (regulates agrarian work and the relationship between dry acres and fields).

14. *Hiit wat kong soang* (regulates the interrelationship between Buddhist temples and the Sangha). [93]

These rites and rules, sometimes referred to as customary law, can neither be enforced legally nor have legal punitive consequences. However, they are being used as instruments to build a nation and bring groups together to form a more stable society.[94] As a result, they are socially enforced. The Center for Isan Buddhist Monks expresses the view that it was probable that the government officials passed these *hiit (ฮีต)* into law so that the people in the kingdom would have further incentive to abide by them.[95] After the Isan people had observed these laws for a prolonged period of time, the laws became traditional customs for the people in this region of the kingdom.

Thus, both the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs and also the *kong-sipsee (คองสิบสี่)* codes of conduct (which also consist of the fourteen conventional rules) are as prescribed by the Lan Chang forefathers and continue to be used for governing the people of the Isan region as well as in other areas where the Lao Lan Chang culture had its greatest influence. The *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* has only one set of stipulations for commoners while *kong-sipsee (ฮีตสิบสอง)* has two sets of stipulations-- one for rulers and kings and one for commoners. The content of *kong-sipsee (ฮีตสิบสอง)* was partly modified because of the Buddhist law codes (*kotmai bohan-กฎหมายโบราณ*).[96] Together, these customary rites and conventional rules are today usually referred to as the *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่)* code.[97] They were prescribed and handed down directly from the Isan (Thai-Lao) and Lao ancestors or forefathers of Lan Chang, and they provide a unique identity to the people who have their roots in Lan Chang.

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[93]Ibid., 184.

[94]Leu Sribounnadaed and Ponma Promdao, *Hiitban kongwat* (customary laws for village and temple - ฮีตบ้าน-คลองวัด) (in Thai)(Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1996), 3.

[95]Center for Isan Buddhist Monks 17 Provinces, *Maradok isan*, 35.

[96]Raendchen, "The *Hiit-kong* Codes of the Lao," 185.

[97]Sribounnadaed and Promdao, *Hiitban kongwat*, 3.

The *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่) code may have been changed periodically and may not have been consistent in terms of locations one to another. The interesting feature about the codes is the lack of concrete sanctions, which was probably because this code was accepted by the majority of the Isan population. Another reason is that the codes already contained threats of sanctions and punishment which were caused by natural or supernatural powers. The codes have their roots in the worldview of the Isan and the Lao.[98] Being the best known code in Laos for regulating community life, the *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสองคอ งสิบสี่) codes still play a large part in the daily life of the Isan people in Northeast Thailand. This happened even after the formal statutory laws of the Thai kingdom had been officially introduced and enforced.

Sribounnadaed and Promdao have alluded to the *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่) as comparable to the "constitution of the Isan life" (*tammanoon chiwit isan* - ธรรมนูญชีวิตอีสาน).[99] The book entitled *hiit-kong-kalom* (Customary Laws-Rules-Prohibitions - ฮีต-คอง-คะลำ) [edited by the Pimwaramaytakuns and printed by Khon Kaen Provincial Office of Education] defines *hiit-kong-kalom* (ฮีตคองคะลำ) as the "constitution of the Thai-Lao, which is not written down but it is a customary law that the Isan from the ancient period have practiced" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[100] It was believed that the Isan in the remote past had prospered and lived together in peace by following this *hiit-kong* (ฮีตคอง) code.

The Isan have been using the *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่) as a means to build group harmony and unity; and, additionally, it was used as a way to accumulate merit throughout the year. The *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่) still has a relative influence in the daily lives of the Isan people, though its extensive power over the people has diminished greatly. Sribounnadaed and Promdao agree with this evaluation: "Although having been reduced a little in its authority, this *hiit-kong* [*hiit-sipsong kong-sipsee*] is still presently being practiced" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[101] They further elaborate on this point: "*hiit-sipsong kong-sipsee* (ฮีตสิบ สองคองสิบสี่) is the large vein, giving life support and providing the way for the Isan so that they can become decent people (trans. from the Thai by the author).[102] Apart from these traditional customs, the Isan society would find it very hard to continue functioning as a distinctive society. Ekkawit Natalang further comments on the importance and function of this controlling mechanism as follows:

> *Hiit-sipsong kong-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่) is a thought and belief structure, and it has the power to attract and bind the Isan people together to have a conviction so

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[98]Raendchen, "The *Hiit-kong* Codes of the Lao," 186.

[99]Sribounnadaed and Promdao, *Hiitban kongwat*, 12.

[100]Boonkoet Pimwaramaytakun and Naparon Pimwaramaytakun, *Hiit-kong-kalom* (Customary Laws-Rules-Prohibitions - ฮีต-คอง-คะลำ) (in Thai), (Khon Kaen, Thailand: Klang Nana Wittaya Publisher, 2003), 1.

[101]Sribonnadaed and Promdao, *Hiitban kongwat*, 12.

[102]Ibid.

as to remain closely connected to one's kinship. The *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่)* allows the Isan to continue their lives as farmers and to determine the performance of their religious festivals and ceremonies (trans. from the Thai by the author). [103]

Although these ordinances do not have legal binding power over the people breaking them as compared to the legal ordinances in Central Thailand, the Isan still respect and observe the *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่)* code as if it were actual law. Central Thailand inherited their legal culture from India, while the Isan of the ancient period received their ancient beliefs from their ancestors or forefathers. The Isan believe in things or powers that could visibly grant favor or inflict punishment from their ancestors (such as fathers, mothers, and grandparents) even though they may have passed away. Tossa explaines the customary (Lao) law:

> Lao folk law has been known to Lao people since remote times set in ancient Lao folk literature, and applied in their daily life…It [traditional or customary law] was not recorded in writing, but it had been practiced for a long time and it had become a 'customary rite,' which is called ฮีต (*hiit* meaning old law, rules, a ruling system) or คอง (*kong*-means customs, laws, rules). Much of the Lao ancient folk law is included in the rites. Later, some of the ancient law was recorded on palm leaf manuscripts. It is interesting to note that some of the law has been taken from various literary and religious sources…It is also interesting that once the law had been recorded, stories have been used to illustrate and elaborate the law to make it clear.[104]

The calendrical customs and rituals of the Isan are expressed in the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* or twelve monthly rites. The *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)*, also called the *hiit-pee kong-duan* (ฮีตปีคองเดือน), is a small part of the overall *hiit-sipsong kongsipsee* code.

These *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* or twelve monthly rituals are carefully observed throughout the year, usually on full-moon days and nights. The Buddhist monks are engaged in the majority of the rituals, not only as the subject of worship and the main celebrants, but also by being involved in the preparation of the rituals.[105]

In providing this necessary support in preparation, the Buddhist monks determine the right timing for the rituals, receive offerings by the Buddhist followers, and perform other necessary ceremonies before the rituals are conducted. The focal point of the ceremonies prior to the performance of rituals (specifically for months 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, and 9) is to give the Buddhist followers the opportunity to make merit (*tum bun*-ทำบุญ). The main purpose of the rituals for these six months is to provide worship to the guardian spirits, which includes the spirit of the water, the spirit of the rice, the spirits of the dead, the ancestral spirits, and the guardian-territorial spirits such as the

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[103]Natalang, *Poum panya isan*, *26*.

[104]Wajuppa Tossa, "On Thai Lao Traditional Law," translated by Isabel Cole Oliver Raendchen, and Nguyen Chi Hieu, *Tai Culture: International Review on Thai Cultural Studies* (Berlin-Mitte, Germany) 6, no. 1 and 2 (2001): 295.

[105]Raendchen, "The *Hiit-kong* Codes of the Lao," 186.

phi ban (ผีบ้าน) or the *phi muang* (ผีเมือง). The rituals are usually performed by a spirit doctor (*mau phi*-หมอผี) or a Brahmin priest (*paam*-พราหมณ์) by rehearsing the ceremonial verses, giving offerings to the spirits, and reading omens for the future.[106]

When the Buddhist monks are the main celebrants (as in the celbrations for months 3 and 4), they perform the rituals themselves which then give the Buddhist followers the opportunity to make offerings to the monks. The primary purposes for the rituals for both months are to worship Buddha and to hear his teachings. However, the rituals in months 6, 8, 11, and 12 are performed in honor of the three Buddhist gems, which are the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The Buddhist monks are the main celebrants and the focal point of worship. In the rituals, the Buddhist followers offer praise and give offerings to the monks.[107]

The Theravada Buddhist influence has had a major effect on the *hiit-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสอง) rites. This allows the Buddhist monks to be included in the majority of the rituals, although the social character or role of the *hiit-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสอง) has not been altered by the effects of Buddhism. Describing the *hiit-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสอง) social activities, Raendchaen states:

> Communal activities performed according to the prescriptions of the *hiit-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสอง) ; making offerings together; worshipping the same guardian spirits within one community; eating, drinking and celebrating together strengthens the inner unity and stability of the community, and besides, is a means of conflict prevention and problem solving.[108]

In support of the heavy influence of Buddhism on the *hiit-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบ สอง), a Thai sociologist Sukanya Patrachai and his colleages in the Department of Social Science and Humanities, Khon Kaen University, comment as follows:

> Generally, the beliefs of the Isan people are a combination between their ancient beliefs and Buddhism. The same is true for the village of Ban Pet [*Khon Kaen, Northeast Thailand*] where the people were still holding to that kind of combination. Later their syncretistic beliefs became the traditional customs [*chareet*] because these customs were being practiced for a long time. The traditional customs are presently known as *hiit-sipsong* [ฮีตสิบสอง]. Although there might have been an occasional pause in observing these traditional customs, for the most part, the villagers still hold to and observe the *hiit-sipsong* [ฮีตสิบสอง] until the present time (trans. from the Thai by the author).[109]

There is a belief in the "absolute necessity" of carrying out the traditional customs, which is the *hiit-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสอง), based on the Isan and Lao worldview

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[106]Ibid., 187.

[107]Ibid., 188.

[108]Ibid., 189.

[109]Patrachai, Dessuankoke, Leopenwong, Somsoon, and Buasri, "*Ong prakob nai kan dumnern chiwit kong chaoban moo ban pet dumbon ban pet amphoe muang chanwat khonkaen*, 42.

concerning the universe. The universe is held to consist of a number of worlds of *muang phi* (the world of spirits – เมืองผี), *muang thevada* (the world of angels – เมือง เทวดา) and *muang fa* (the world of heavenly beings – เมืองฟ้า), *muang kon* (the visible earthly world of human beings-เมืองคน), and *muang puen din* (the underwater and water worlds-เมืองพื้นดิน). Ngaosrivathana and Breazeale articulate the Lao beliefs concerning the heavens and the earth:

> The Lao believed that the heavens existed from all eternity and underneath the heavens lie sixteen terrestrial worlds and that earth is eternal. After many thousands of years, fire will descend from heaven and destroy the earth, reducing it to a mass of water. Yet, afterward, the beings dwelling in the first heaven will re-establish the earth to its previous condition.[110]

In view of this concept of the universe, the people who originated from or are influenced by the Lan Chang, which is the modern-day Laos and Isan region of Northeast Thailand, believe that humans hold little power and are highly subjected to the control of beings from other worlds. Nevertheless, humans can influence beings from other worlds and show favors toward them by "following the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)* codes and regularly making offerings and sacrifice as prescribed by the *hiit-sipsong (ฮี ตสิบสอง)*."[111]

The *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites were believed to be created, determined, and sanctioned by beings from other worlds. Since human beings are regulated and upheld by the spirits, the *thevada (เทวดา)*, the heavenly beings, and the *hiit-sipsong (ฮี ตสิบสอง)*, severe consequences can result if the rites are not observed carefully. The penalties resulting from ignoring or refusing to follow the rites are described by Oliver Raendchen, Lecturer from the Institut für Ethnologie, Universität Münster, Germany:

> Individuals or whole communities that do not follow the code, are thought to be punished by the powers of the other worlds, through natural catastrophes, illnesses and epidemics, war, poverty, death, fire, drought or flood etc. On the other side, many of the sections in the *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่)* describe that, in following the code, the *baan* (village-บ้าน) and the *muang (เมือง)* will be protected from catastrophes, etc.[112]

The significance of participating in the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites can not be overstated. They are the traditional customs for the 12 lunar months, and they afford members of the Isan society an opportunity to gather together in order to make merit in every month of the year. According to Natalang's perspective, the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* is a "cycle" or "routine" that provides a way to make merit by

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[110]"The Kingdom of Laos: An Edited Reprint of the 1759 Universal History," 193.

[111]Raendchen, "The *Hiit-kong* Codes of the Lao," 189.

[112]Ibid., 189.

supporting Buddhism all year round.[113] As a result, the Isan have the chance to attend the Buddhist temples on a regular basis and to learn more of the teachings of Buddhism.   In addition, the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* provides the people living in the same community the way to interact and know each other. Finally, the rites offer an avenue for the Isan to be sacrificial and to work as a unified community.[114]

   According to Raendchen, when two persons in conflict take part together in the rites of *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)*, it is viewed as a gesture of forgiveness and agreement. On the other hand, if they do not partake in the rituals together, they are considered to "lose face." [115] This then would result in the displeasure of beings in other worlds (such as the *phi* and the *thevada)* and, calamities or tragedies will consequently be the inevitable outcome.

   The person who chooses to ignore the observance of these rites will not only be sanctioned by the beings of other worlds but also the Isan society members. Adison Piangket quotes on this situation from the *wattanatam isan (วัฒนธรรมอีสาน)* as follows: "It [*hiit-sipsong*] is like a law except that it does not specify legal punishments. The society will carry out customary punishment of any person who breaks any of the rules specified in the *hiit-sipsong* [ฮีตสิบสอง] " (trans. from the Thai by the author). [116]

   Although influences from outside the Isan region will continue to challenge the continuation of the traditional customs embodied in the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* and *kong-sipsee (คองสิบสี)*, the Isan (Thai-Lao) will adapt these traditional customs to serve their religious purposes. Natalang agrees on this point as follows:

> Although the practices of the traditional customs or the twelve monthly rites are being interfered with and impeded by the force of capitalism and the power of the state, resulting in the adding of more festivals and public holidays to Thailand's annual calendar, nevertheless the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)* will still continue at the villagers' level according to the agricultural production cycles and the local culture in the context of the changes (trans. from the Thai by the author). [117]

   Since the rites, ceremonies, and festivals are only the concrete expressions of the Isan's underlying values and beliefs, these outward expressions can be modified or adapted to changing situations, but the internal principles of the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง)* code remains operative. The Isan villagers use the rituals and ceremonies as a way to communicate the meaning of their beliefs and to stress the principles, values, norms, and morals to which they cling.

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[113]Natalang, *Poum panya isan*, 72.

[114]Sribounnadaed and Promdao, *Hiitban kongwat*, 11.

[115]Raendchen, "The *Hiit-kong* Codes of the Lao," 189.

[116]Adison Piangket, *Khon Kaen Provincial Office of Education, Wattanatam isan* (Isan Culture - วัฒนธรรมอีสาน) (in Thai) (Khon Kaen, Thailand: Khon Kaen Provincial Office of Education, unknown), 92.

[117]Natalang, *Poum panya isan*, 67.

The *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites, as traditional customs or rules to be practiced for each month of the year, are believed to have been established by the Isan and Lao's ancestors in the ancient period. These rites are designed with at least three purposes and resulting benefits in mind. First, the rites were designed for members of the Isan and Lao societies to have the opportunity to assemble and carry out monthly merit-making ceremonies throughout the year. Second, they were established to allow the Isan and Lao peoples to have a time to participate regularly in the activities of the Buddhist temple and to listen to the sermons on the Buddhist dharma (teaching). Third, they were planned to indirectly urge the people to use their spare time to make sacrifices for the common good of the village or community. If anyone violates or disobeys any of the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites, the society will "chastise or punish him by finding serious grounds for dislike or prejudice against that person" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[118]

In addition, it should be noted that the Isan people in all of the Northeast provinces of Thailand still remain faithful in observing the twelve monthly rites or *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง).* The only difference is that one Isan province might place heavier emphasis on one rite or *hiit (ฮีต)* above the other. For example, the Ubonratchatani province stresses the Pansa Candle Procession during the *kao pansa* (เข้าพรรษา) festival; Nakon Panom province stresses the "flowing boat" ceremony; and, Roi Et province emphasizes the *bun pravet (บุญพะเหวด)* ceremony. All five provinces mentioned are mainly placing their emphasis on the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites which are designed to celebrate the Buddhist religion. Yasothon is an example of a province which celebrates the rite that pertains to an agricultural lifestyle and observes the *bun bungfai (บุญบั้งไฟ)* festival in order to invoke the favor of the rain god for rain when they commence their rice farming.

The Twelve Hiit-Sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง) *Monthly Rites*

The life of the Isan people is intimately attached to these monthly rites or traditional customs; and, apart from the rites, the Isan society and culture would not be able to fully function because they live in a religious culture. In order to survive as a distinct region, the Isan will have to continue making needed adaptations to these rites. This perspective is supported by Wansri Pynyaprachoom, the educational supervisor of the Roi Et Metropolitan Office, who has expressed in his findings that the present twelve monthly merit-making traditional customs (*hiit-sipsong*-ฮีตสิบสอง) have developed and are believed to be relevant to the modern age.[119]

Although the Isan, like most of Thailand, continue to face the forces of modernization, globalization, and the infiltration of other religions, including

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[118]Charuboot Ruangsuwan, "*Hiit-sipsong kong-sipsee* (Twelve Rites and Fourteen Rules - ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่)," (in Thai) ed. Faculty of Teachers' College (Ubonratchatani, Thailand: Ubonratchatani Teachers' College, 1977), 98.

[119]Wansri Punyaprachoom, "*Puttanadan kong prapanee taamboon papa amphoe muang changwat roi et* (The Development of Pha-pa Merit-Making Tradition in Muang District, Roi Et Province-พัฒนาการของประเพณีทำบุญผ้าป่าอำเภอเมือง จังหวัดร้อยเอ็ด)," (in Thai) (Master's thesis, Mahasarakham University, 1999), 69.

Christianity, this region, and certain other parts of Thailand, seems to withstand its disintegrating power. Punyaprachoom further indicates the changing situation in Isan as follows: "In the present situation in our society, there are inflows of foreign cultures into the Muang district of Roi Et, but our people remain strongly secured in carrying out the *hiit-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสอง) rites" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[120] A French official once made an insightful observation: "The survival of these religious ceremonies and rites confirms that Thailand possesses the happy talent of being able to adapt herself to progress without renouncing her traditions."[121] The twelve *hiit-sipong* (ฮีตสิบสอง) monthly rites previously observed by the Isan will continue to influence and provide assurance for the people of the Isan region for many years to come.

The first *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *kaokam* (เข้ากรรม). This rite provides a way for the Isan to demonstrate gratitude to their mothers because only after a son has been ordained as a monk and has gone through the process of *kaokam* (เข้ากรรม), can he repay his mother for her goodness. Concerning the worship of spirit cults, the traditional rite of *kaokam* (เข้ากรรม) also allows the Isan villagers to worship the *phi tan* (ผีแถน) (creator god), ancestral spirits, and guardian-territorial spirits of heroes and the village, town, or provincial founders (*mahesak lakban*-ผีมเหศักดิ์ หลักบ้าน, and the *phi maheysak lakmunag*-ผีมเหศักดิ์ หลักเมือง). Concerning the support of Buddhism, *kaokam* (เข้ากรรม) affords the Buddhists laymen the opportunity to accumulate merit by making offerings and listening to a sermon of the monks in the *kaokam* rite, and observing religious precepts.

The second *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *kounlan* (คูณลาน). This rite has the primary purpose of bringing blessing, good luck, happiness, prosperity, and protection to the farmer, his equipment and plowing animals, and the ritual participants. In addition, it is a rite of thanksgiving and preparation for another bountiful harvest in the following year. Concerning the Buddhistic aspect of the ceremony, *kounlan* (คูณลาน) allows for the Buddhist monks to also ritualistically bless the harvest and the host and participants of friends and kinsmen to make merit by making offerings to the monks, and observing the religious precepts. Concerning Brahmanism, *kounlan* (คูณลาน) provides a time for the Brahmin priest to perform a *baisee sookwan* (บายศรีสู่ขวัญ) ceremony in order to restore life and rejuvenation back to the rice. Socially, *kounlan* (คูณลาน) offers community solidarity for every villager in the village and its surrounding villages to come together at night for joyful events and amusement. Additionally, it accesses the whole community to receive blessing, happiness, protection, and prosperity.

The third *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *kaochee* (ข้าวจี่). This rite is similar to the first fruit offerings in the Old Testament. After the harvest, the Isan bring the first fruit of their harvest rice and make offering to the monks, listen to the sermons and observe the religious precepts, and accumulate the merit. This therefore accomplishes the religious purpose in regard to Buddhism. Socially, it allows community solidarity and harmony among the monks, novices, and villagers celebrating together in the

[120]Ibid., 58.

[121]Raymound Plion-Bernier, *Festivals and Ceremonies of Thailand*, translated by Joann Elizabeth Soulier, French (Unknown: Unkown, 1973), 7.

temple and having a good time of fellowship. Also, in the third month, a *makabucha (มาฆบูชา)* day (the birth, death and enlightment of the Buddha) is celebrated and more merit is added to one's storehouse of merit.

The fourth *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *pravet (พระเวทด)* rite which accentuates the desire of the Isan people who desire to escape the feeling of injustice and oppression under their current life conditions. Thus, the Isan have been performing *pravet (พระ เวทด)* to indicate their sincere waiting to be born in the reign of the future Buddha, Prasri Ariya Mettrai, who provide a period of happiness, prosperity, fertility, justice and equality. Religiously, the *pravet* also allows the accumulation of merit through worshipping the monks, receiving religious precepts, and listening to sermons. In the ritual, the animistic beliefs of the spirit cults are included. During part of the ritual, the elders will invite the *thevada (เทวดา)* and guardian spirits to be a part of the ceremony and to listen to a series of sermons. Socially, the *pravet (พระเวทด)* builds community solidarity through its involvement.

The fifth *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *songnam (สรงน้ำ)*. This rite stresses the honor of the ancestors, the dousing of sacred objects (Buddhist statues) and respected people (monks, parents, and elders). Also, *songnam (สรงน้ำ)* provides merit-making opportunities by offering food to the monks, and by receiving and observing the religious precepts. Also, during *songnam (สรงน้ำ)*, sins can be washed away by pouring water over the Buddhist statues, monks, and elders. Concerning the animistic beliefs and practice of the spirit cults, *songnam (สรงน้ำ)* is a time when merit-making rituals are aimed at dedicating accumulated merit to one's deceased parents. In addition, on the second day of *songnam (สรงน้ำ)*, the dead are allowed to visit the living. Also, annual offerings and rituals are made to village or town guardian-territorial spirits (the *phi puta*, the *phi mahesak lakban-ผีมเหศักดิ์ หลักบ้าน*, and the *phi maheysak lakmunag-ผีมเหศักดิ์ หลักเมือง*) when they receive their annual offerings. Sometimes, ordination of monks is allowed in order for a son to transfer merit to their deceased loved ones and thus enabling them to be reborn and not continue wandering around the village. Besides the Buddhist and animistic beliefs manifested in the *songnam (สรงน้ำ)*, there is also the Brahmanistic elements. At the same time, the *baisee sookwan (บายศรีสู่ขวัญ)* is performed to bring happiness and good health. Socially, *songnam (สรงน้ำ)* gives the individuals a chance for amusement in playing water games and in building community solidarity. Also, in some areas of Isan, it is common to have the people release birds and fish into the lakes, ponds, or rivers to gain merit, thus resulting in bringing good luck, happiness, and prosperity.

The sixth *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *bungfai (บั้งไฟ)*. This rite serves the Buddhist religious functions as well as the animistic beliefs in the spirit cults of the Isan ancestors. Concerning the religious importance of Buddhism, *bungfai (บั้งไฟ)* makes provision for the Isan to store up more merit by making offerings of food to the monks and additionally presenting their sons for ordination into the monkhood for the period of at least three months during the Buddhist Lent. The importance of Buddhism is also recognized through its activities of promotion of its monks to higher ranks. Concerning the animistic importance of the spirit cults, the Isan recognize the role of their creator god *phi tan (ผีแถน)*, also called the *phaya tan (พญาแถน)*, who also is believed to be in control of the rain. The worship of the *phi tan (ผีแถน)* is seen as essential for the rainfall to take place at the beginning of the rice-planting season, and, additionally, the people believe that by performing *bungfai (บั้งไฟ)* the people will live

in peace and will not experience diseases. Socially, *bungfai (บั้งไฟ)* provides a time of merrymaking and amusement for the whole community. As the villagers and their households get involved in the *bungfai (บั้งไฟ)* festival, community solidarity and harmony are built up.

The seventh *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *sumhah (ซำฮะ)*. This rite stresses the primary importance of the animistic beliefs and the worship of the spirit cults of the ancestors. It is significant that this rite takes place prior to rice planting because the Isan hold that a good year with a plentiful rice season is only possible after a proper recognition and worship of the ancestral spirits and other guardian-territorial spirits. At the same time, a ceremony to clean and get rid of any evil or bad spirits is conducted in the village. Additionally, it provides community solidarity and harmony through the animistic and Budddhistic rituals and ceremonies and a chance to make collective merit. The objectives of all the rituals and ceremonies are fertility, good luck, happiness, and prosperity.

The eighth *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *kaowatsa (เข้าวัสสา)*. This rite is of tremendous religious significance for Buddhism and to a lesser degree to Brahmanism. The *kaowatsa (เข้าวัสสา)* allows the people to accumulate merit by making offerings to the monks and observing religious precepts and prepares the Buddhist monks for entering into three months of Lent. Here, the Brahmanistic *sookwan (สู่ขวัญ)* ceremony is performed for the monks who prepare to enter Lent. In addition to the opportunity for the accumulation of merit, the people can receive protection and blessing from attending the chanting of the monks. Socially, *kaowatsa (เข้าวัสสา)* makes provision for the people to come together for amusement and for the building of community solidarity and harmony.

The ninth *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *kaopradupdin (ข้าวประดับดิน)*. This rite has the primary purpose for fulfilling the animistic beliefs of the spirit cults and its integration into Buddhism. Here, Animism (spirit cults) and Buddhism (merit making) consolidate their beliefs in order to respond to the felt needs of the Isan people in the areas of gratitude, respect, continuity with the ancestors, kinship relationships and deliverance from hell. During *kaopradupdin (ข้าวประดับดิน)*, the dead relatives (the *phi prêt-ผีเปรต*) who have gone to hell because they had committed sins and did not have sufficient merit to escape are believed to be released for a time to seek food from relatives who are alive. The dead relatives who are the *phi pret (ผีเปรต)* can receive merit transferred from the storehouse of their relatives who are alive. The merit transferred can be sufficient to result in their dead relatives currently in hell to be reborn in the next life. It is believed that the ceremonially pouring of water on the ground serves as a means to transfer merit to the *phi pret (ผีเปรต)* relatives.

The tenth *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *kaosahk (ข้าวสาก)*. This rite is similar to the *kaopradupdin (ข้าวประดับดิน)* which focuses on maintaining continuity with and expressing gratitude to the dead loved ones and ancestors. Again, Buddhism and Animism have joined their strengths to respond to the felt needs of the Isan. The merit acquired by making food offerings to the monks is transferred to the dead loved ones and ancestors by the water ceremony performed by the monks. The spirits of the ancestors are worshipped and small meal packages are prepared and laid out in different places to feed the spirits of the dead loved ones and ancestors. Another important *phi (ผี)* or spirit called the *phi tahek (ผีตาแฮก)* is also given special attention during this rite. According to the Isan's animistic beliefs, the *phi tahek (ผีตาแฮก)*

watches over the rice paddies and has protected the rice plants until they are mature. The guardian-territorial spirit called the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* is also venerated by food offerings performed by a spirit practitioner called *cham (จ้ำ)*. In addition to fulfilling the animistic and Buddhist beliefs concerning merit and the spirits, the network of kinship benefits socially. The close relatives are able to come together for kinship building and for showing respect for one another. The village community also has a chance to build community solidarity.

The eleventh *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *aukwatsa (ออกวัสสา)*. This rite is often referred to as *aukpansa (ออกพรรษา)*. This rite largely emphasizes the importance of Buddhism. Knowledge and experience are transferred from one monk to the other. The senior monks take advantage of this rite to transfer to the younger monks the discipline training which they have received. Regarding chances for merit making, the villagers gain merit by worshipping the Three Gems—the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and making wax candle castles to present to the monks. The worship of the Buddha's footprints is especially emphasized through the sailing of candlelight vessels. Socially, the village communities will have a time of amusement and of building community solidarity. An important social event as part of the *aukpansa (ออกพรรษา)* festival is the boat race. Although Buddhism has its main stage in the *aukpansa (ออกพรรษา)* rite, the animistic beliefs also have a shared part of the rite. The boat race, which initially came after the rite of *aukpansa (ออกพรรษา)*, was an act of worship to the *Naga*'s (serpant's) 15 ancestors.

During the rite of *aukpansa (ออกพรรษา)*, another important Brahmin traditional custom, which originated in Central Thailand but widely practiced in the Isan region and is now becoming very popular, is the *Loy Krathong (ลอยกระทง)*. The traditional custom supports the Isan's animistic beliefs. It grants the Isan a chance to seek forgiveness of the goddess Me Kongka, the Mother of Water, for polluting the water and also provides a chance for the people to float their sins and calamities away with a small candlelight vessel. Socially, the *Loy Krathong (ลอยกระทง)* makes available a time of building solidarity in the community.

The twelfth *hiit-sipsong* rite is the *katin (กฐิน)*. This rite serves both social and religious (Buddhist) purposes. In its religious support of Buddhism, the *katin (กฐิน)* offerings attend to the need of the monks by providing them with a set new of robes and other necessary supplies. In return for the offerings, the people earn a huge amount of merit which they can use in this life or transfer to the next life. According to the Isan's belief, the merit earned from the offering of *katin (กฐิน)* is sufficient to guarantee one's position in heaven.

Compared to all the offerings in all the twelve rites, the *katin (กฐิน)* offering is the most expensive. Rarely can an impoverished person afford the *katin (กฐิน)* ceremony. Socially, the *katin (กฐิน)* rite allows family members, friends, kinsmen, and village members a time of elaborate amusement in the evening. Again, the rite makes available a time for the building of community solidarity as people gather together to enjoy the festival. Because of the expensive and elaborated nature of the *katin (กฐิน)* festival, any person or group of people who sponsors the *katin (กฐิน)* offering receives enormous social recognition in addition to the merits gained.

In addition to the Buddhist Lent in July and the *katin (กฐิน)* offering in November, the Isan Buddhists can make robe offerings to the monks by giving a *taud papa (ทอดผ้าป่า)* offering. The flexibility of the *taud papa (ทอดผ้าป่า)* allows the offering to

be made by people of any economic level anytime during the year. While the recipient of the *katin (กฐิน)* offering is the abbot of the temple, the recipient in the *taud papa (ทอดผ้าป่า)* can be a monk. Although less merit is received from *taud papa (ทอดผ้าป่า)* than from the *katin (กฐิน)* offering, the consequence of the merit also will guarantee a birth in the next life as one of the heavenly beings and also to be liked by both humans and the *thevada (เทวดา)*. Another important reward is that the sponsor of the *taud papa (ทอดผ้าป่า)* offering will be reborn into a ruling position. The funds raised from the *taud papa (ทอดผ้าป่า)* offerings can also be used for building schools, community centers, and other charitable causes.

In summary, the significance and practices of the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs (of merit making) can be seen in five important points. First of all, the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs of merit making of the Isan are one of the cultural features which set the Isan apart from other regions of Thailand. As a *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* or customary law, the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs have been used as behavior norms or standards of conduct.

Second, in contrast to statutory laws or national constitutions, the local Isan villagers recognize the power of the customary law to be more potent for their daily decisions in the village than the statutory law because the customary law responds to the needs and conditions of an Isan community and specifies a person's role, rights, and obligations in that community. It serves as a legal cultural law to control individuals and local village communities. As a custom, the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs of merit making can neither be enforced legally nor can it have legal punitive consequences, but they are socially enforced.

Third, even after the Thai kingdom had seized the Isan region from Lan Chang, the Thai government still allowed the Isan region to govern themselves according to how the Isan region had been previously governed, that is, primarily by the customary law of the *hiit-sipsong kong-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสองคองสิบสี่)*. Only recently has the Thai government begun legislating the Isan region according to its statutory law or national constitution; and, even after that, the majority of the Isan still continue to exert the influence of the customary law of *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* as part of their village life.

Fourth, the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs still has an important function of building community harmony, unity, and loyalty as well as providing means for accumulating merit throughout the year. Finally, the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs both recognizes and emphasizes both Buddhism and the worship of the spirit cults of the Isan predecessors as well as they are believed to be have been created, determined, and sanctioned by supernatural beings or *thevada*. Thus, severe consequences are believed to come upon the village community which chooses to ignore observing it.

Summary Conclusions

After extensive literature research, personal observations and ministry experience, and many Isan interviews, the author has concluded that there are five major belief systems of the Isan people which function together like the parts of a complicated machine. As the author studied the temporal and spiritual needs of the Isan society, he became aware of these five groupings of beliefs in his own ministry.

Ideas jell from many sources and combinations of experiences, and the author is not aware of any other writer who has organized his or her material in these five categories. Also, it is common knowledge to anyone who has studied Isan history and anthropology that three streams of religious thought have emerged in Isan to form a syncretistic blend of religion quite distinct from the indigenous Animism of the region or of the immigrant Buddhism and Brahmanism from India and the neighboring areas through the centuries.

These five major Isan belief systems, blended together with the social, Buddhist and traditional customary values, give the Isan its own distinct worldview. Since the five major belief systems form the foundation for these values and worldview, they will each be briefly summarized below. A more detailed summary for each of these systems is given in the appendices (Appendix AA through AF). These appendices consolidate and simplify ideas from the long narrative text and elaborate on the key conclusions given at the end of the chapter so as to better understand these important concepts.

The author has drawn five major conclusions from the five major Isan's belief systems:

1. Buddhism appeals to the Isan people in two major ways: (1) in Buddhism a person can work and gain merit toward heaven while at the same time avoiding hell, and, (2) Buddhism offers a chance to stay in connectedness with the dead loved ones while still maintaining those kinship relationships even after death as well as to express gratitude to elders and other relatives that have passed away. In addition, the Isan show respect for their predecessors by continuing their ancestral teaching and way of life and by conducting merit-making activities in the temple and transferring all the merit gained to their dead fathers.

2. The animistic belief systems provide the Isan people with consistent ways of dealing with their present felt needs for survival, safety, security, and prosperity. In addition, Buddhism reinforces these felt needs. Right relationships with the *phi (ผี)* or the *thevada (เทวดา)* (spiritual beings) through rituals and ceremonies result in benefits in terms of protection and prosperity.

3. The notions of karma, merit, reincarnation and sin constantly work in the minds of the Isan people and as a result have developed a value system which is merit-oriented and karma-conscious. Thus, in fear of bad karma, which can have an effect on their future life, the Isan people perpetually are making daily decisions and living their lives in consideration of the karma and its effect on their future reincarnations.

4. The *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี), the *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*, or the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs (which serve as customary law among the Isan) have the force of a norm or standard which regulates and controls behavior and decision making among the Isan. Therefore, it is unlikely that those who do not ascribe to these traditional customs will get away without incurring some measure of sanctions from the household, the kin group, or the village community. As a result, the beliefs according to the *chareet prapaynee* or *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* will act as a deterrent against any religious decision to convert to another religion.

5. The *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี), the *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*, or the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs have its basis in the religion of Buddhism, the animistic beliefs of the spirit cults, and Brahmanism. They have been so intertwined together in order to respond to the Isan's spirit felt needs and to provide a stable force for them in precarious times. In addition, they provide the opportunity for merit making and community involvement.

CHAPTER 3

THE ISAN'S VALUES WHICH DIRECTLY INFLUENCE
THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Introduction

An analysis of the relationships between the Isan's five belief systems and their value system will now be undertaken. In considering the Isan value system, the author has selected sixteen Isan worldview values which directly influence the Isan's decision-making process (which will be considered in the next chapter). This Isan value system consists of nine Isan social values, three Buddhist religious values, and four traditional customary values. Together with the five belief systems, they form the foundation for Isan's decision making process, and especially with regard to conversion to Christianity. Their value system is a key determinant on whether or not they will choose Christianity or remain as Buddhist-Animists.

The Relationship Between Beliefs and Values

Isan behavior patterns have been the focus of many Thai and Western anthropologists, sociologists, and missiologists alike. The author is especially interested in the root cause of these behaviors, particularly in regard to the decision-making process utilized by this people group. According to Jan van Deth, a German Professor of Political Science and International Comparative Social Research at the University of Mannheim and Elinor Scarborough, a British political scientist at the University of Essex, "Values are at the root of behavior."[1] Like all ancient social groups, Isan society has strongly held values and a complex value system that significantly impacts their decision-making process. Van Deth and Scarborough expound on this subject:

> Values are not about action as such but, rather, abstract principles with which action is to be conformed; concepts or purposes or ends to be realized in determining course of action, rather than determinate principles of action.[2]

In order to comprehend the complexity of the decision-making process of the Isan specifically and the Thai generally, a careful consideration of their values and value system must be observed. American anthropologist George M. Foster,

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[1]Jan W. van Deth and Elinor Scarborough, "The Concept of Values," in *The Impact of Values*, ed. Jan van Deth, Elinor Scarborough (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 21.

[2]Ibid., 30.

Professor of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley, also describes the importance of understanding the value system of a culture:

> A value system gives stability to a culture. . . It justifies us in our actions or thoughts and reassures us that we are behaving as our society expects. The rightness of our way of life is thereby validated. We know that behavior which significantly deviates from the norms established by our value system will be met by threats and punishment, both legal and supernatural, and that behavior that conforms to the norms will be rewarded in a variety of ways. Most individuals find security in conforming to the standards of their culture's value system.[3]

The Isan values in their value system provide the people with some measure of daily stability and security. The value system gives the Isan people the moral standards by which they behave and conduct themselves. In regard to a value in one's value system, American social psychologist Milton Rokeach clearly defined it thus:

> A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance.[4]

Rokeach considers values to be "standards that guide ongoing activities" and value systems to be "general plans employed to solve conflicts and to make decisions."[5] An individual's value system provides him with principles and rules which assist him in making choices and solving conflicts. In any given situation, a person's values are set in motion in response to his circumstances and he makes decisions or solves conflicts in conformity to this value system. Thai anthropologist Patya Saihoo agrees:

> Since action stems from desire and decision to act, and desire and decision are determined by beliefs, values and goals of the person regarding that particular matter under consideration, acceptance or rejection of development proposals will depend on such beliefs and values as the person entertains. If the actions proposed are contrary to the beliefs and values held, they will not be undertaken.[6]

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[3]George M. Foster, *Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technological Change* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 19.

[4]Milton Rokeach, *The Nature of Human Values* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 5.

[5]Ibid., 12.

[6]Patya Saihoo, "Beliefs, Values and Goals of Farmers in Relation to Agriculture Development," *The Journal of Social Science* 9, no. 1 (1974): 43.

Hence, values and a value system supply standards, principles, a sense of stability and security and rules for behavior and actions. The Isan people, along with the Thai, are similarly guided by their values and value system. Phon Sangsingkeo, the founder of modern psychiatry and mental health in Thailand, and a native of Northeast Thailand, notes:

Because of its long history of independence along with the institutions of monarchy and Buddhism, Thai culture and values systems are considered to have been well preserved and respected.[7]

Thai sociologists Penke Prachakchanuk and Armdeuan Sordmanee also note the significance of traditional values in the rural areas of Thailand, including the region of Northeast Thailand:

The Thais have basic values of traditional societies such as values derived from life under the influence of nature or environment; staying together as groups; living together as kinsmen; Buddhist teaching and beliefs - such as the belief in merit, power and fate, gentleness, *krengchai (เกรงใจ)*, hierarchical power, self-contentment, patience, avoidance of conflict. When one compares the rural and urban Thai, the rural Thai [*including the Northeastern Thai or Isan*] tends to preserve traditional values (trans. from the Thai by the author).[8]

Sobha Spielmann, a senior psychologist and Director of the Graduate Program in Criminology and Criminal Justice in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the Mahidol University in Bangkok, conducted research of the Thai values and concluded the following:

The dominant Thai value system and its associated set of norms and behavior patterns, mainly derived from Buddhist doctrine, were absorbed from early childhood on. Major portions of Buddhist doctrine that involved important views on family life were recited in temples. Social relations were characterized by verticality, deference of subordinates towards superiors. These 'respect patterns' were universal and based upon status inequalities in all social relationships. The social hierarchies were determined by such factors as age, power, education, wealth and religious or government role, and were well entrenched within each individual. The older - younger and the senior - junior pattern guided the relationships effectively, so that the younger would always show respect for the elder. Status differences were reflected in conversation, since the pronouns used varied with rank and role of the speaker and that of the one spoken to. The family offered early and ideal training for this pervasive

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[7]Phon Sangsingkeo, "Buddhism and Some Effects on the Rearing of Children in Thailand," in *Mental Health Research in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. William Caudill and Tsung-Yi Lin (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1969), 293.

[8]Penkhae Prachonpachanuk and Armeuan Sordmanee, *Kaniyom kong chao chonnabot tai: Kaniyom tang wattookam kaniyom tang rapiep prapaynee (Values of the Thai Rural People: Materialistic and Customary Values-ค่านิยมของชาวชนบทไทย: ค่านิยมทางวัตถุกับค่านิยมทางระเบียบประเพณี)* (in Thai), Research Report no. 35 (Bangkok: Institute of Behavior Science, Srinakharinwirot University, 1986), 25.

deferential behavior. Family matters had priority over individual concerns; on the other hand, an individual was always respected in Thai culture.[9]

Although some of the values and value system are common in all regions of Thailand, there are, however, values and value system that are locally and regionally distinct. William Klausner made the following notation concerning the values that function in the Isan villages of the Northeast and influence the decision-making process of the Isan:

> Values operative at the village level that do and will cause most conflict with American *cum* western values center around the concepts of time, responsibility, accuracy, social harmony, family solidarity, respect of elders, behavior between the sexes, etc.[10]

After studying and evaluating the values of the Isan people of the Northeast, the author has come to the conclusion that there are three major values which make up the entire basis of the Isan value system which are primary factors in their decision-making process. The author places these values in three categories: (1) the social values; (2) the Buddhist religious values; and, (3) the raditional customary values.

In summary, the relationship between Isan's belief systems and value system can be stated in three important points. First of all, people find security and stability in conforming to the standards of their cultural and belief systems. Second, a value system is an organized belief system which specifies certain preferable course of action or decision making over the others. A person's desires and decisions are determined by beliefs, values, and goals. Consequently, a decision to accept or reject another religion by the Isan Buddhists is dependent on their beliefs and values. Second, the Isan's value system is derived from life under the influence of Buddhism (such as the beliefs in merit, karma, reincarnation, power and fate, gentleness, *krengchai (เกรงใจ)*, hierarchical power, self-contentment, patience, and avoidance of conflict), Animism (from the animistic and ancestral worship of the spirit cults) and from Brahmanism as well as from living together interdependently as kinsmen and community, and from living under the influence of nature. Third, a value system serves as a standard to guide in decision making. A person's action in deciding whether or not to take a course of action to make religious conversion or not is likely to conform to one's values. A decision contrary to their beliefs and values is unlikely to be taken. A person's decision making as to whether to convert to Christianity or not will be supported by his value system which assures that the person's behavior will be as expected by society.

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[9]Sobha Spielmann, "The Family in Thailand and Drug Demand Reduction: Problems of Urban Thai Society in Transition," January 1994, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime - *Bulletin on Narcotics*, 12 October 2006 <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/bulletin/bulletin_1994-01-01_1_page005.html>.

[10]William J. Klausner, A Memorandum to Research Officer, USIS, Bangkok, "Notes on Values, Media, Habits and Some Central Attitudes of Rural Thailand As They Apply to USIS Program" n.d., 3.

The Social Values

These values form the relational attitude of the Isan and control how he relates to others in his community and society. The social values define one's role and status and shape his attitude and behaviors. They specify the standard and mode of conduct for individuals in their daily life throughout Isan society. Thai sociologist Srisunrang Poolthupya, a professor at Thammasart University, defined social values as "the values that a society seems to uphold or finds important for the society."[11] In this section, the author identifies and dominant social values characterized by the Isan people.

Respect and/or Deference to One's Parents, Elders, and Superiors

Among the strongest of Isan social values is that of paying respect to and/or deferring to one's parents, elders, and superiors. The Thai and the Isan social order is based on a social hierarchy. Respect and deference are expected toward those higher up in the hierarchy. American sociologist Lucien M. Hanks, who conducted extensive research among Thai peasants, concludes:

> Each Thai regards every other person in the social order as higher or lower than himself. The elder, more literate, richer persons tend to be higher due to greater virtue or 'merit,' as the Buddhist *bun (บุญ)* is usually translated. Based on these differences in social standing, a hierarchy arises where each person pays deference to all who stand above and is deferred to by all below. At the top is the king, and at the bottom some lone person who survives miserably in the dark jungle.[12]

Respect and obedience to authority figures are common among the Central Thai. Herbert P. Phillips, an American anthropologist who conducted extensive research in Bang Chan Village of Central Thailand, indicates that "the vast majority of these [*the respondents*] simply do, or feel they have to do, what the '*phuu-ying-yai* (ผู้ยิ่งใหญ่) tells them.'"[13] The *phuu-ying-yai (ผู้ยิ่งใหญ่)* are the elders of the community or kin group and parents, but it can also refer to one's superiors. Phillips moreover emphasizes the "sense of esteem - respect, pleasure, honor, admiration, and thanks - that informants feel toward their superior."[14] Klausner, a world famous authority on the Isan culture who undertook a year of intensive field work in a Northeastern Thai

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[11]Srisurang Poolthupya, "Thai Customs and Social Values in the Ramakien," A paper presented at the International Conference on Thai Studies, New Delhi, India, 25th-27th February 1981, Paper No. 11, Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 1981).

[12]Lucien M. Hanks, "The Thai Social Order as Entourage and Circle," in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society* , ed. by William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch, 197-218, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975), 198.

[13]Herbert P. Phillips, "Thai Peasant Personality: A Case Study of Bang Chan Villagers," (Ph. D. diss., Cornell University, 1963), 277.

[14]Ibid., 279.

village as well as serving as staff, advisor and consultant to the Thai government and numerous Thai and foreign foundations, agrees:

> There was also an element of acceptance of the privilege of rank and status and the obligation to show respect, deference to and diffidence towards those on the higher rungs of the social ladder whether it was in terms of rank, seniority, wealth or power.[15]

Klausner further explains that "villager deference to those in power and appeasing, mollifying and accommodating the existence and exercise of such power on the part of villagers continues but with an increasing number of exceptions to the norm."[16] American anthropologist Robert L. Mole, who has extensively researched Thai values and behavior patterns, notes the same value and behavior pattern:

> There is always deference, courtesy and proper status respect formally expressed toward those in authority over the individual. . . However if the authority figure does not honor the accepted reciprocal relationships, the oppressed individual may simply quietly cease to follow higher directions.[17]

American sociologist John Embree agrees with the assessment thus:

> The father is head of the family and inheritance is through him. Various members of the family are expected to respect his word. If the father dies, the eldest son is supposed to look after his mother and siblings.[18]

Not only in society is respect and deference demonstrated, but also in domestic affairs within each household. In his comparative study on the Thai pattern of social organization, Japanese sociologist Koichi Mizuno elaborates on this point:

> The wife should serve her husband well by refraining from uttering harsh words and abusing him; she should not commit adultery; she should attend carefully to the household affairs by preparing the dishes and taking care of valuables and the hearth; she should manage the property her husband acquires; and finally she should respect her elders and her husband's relatives by following their

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[15]William J. Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past: Thai Society Thirty-Five Years Ago," A paper presented at the Symposium on Cultural Change in Asia/U.S., July 12-16 Bangkok, 1991, 4.

[16]William J. Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture* (Bangkok: The Siam Society Under Royal Patronage, 1993), 155.

[17]Robert L. Mole, *Thai Values and Behavior Patterns* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1973), 69.

[18]John Embree, "Thailand: A Loosely Structured Social System," *American Anthropologist* 52, no. 2 (1950): 3.

instructions.[19]

The social structure of the Isan region is similar to the rest of Thailand inasmuch as it exhibits classic characteristics of an affiliative society as described by Weerayudh Wichiarajote, Thai educator and sociologist at the University of Rhamkhamhaeng, Bangkok:

> Affiliative societies emphasize the paternal leaders. A younger person has to be obedient and fearfully respect the leader. As long as the leader is in the leading position, his followers also have power, but as soon as the leader retires or loses position his followers also lose it.[20]

A son demonstrates respect for his parents by being ordained as a monk so that he can earn merit for both his mother and his father. Tambiah points out "that a son should show gratitude to his parents by being ordained is [sic-as] part of village ideology and village expression of filial piety."[21] The Isan people not only display respect to their societal authority figures and within their own household, but also in their kin group circle. American anthropologist Jack M. Potter, an expert on Asian peasantry, comments:

> Outside one's immediate family, the members of one's bilateral kindred are the people to whom one owes the greatest respect, affection, and mutual support and cooperation. These are the closest relatives one has; and they are much closer than unrelated neighbors or fellow villagers in general. [22]

Inside the kin group, a leader called *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร)* undertakes the unique role and responsibility of handling all matters concerning the kin group. As one of the elders in the kin group, he is revered and his authority is respected. He is viewed as the bearer of the teachings, traditions, and customs of the ancestors or forefathers. As the important protector and defender of the traditions and customs of the kin group's ancestors, the *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร)* carefully follows the prescribed ways of the past and acts as the continuum from the past into the future. Regarding the *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร)'s* role, Klausner elaborates in details as follows:

> The *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร)* is 'chosen as the most respected elder within the kin group whose wisdom is recognized by all.' This respected and revered elder, possessing 'good character' and practicing 'proper behavior' as an ideal villager

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[19]Koichi Mizuno, "Thai Pattern of Social Organization: Note on a Comparative Study," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 6, no. 2 (September 1975): 129.

[20]Weerayudh Wichiarajote, Theory of Affiliative Verses Achieving Societies: A Comparative Approach to Thai Personality and Society, Second Thai-European Research Seminar, 12-14 June Saarbruecken, 1982, 13.

[21]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 103.

[22]Jack M. Potter, *Thai Peasant Social Structure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 137.

will act as advisor and arbiter in matters concerning blood relations. The appointment of *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร)* is an informal one and remaining in his position depends on how satisfactorily he is able to mediate and solve family problems and crises. The *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร)* may be called upon to settle disputes not only within kin groups but between other groups. Because of their respected position, their decisions are generally accepted. The *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร)* are invited to arbitrate such matters as marriage; divorce and separation; offenses against sexual taboos; personal quarrels between relatives involving petty theft, property rights etc. The *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร)* also acts as mediator in communication with the kin group's ancestral spirit who may be offended by bickering and social confrontation among kinsmen.[23]

Respectable, honorable, and deferential speech and behaviors are critical to maintaining one's social relationships with others in the Isan society. One's social status within Isan society is determined by his recognition of the authorities above him in the social hierarchy and his respect and deference to their decisions.

In the Northeast, the village is the social universe of one's life. The village ancestral and traditional/customary authority is invested in the village elders. They ultimately have the most power in deciding matters of religious belief and practice within the Isan village. Respect and deference is expected of the villagers toward all the elders. Somchai Rakwijit, a former CSOC/ISOC Research Director, Bangkok, who conducted extensive research on village leadership in the Northeast, concurs in this conclusion when he concludes that "the groups of people villagers strongly disapproved of are those who do not respect villager elders, are arrogant, speak badly, are trouble-makers, are irresponsible to their own family, and are uncooperative in community affairs."[24]

Respect for those higher up in the social hierarchy includes respect for one's ancestors which is expressed by continuous conformity to the teaching and will of the ancestors. The Isan's belief systems, traditions, and customs (including the practices of popular Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Animism) embody the teaching and will of the Isan's ancestors. Isan society and village community life insist that those living under the community's protection show respect by observing the traditions and customs of the ancestors. Rakwijit added that "the Isan perceive an 'evil' man as one who lacks respect for the village tradition and customs."[25] The same sentiment was shared by a village elder of the Nathan village in Ubonratchatani province who assertively expressed his view as follows:

Even if the majority of my community converts to Christianity, I will remain as a Buddhist because I do not want to disappoint and disgrace my ancestors who had formerly chosen Buddhism for me. In addition, remaining a Buddhist is not overly involved. I can stay home and be a Buddhist (trans. from the Thai by the

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[23]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 82.

[24]Somchai Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, Research Report no. 71-011 (Bangkok: Joint Thai-U.S. Military Research and Development Center, November 1971), 56.

[25]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 73.

author).[26]

Conforming to ancestral tradition and customs within the Isan society and village community life requires that villagers respect not only the elders of the village but also the formal (elected or appointed officials) and informal (community recognized elders) leaders. Isan villagers, in turn, expect that their leaders will comply with the traditions and customs of the ancestors. Rakwijit further expresses, "The tendency of top leaders is to be highly scrupulous in maintaining their moral image—respecting village elders and cultural traditions."[27]

Because the Isan people maintain a strong sense of respect and deference toward those above them in the social hierarchy and toward their ancestors by conforming to their ancestors' wishes and aspirations, their decision making is consequently highly influenced by these two groups. Any decision or behavior that ignores or disregards this sense of respect and deference toward one's parents, elders, leaders, and superiors, or those higher on the social ladder is to be circumvented. As a result, the decision-making process of the Isan is heavily influenced or preconditioned.

Reciprocity/Obligations

The second social value which influences the decision-making process of the Isan of Northeast Thailand is their structure of reciprocal and obligatory relationships. The Northeastern Thais as well as the Central Thais call this a *bunkhun* relationship. Mont Redmond, an independent researcher in Thai culture, and Klausner refer to it as "moral debt"[28] while Thai sociologist Titaya Suvannajata calls it a "mutual exchange relationship."[29] It is additionally viewed as a "life-long debt" relationship[30] or "psychological binding."[31] As a "cultural and moral imperative,"[32] the *bunkhun* relationship is at the heart of how the Isan relates to other people and how he makes decisions. Referring to the reciprocal and obligatory or *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship, Mont Redmond states, "Moral debt is in the very air of traditional Thailand; it is not merely the fabric of society, but of existence itself."[33]

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[26]Utit Phetpan, a village elder of Nathan village, Nathan minority-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 12 August 2006.

[27]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 97.

[28]Mont Redmond, *Wondering Into Thai Culture* (Bangkok: Redmondian Insight Enterprises Co., Ltd., 1998), 175; Klausner, *Thai Cultural in Transition*, 26.

[29]Titaya Suvannajata, "Is Thai Social System Loosely Structured?" *Journal of Social Science Review* 1, no. 1 (March 1976), 382.

[30]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 275.

[31]Suvannajata, "Is Thai Social System Loosely Structured?", 181.

[32]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 320.

[33]Redmond, *Wondering into the Thai Culture*, 176.

The *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships are foundational to other relationships and they greatly affect the decision-making process. The Isan reject any actions or decisions not in conformity or in being supportive of reciprocal and obligatory relationships. One determines his actions based upon his existing *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships or to enter into a *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship. Mole confirms this type of social structure in the Thai (as well as the Isan) society thus: "Relationships with other people are characterized by a large measure of reciprocity. I do something for you with the expectation that you will do something for me in return."[34] While other kinds of relationships are important, the Isan places the highest value on *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships. American missiologist Paul DeNui, who serves among the Isan, articulates that the "Isan people prize the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships above all others."[35]

The reciprocal and obligatory, or *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)*, relationships are believed to be initiated at birth or caused by benevolent and compassionate actions. At birth an individual is automatically wedged into a *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship with his parents, especially his mother. From birth, the children are in moral debt to their parents.[36] *Bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships are also produced by benevolent or compassionate actions from a counterpart. The teacher and the king are both primarily viewed by Isan villagers as ones whose lifestyles demonstrate benevolence and compassion. Consequently, the Isan hold that *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships are naturally granted to the teacher and the king. Speaking about this matter, Suvannajata states:

> *Bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* by status relation is institutionalized by social norms. The Thai recognizes his king, parents, and teacher as the ones who have *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* on him. Whoever is the incumbent of that position is entitled to have *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* on the incumbent of the counter position. The obligation under this relationship is a lifelong obligation.[37]

Both benevolence and compassion are very significant factors which serve as the basis for *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships. The Isan call benevolence, *meta (เมตตา),* and compassion, *karuna (กรุณา)*. Relating this to Thai villagers, Mizuno (conducting research in Thailand) explains:

> For villagers *khwam metta karuna (ความเมตตา กรุณา)* and *katanyu katawethi (กตัญญู กตเวที)* are the greatest virtues which should be observed. . . *Meta (เมตตา)* refers to the benevolence with which we bring happiness to other persons, while *karuna*

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[34]Mole, *Thai Values and Behavior Patterns*, 68.

[35]Paul H. DeNeui, "String-Tying Ritual as Christian Communication in Northeast Thailand" (Ph. D. diss., Faculty of School of Intercultural Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2005), 281.

[36]Suvannajata, "Is Thai Social System Loosely Structured?", 181.

[37]Ibid.

(กรุณา) indicates the compassion with which we save others from unhappiness. *Metta karuna (เมตตา กรุณา)* which has been received is felt as *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* by the recipient. And *katanyu (กตัญญู)* means to feel gratitude to the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)*, and *katawethi (กตเวที)* refers to returning it in response.[38]

Not only are humans viewed as initiates and recipients in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships, but spirits of the rice or spirits of the ancestors are also considered capable of involvement in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships.[39] The spirit of the rice grants benevolence by causing the rice fields to be abundant and plentiful. The spirits of the ancestors, or the the *phi sua (ผีเชื้อ)*, provide benevolent care for the Isan villagers. As a result, they are considered counterparts in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship. The boundary or circle of the strongest reciprocal and obligatory relationships includes one's parents, family members, kinsmen, village elders, and deceased kinsmen.[40] Mizuno explains in more detail the children's obligation to their parents as follows:

> The children are expected to reciprocate by fulfilling five duties: to help their parents as much as possible; to become such persons as the parents can bequeath property without misgivings; not to disgrace the parents; to take care of the parents in their later days; and to render religious services after their death.[41]

As already mentioned, the other *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships are the Isan's teacher and king. These will be consulted and allowed to play a significant part in their decision-making process. As a result of their position in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship, they exert strong influence on the decision-making processes of the individual.

The *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship reflects a hierarchy and an inequality. The counterparts in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships, whether they are parents-child, king-subject, teacher-student, elder-younger, or village-villager, maintain a vertical relationship. In order to maintain the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship, the counterparts must play their role well by following the rules which govern and sustain the relationship. Since the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship is reciprocal and obligatory in nature, the rules determine what can be provided for both parties involved in the relationship.

The first rule of the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship is respect and deference. The counterpart who occupies the highest position is to be shown respect and

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[38]Mizuno, "Thai Pattern of Social Organization," 132.

[39]Siri, "*Wattatam kan tum na kong chow isan,* 57.

[40]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 4.

[41]Mizuno, "Thai Pattern of Social Organization," 129.

deference by the lower counterpart. Consequently, his authority and decisions must not be questioned or challenged.[42]

The second rule of the relationship is loyalty and obedience.[43] The lower counterpart in the *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationship must demonstrate loyalty and obedience as proof of the relationship. This loyalty and obedience is expressed by following the same religion as the higher counterpart in the *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationship. In Thailand as a whole, to be Thai one must remain loyal to the king of Thailand as well as to his religion. As the king of Thailand is required to be Buddhist, all of his subjects demonstrate their loyalty and obedience to him by remaining Buddhist. Those who hold any religion other than Buddhism are viewed as being "non-Thai." The Thai, along with the Isan people, remain Buddhist because they do not want to be construed as disloyal to their king, thus breaking the *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationship. In an attempt to maintain this position of loyalty and obedience, the Thai, including the Isan, individual Christians and churches carefully observe special ceremonies, such as father's day or the king's sixty-year enthronement, in order to repudiate the negative perception that Thai Christians are disloyal to the king who is a Buddhist.

The third rule of *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationships is commitment. A high level of commitment is expected of those within the *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationships. DeNeui points out that "some may accuse Isan people of having no commitment; however, they are completely committed to those whom they know are within their own *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) support network."[44]

This commitment usually benefits the other counterparts in the *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationship. The interest and welfare of counterparts in the *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationships takes priority over all other relationships.

The fourth rule of *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationship is interdependence. For the *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationships to continue growing, the counterparts in the relationships must show interdependency on one another. Mizuno comments that there is "reciprocity among those who are familiar with each. Beyond such circles the social relations involve a sense of general mistrust and suspicion . . . Villagers recognize a value of inter-dependence and reciprocity while keeping their group life."[45] This interdependence continues to provide solidarity for the *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationship and allows the relationship to provide return benefits for both counterparts involved. As a result, an action or decision is rarely made by the Isan villager without first consulting the counterparts in his *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationship.

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[42]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 6, 278; Potter, *Thai Peasant Social Structure*, 137; and Herbert J. Rubin, "Will and Awe: Illustrations of Thai Dependency Upon Officials," *Journal of Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (May 1973): 425-44.

[43]Klausner, A Memorandum to Research Officer, 125.

[44]Paul H. DeNeui, "Contextualizing with Thai Folk Buddhists," in *Sharing Jesus in the Buddhist World*, ed. David Lim and Steve Spaulding (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2003), 84.

[45]Mizuno, "Thai Pattern of Social Organization," 131.

Maliwan Thamkham, an Isan villager living in Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani province shared in an interview that for her to change her religion to Christianity she would first of all have to consult the elders of her kin group since she is interdependent on them and owes a moral debt to them for leading her to Buddhism. In addition, if she ever makes the decision to change her religion to Christianity, she would need to consult the head of her household as well as her village community leaders to gain their support in her decision making.[46] She consults them and seeks their support—without which she would dare not change religion. She has been conditioned to do so by the rule of interdependence, and can not experience true independence.

The fifth rule in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship is the fulfillment of expectation or obligation. In a *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship, the counterparts expect the other to meet their expectations. This sense of duty to fulfill the counterparts' desire and expectation restricts the individual from making any individual choices that might disturb the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship.

This pressure to conform for the best interest of the counterpart is extremely high in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship. This felt obligation to fulfill the expectation of the community was evident in an interview with Chalee Muangsong, an elder of the Laitat village in Nathan district, Ubonratchatani province. Chalee expressed that if he changes his religion to Christianity, the elders and leaders of the village community would contest his decision, declaring that he has renounced his old religion; and, therefore, he is now different from others in the community. To disclaim his former religion (Buddhism) is perceived as a rejection of the community and its leaders who still hold to the old religion. In addition to the fear of the elders and leaders of his village community, he also fears the words of the elders of his kin group who would normally rebuke those who convert to another religion, "Don't you see what the *banmuang* (others in the community-บ้านเมือง) are doing. Whatever the *banmuang (บ้านเมือง)* are doing, you should follow them" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[47]

Clearly, this emotional need to meet the expectation or obligation of others in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship binds the Isan villager from making choices that would not be in accordance with the expectations of others in the relationship. In the case of one's parents, teachers, or king, the obligation to conform to their desires or expectations endures for a life-time. Again, Suvannajata elaborates by saying that "*bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* by status relation is institutionalized by social norms. The Thai recognizes his king, parents, and teacher as the ones who have *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* on him. Whoever is the incumbent of that position is entitled to have *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* as a lifelong obligation."[48]

This lifetime obligation in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship is very significant as it relates to one's parents and elders. Even after a parent dies the

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[46]Maliwan Thamkham, Nachoom villager, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 13 August 2006.

[47]Chalee Muangsong, village elder of Laitat villager, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 18 August 2006.

[48]Suvannajata, "*Is Thai Social System Loosely Structured?*", 181.

children are expected to continue fulfilling the obligations due them. Klausner explains that "one must fulfill one's obligations to one's parents and elders who have cared for and nurtured one."[49] The obligations include merit making for the parents and elders prior to and after their death, staying close to them in their old age—especially for the daughters (married and unmarried),[50] being kind and generous toward them, and providing them with financial and material assistance,[51] and for the sons - being ordained as monks, starting at the age of twenty.[52] Mizuno observes that Thai village children are expected to reciprocate by fulfilling the five basic duties: helping their parents as much as possible, becoming such persons as the parents can bequeath property to without misgivings, not disgracing one's parents, taking care of one's parents in their later days; and rendering religious services after their death.[53]

The Isan fulfills his *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) obligation to his parents and family elders in the religious realm by performing the religious service of regular merit-making ceremonies after the parents' and elders' death. The Isan perform the *kao pradupdin* (ข้าวประดับดิน) merit-making ritual in August and the *kaosahk* (ข้าวสาก) merit-making ritual in September and also recognize monthly Buddhist holidays so that they can acquire merit and send it to their ancestors who have passed away (or the *phi sua-* ผีเซื้อ).[54]

Great disgrace can easily be brought upon a household or community for not observing the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี), so the Isan carefully observe the monthly merit-making customs and rituals to avoid that dishonor. Therefore the *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationship with the parents, household and kin group elders is expressed by one's conformity to the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี) and by observing the merit-making customs and rituals. When an Isan changes his religion and converts to Christianity, he is believed to be bringing disgrace and sin upon his household, kin group, and village community. Hence, the expectation in the *bunkhun*

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[49]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 80.

[50]Phillips, "Thai Peasant Personality," 133; Klausner, A Memorandum to Research Officer, 3; and Charles F. Keyes, "Kin Groups in a Thai-Lao Village," in *Change and Persistence in the Thai Society, Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp*, ed. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), 290.

[51]Keyes, "Kin Groups," 293; Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 275; Rubin, "Will and Awe," 428.

[52]Phillips, "Thai Peasant Personality," 13; Charles F. Keyes, "Baan Noong Tyyn: A Central Isan Village," in *Thai Villages*, ed. Clark Cunningham (Seattle: University of Washington, 1967), 13; Stephen K. Bailey, "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness Among the Lowland Lao Informed by Worldview Themes in Kwan Rituals" (Ph. D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2002), 180; and Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 275.

[53]Mizuno, "Thai Pattern of Social Organization," 129.

[54]Jeruwan Thamawat, *Kati chow ban isan* (The Folk Story of the Isan Villagers - คติชาวบ้านอีสาน) (in Thai) (Unknown: Unkown, n.d.), 112.

(บุญคุณ) relationship of observing the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* and merit-making customs of their old religion greatly hinders them from considering conversion to another religion.

This issue was revealed in an interview with Leungpratin Kiowsoot, an Isan teacher and village elder of Sonkorn village, Phosai district in Ubonratchatani province, who said:

> I can not change to Christianity because my old religion [*Buddhism*] was passed from my ancestors. If I change to Christianity, it will affect my ancestors. Also, since the elders of my kin group are descendents of our ancestors who gave us our present religion [*Buddhism*], they certainly will oppose my decision to change to Christianity (trans. from the Thai by the author).[55]

The *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* obligation to the parents and family elders extends to the economic realm, and Isan villagers feel that they must continue supporting their parents until they are old. The economic interdependence between children, parents, and the elders plays a critical role in maintaining the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship. When an Isan female is young, she is dependent upon her parents and elders for economic support; and, when she is old, she is expected to support her parents economically—even after she is married. The elderly parents are then dependent upon the unmarried daughters or the married daughters and their husbands for economic subsistence and protection.

Klausner makes the following observations concerning the Isan working in urban centers (who are considered servants because they are serving in the homes of wealthy Thais): "The servant, in all likelihood, has sent the major portion of his salary to parents back in the village. It is back in the village where the obligations lie."[56] For economic reasons, it is a common fear among Isan parents and elders that if their children change to another religion, such as Christianity, they will discontinue their financial and emotional support. As a result, a high percentage of the elderly Isan population usually oppose any decision to convert to another religion. This was the case with Nalee Thongsopha, an Isan woman in her 50's who was converted to Christianity. In an interview, she revealed that her elderly father was enraged with her for changing from Buddhism to Christianity.[57] He believed that she would no longer provide the support and care for him in his old age as was her obligation. Klausner points out that "very often children will give their parents part of their salary even though the parents are not in economic need."[58] This is to indicate to their parents that they are *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* (or grateful) to the parents.

It is also important to note that this interdependency does not concern only the sons or daughters—married and unmarried—who are expected to continue in the

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[55]Leungpratin Kiowsoot, teacher and villager of Songkorn village, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 26 August 2006.

[56]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 267.

[57]Nalee Thongsopha, member of committee for the Isan Women's Conference in Ubonratchatani, Northeast Thailand, interview by author, 3 March 2006.

[58]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 320.

religion of the parents, but also the elderly parents who are expected to continue in the religion of their children to maintain their economic support. An interview with an assistant pastor, Souban Doungpanya, who serves at the Mekong Church Nonprasert in Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani province, Northeast Thailand, revealed the story of an elderly Isan woman named Maeyai Prom who was 70 years of age, unmarried and living in Nadong village in Nathan minor-district.[59] Maeyai Prom had been attending the Mekong Church Nonprasert for many months but never made a decision to convert to Christianity. Suddenly, she ceased to attend the church service, but her son, who had only recently begun attending service, made a decision to convert to Christianity. Maeyai Prom's great granddaughter, Nicole, and her husband, in keeping with the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* obligation to care for their elderly relatives, are caring for Maeyai Prom. Fearing that Maeyai Prom would convert to Christianity with her son, Nicole threatened to abandon her obligation to care for Maeyai Prom if she converts. As a result, Maeyai Prom has decided to cease attending the church service at the Mekong Church Nonprasert and has dismissed the thought of converting to Christianity, fearing that her great grand daughter will not continue providing economic support and caring for her in her old age. Hence, the need to meet the obligations or expectations of the other party in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship plays a critical role in the decision-making process of the Isan villagers in regard to a conversion decision or in changing a religion.

The sixth rule in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship is providing protection and guidance. This kind of relationship clearly provides security and protection. In time of trouble or crisis, the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships provide the most reliable source of security, protection, and guidance for the individual Isan villager. His protection is realized in the circle of his family and kin group. The importance of the kin group and relatives as a source of protection and guidance is noted in the words of Rakwijit during his study of the leadership in Nakon Pranom in Northeast Thailand. He says, "The system of extended families in the village also places an important limit upon village leaders. That is, any man in the village is not alone. He has a moral claim on his friends and a large number of relatives to help or protect him. A few of these people may be leaders."[60]

The role of his kin groups and the members of his household are extremely crucial to his survival in the village. Without them he is left vulnerable and subject to mistreatment and can be easily taken advantage of by others. His only protection from outsiders, others in his village, and malicious spirits is under the covering of his kinsmen and household. When he is in need, they will come to his aid, and they also expect him to reciprocate when they are in a similar predicament. Klausner describes the reciprocal relationship between Isan parents and children as follows:

> The principal ties [*between parents and children*] were based on respect, obligation, and gratitude of the children towards parents and the duty to care for, protect and guide their children on the part of the parents. The control and authority of parents over their children was pervasive, and children did not think

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[59]Souban Doungphanya, an assistant pastor of Mekong Church Nonprasert, Na-Alorn village, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani province, Northeast Thailand, interview by author, 14 September 2006.

[60]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 183.

to question such authority.[61]

Where protection and safety are provided, the likelihood of leaving such a relationship is minimal. This explains why the missionary who asks the Isan villager to leave his reciprocal relationship with his parents and kinsmen has been met with rejection. What the villager expects is a better present reciprocal or obligatory relationship with the missionary; however, what the missionary desires for the villager is a cognitive understanding of the Gospel as a way to secure future protection and safety in heaven. Keeping the present *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships with one's kinsmen and family is a better option for them than risking their lives with a stranger (the missionary) who claims to provide a better alternative in the future.

Discharging of Reciprocity and Obligations

The reciprocal or obligatory relationships with one's parents, elders and ancestors are believed to have some time limit affixed. Keyes and Sparks note that a male member of an Isan family discharges his filial obligation to his parents, elders, and ancestors after he has gained merit for them by entering the monkhood. Keyes supports this conclusion:

> Thai-Lao villagers believe that each child has a responsibility to repay his/her parents in some way for the care provided during childhood. . . . Ideally, although not universally realized, young men finish discharging their filial obligations by entering the monkhood for a short period of time (one to two years) thereby making merit which is transferable to their parents. Having been in the yellow robes, a young man becomes a fully independent adult who is free to make his own future.[62]

Based upon the matrilocal form of residence, once he leaves the monkhood, he will wed, join his wife's kinsmen and be under the authority of her parents, elders and ancestral spirits. In agreement with this idea, Sparks states:

> After a son has fulfilled his filial duty to his parents, that is having been ordained a monk, and thus becoming mature, he then marries and comes under the authority of his father-in-law, entering the world of his wife's compound and kin.[63]

The daughter's filial obligation, however, remains with her parents. Her obligation is seen as a "lifetime" obligation to her parents. Even after marriage, she is still obligated to provide physical care for them until their death. Then, after their death, the daughter still makes merit through the monthly rituals or customs so that the deceased parents will be guaranteed a better future rebirth into the world of

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[61]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 6.

[62]Keyes, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 13.

[63]Stephen Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls: General and Cosmology in an Isan Village in Northeast Thailand*, Studies in Contemporary Thailand, ed. Erik Cohen, no. 13 (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2005), 78.

humanity rather than wandering as ghosts in the woods or suffering in hell. Since the daughter is unable to discern whether her parents have been reborn or not, she continues to make merit for her dead parents until her own death.

While ideally the filial obligations are discharged through monkhood for the son or through death for the daughter, the reciprocity or obligation as a moral debt is perceived as being unending. Lawrence C. Bechker, Professor of Philosophy at Hollis College, Virginia, also discusses this reciprocity as "the debt that can not be repaid" in the context of the familial relationship.[64] Along the same point of view, Klausner writes, "As in the case of one's parents or teachers, so with one's superior, a subordinate can not ever totally repay favors and support given. Thus, he remains eternally grateful and continually committed to his superior's interests and ambitions."[65]

The sense of reciprocity or obligation causes the Isan villager to continue to choose options conforming to the perceived desires or preferences of the parents, elders, and ancestors. Sentiment of this kind was evident in the words of Isan villager Sarawut Namsaena, age 17, male, single, a member of Bok village, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani province, who was interviewed in August 2006.[66] In response to the author's inquiry regarding the most important people in his life and who would have the most say in his decision to convert to Christianity, Sarawut answered that he regarded the elders of his kin group and the head of his household to be the most influential people involved in his decision-making process. Both of these respectable authority figures have led him to follow his present religion (Buddhism). He stated that he would not dare to change his way against their desire and without their leadership. The desire and preference of the kin group elders and his parents are the determinative factors in his decision-making process regarding conversion.

Consequences of the Failure to Observe the *Bunkhun* Relationships

While the benefits resulting from observation of the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* or reciprocal relationship can be life-saving, the negative sanctions resulting from the neglect of these norms or rules of the relationship can be detrimental. What is a sanction and how is it carried out? The world renowned anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown defines sanction thus: "A sanction is a reaction on the part of a society or of a considerable number of its members to a mode of behavior which is thereby approved or disapproved."[67] Radcliffe-Brown continues to explain that the standards of behavior by which people judge one another are based on the norms (ideas about right and wrong) of that society, which are learned during one's formative years. These negative sanctions include expressions of disapproval through

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[64]Lawerence C. Becker, *Reciprocity* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 138.

[65]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 276.

[66]Warawut Namsaena, Bok villager, Nathan minior-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 14 August 2006.

[67]A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, "Social Sanctions," in *Structure and Function* (London: Cohen & West, 1952), 192.

gossip and avoidance and ridicule within the local community. An organized sanction may involve the burning of houses or the destruction of fences or trees. A diffused form of sanction such as ostracism is often used to correct deviant behavior. Ultimately, banishment, imprisonment, and death are the final sanctions.[68]

From childhood to adulthood, the Isan villager has been taught the concept of *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* or reciprocal/obligation. He is taught by his parents, elders, and teachers; and these teachings are reinforced by his society. The Isan societal norms, consisting of the values of the individuals in the society, determine the behaviors of the Isan individual, especially in regard to his obligation in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* or reciprocal relationships. Failure to follow the rules of the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships will be considered sin (or demerit) and will be met with negative sanctions by the counterpart in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships in particular and the Isan society as a whole. Mizuno seems to be in agreement when he writes:

> Merciful patronage of parents is the most important among all, and it is because of a sense of gratefulness to their *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* that sons are ordained as monks and children support the parents into their old age. Failure will be counted as demerit . . . Thus 'one should not forget oneself' and should be willing to reciprocate the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* which one has received.[69]

The Isan society will then label the person abandoning the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship as *khon neerakhun (คนเนรคุณ*-ungrateful person*)*, and, as a result, the counterpart will apply ostracism. Suvannajata explains sanction against the individual who is not following the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* or reciprocal relationship in this way:

> Whoever enters into the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship and does not observe it will be blamed as *khon neerakhun (คนเนรคุณ)*. Consequently, his social counterpart applies the ostracism. The intensity and scope of the sanction depends upon the status of his counterpart and information coverage of his failure to observe.[70]

In 1983, the author was converted to Christianity as a result of unconditional love given by two American families, Henry and Linda Taylor and Bernie and Gayle Jernigan. Also influential was the gospel preaching of Dr. Alfred Henson, senior pastor of Lighthouse Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee. The author's conversion was interpreted by his father as *neerakhun* (ungrateful-เนรคุณ) and as an abandonment of the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship with his parents; and, as a result, he was banished from his parent's house and from their protection. It was not until many years later that he was fully accepted back into his father's home. Klausner testifies to the seriousness of being accused of as *neerakhun (เนรคุณ)* or *akatanyu* (ungrateful-อกตัญญู) when he concludes:

> Even in the midst of fast-changing values and attitudes, the moral obligation to

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[68]Ibid.

[69]Mizuno, "Thai Pattern of Social Organization," 132.

[70]Suvannajata, "Is Thai Social System Loosely Structured?", 382.

repay a meritorious debt incurred in this present life, if not a former existence, remains strong. To be *katanyu (กตัญญู)*, constantly aware of benefits and favors bestowed and ready to express appreciation, is a highly valued character trait. On the other hand to be *akatanyu (อกตัญญู)*, or ungrateful, is considered one of the most reprehensible faults and sins one can be accused of.[71]

The *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* or reciprocal/obligatory relationship is viewed closely with one's observances of the traditional religion, customs, and rituals of one's ancestors as well as one's conformity to the norms and social values of the Isan Buddhist society. Thus, the villager's conversion to another religion is seen as abandonment of the reciprocal obligation to parents, elders, kinsmen, community, ancestors, and king. As a result, the influence of the social value of reciprocity and obligation will continue to pose as strong opposition to the Isan's decision-making process and eventual conversion to Christianity.

Patron-Client /Subordinate-Superior Relationships

The third value influencing the decision-making process of the Isan of Northeast Thailand is the patron-client or subordinate-superior relationship. The conception of reciprocity is not only operative at the village, kin group, and household levels; it also extends outside the villager's trust relationships and outside his village. As a peasant, the Isan villagers' relationships with those outside his universe (which is his village) are uncontrollable and hostile. American sociologist Ronald C. Benge describes this value as it relates to peasant life as follows:

> In peasant life the hostile, capricious and incomprehensible forces by which they are scourged are no longer (as with the folk) supernatural, but the people from the towns, by whom the village has been victimized since its beginning. That the only way to survive is by trickery and propitiation must be the peasant's attitude to those outside on whom he depends, but even to those inside the village he can not afford to be co-operative either. Village life is characterized by the villagers' mutual animosities, suspicions and mistrust.[72]

As a Thai researcher in Nakon Pranom in Northeast Thailand, Rakwijit describes his findings concerning the Isan villagers' view of the outside world (outside his village):

> A deeper sense of conflict or anger tends to be directed against the out-groups— people in other villages, officials, and other outsiders. For example, villagers are quick to accuse outsiders for the trouble in their villages, or to expose bad deeds in other villages, but they tend to tone down or keep secret the 'shameful' affairs in their own village. That is, there is a strong tendency to suspect or blame outsiders for difficulties in the village and to find excuses for the bad

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[71]Klausner, *Thai Culture in Transition*, 26.

[72]Ronald C. Benge, "Traditional Societies," in *Communication and Identification* (London: Clive Bingley, 1972), 72.

deeds committed by the in-group.[73]

The Isan villager's relationships within his household, kin groups, and even within his village (consisting mostly of his kinsmen by blood or by marriage) seems to provide some measure of security and stability. The reciprocal or *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationship comes through kinship. Beyond the village, his world centers on the person of his patronage. This person could be his patron or sometimes a superior. All of his reciprocal relationships will be in the context of the patron-client or inferior-superior relationship. Stephen K. Bailey, Assistant Professor of Missiology at Alliance Theological Seminary who has worked extensively among the Lao in Laos, calls it the older-to-younger relationship or *muang* (เมือง) relationship which can change depending upon the circumstances.[74] Although Bailey's research was done among the Lowland Lao, the social structure is closely related to the Isan. To make the distinction between the two kinds of relationships, Bailey explains: "Outside the maternal kinship network of the household, relationships take on a mechanistic and ritualized character in the sphere of *müang* power.[75] Recognized American anthropologist Lucien M. Hank, who conducted extensive research in Northern Thailand, describes the Thai social order:

> With the probable exception of the bond between husband and wife, every liaison between people in this society takes on some form of this patron-client relationship . . . this relationship is not just the mortar but the rods and rivets that hold Thai society together.[76]

As kinship provides context for relationships within the Isan village, so the entourage provide context for relationships outside of the Isan village. Hank presents further clarification on the concept of the entourage and defines it: "An entourage is a group focused on a single person. The points to be noted about it are its individualistic rather than group character, its dependence on a particular patron for survival, and its multiple functions."[77] As an anthropologist and ethnographer who lived and conducted research among the Isan people of Northeast Thailand, Klausner also recognizes the reality of the subordinate-superior/patron-client relationships at work among the Isan of Northeast Thailand. He argues:

> In Thai society, with its emphasis on 'social place' as expressed in elder-younger, subordinate-superior, patron-client relationships, *krengchai* (เกรงใจ) is, most often, an attitude displayed towards one higher in the rank, social status or age scale. It is diffidence, deference and consideration merged with respect.[78]

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[73]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 65.

[74]Bailey, "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness," 277.

[75]Ibid., 330.

[76]Hanks, "The Thai Social Order," 200.

[77]Ibid.

[78]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 258.

Being in the patron-client or subordinate-superior relationship offers security and protection as well as economic benefit for the Isan individuals who are now dealing with the outside world. His relationship with his patron, superior, or "older brother" will ensure his survival and the achievement of his goals. These relationships are to be reciprocal by nature and require exchanges between the patron and the client. The patron will usually bring into the relationship the provision of protection, support, and advice for the client while the client will give loyalty, deference, respect, and honor to the patron for the building of his entourage. Australian anthropologist Graham Fordham, who conducted his field research in Thailand, shares his view point regarding the Thai reciprocal relationships:

> The patron, from a position of economic security, offers tangible goods such as economic aid and protection. In return, the client, from a position of economic insecurity, offers more intangible goods. These include loyalty, a commitment to increasing the good name of his patron, information and political support. . . . Also, there may be several hierarchal levels of patron-client relations. Patrons at lower levels are themselves clients of higher level patrons who, in turn, are clients of still higher level patrons.[79]

Additional support can be found in the argument of Rubin J. Herbert, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Northern Illinois University:

> The insecure inferior expects that his patron will provide protection, aid and advice. The patron, in turn, receives deference, respect and honor from the client. Consistent with the Thais' ambivalence with respect to dependence-independence, patron-client relationships are quite fragile. Both patron and client are normatively permitted to terminate such relations and form new ones.[80]

The social relationships in rural Northeast Thailand are organized around factions that are formed along kinship lines and by patronage;[81] this poses difficulties for introducing new ideas or concepts that would require that the villager change patronage or entourage. Since the reciprocal relationships are guided by *krengchai* (stand in awe-เกรงใจ) toward one's patron,[82] the probability of changing a patron is minimal as long as the patron still provides the security, resources, and "bodily and psychological needs".[83] As a rural peasant, the Isan villager "relies almost

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[79]Graham Fordham, "Protestant Christianity and the Transformation of Northern Thai Culture: Ritual Practice, Belief and Kinship" (Ph. D. diss., Department of Anthropology, The University of Adelaide, 1991), 9.

[80]Rubin, "Will and Awe," 427.

[81]Charles F. Keyes, and Damrong Thandee, *Social Soundness Analysis:Provincial Planning and Development Project in Northeastern Thailand*, Research Report (Bangkok: USAID Thailand, July 1980), 18.

[82]Rubin, "Will and Awe," 425.

[83]Phillips, "Thai Peasant Personality," 93.

exclusively on patron-client relationships in his quest for socio-economic self-betterment."[84]

The patron-client relationships are also operational in missions. A classic Isan example is Chang Lieng. In 2003, Chang Lieng began attending Mekong Church Khemarat in Northeast Thailand, a church plant established by the Mekong Evangelical Mission of which the author is the founder and executive director. Lieng began attending the church just as construction began on the main church building. Prior to that period, the church had been meeting in a rental storefront building in the town of Khemarat. Because of his construction skills, Lieng was appointed by Udon Yodboon, pastor of the Mekong Church Khemarat, as the head of the construction team. He was given considerable authority in the execution of the construction project. During the process, he and his wife became converted to Christianity and changed their allegiance to the church. Viewing himself as a client to the new patron Udon Yodboon, Lieng and his family respectfully and obediently submitted themselves to Udon Yodboon.

A new patron-client relationship now exists between Lieng and his wife (the client) with Yodboon and his wife (the patron). The relationship was mutually benefiting as Lieng received the economic benefits of working in the construction project and also received family counseling from Pastor Yodboon. Yodboon received the loyalty and trust from Lieng who led the construction workers. In addition, Lieng began introducing many of his kinsmen to the church and Christianity, including his brother who is the village chief in a village adjacent to the church. Lieng and his wife felt admiration and obedience for Yodboon and his wife in every respect.

Then, in 2005 (two years later) when the church construction project was completed, Lieng and his wife moved to Southern Thailand to participate in a tsunami recovery house-building project for those affected by tsunami giant tidal waves. This project was under the direction of Mercy Foundation of which the author is the founder and executive director. While in Southern Thailand, Yodboon and Lieng tried to keep the patron-client relationship functioning but it eventually ended. Distance resulted in an inability to provide mutual benefits and resulted in the termination of the patron-client relationship between Yodboon and Lieng.

In mid 2006, Lieng and his wife moved back to Northeast Thailand to the same area as Yodboon to work in the construction of Mekong Church Nathan. Lieng could resume the patron-client relationship with Yodboon by demonstrating loyalty, deference, and obedience to the relationship, but Yodboon could no longer provide the economic benefit for Lieng. Although both Lieng and Yodboon maintain a friendship, the patron-client relationship between Lieng and Yodboon was unable to continue. As a result, Lieng, his wife, and kinsmen, began attending Mekong Church Nathan where Lieng is the head of the construction team on the church building project. His new patron is Pastor Tom Chanthanvong. His loyalty, respect, deference, and obedience are now given to Chanthavong, and, in return, Chanthavong provides him with economic betterment, Bible teaching, and marital counseling. Lieng has been introducing his kinsmen to Chanthavong, and they have attended the Mekong Church Nathan. The patron-client relationship between Lieng and

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[84]Steven Piker, *A Peasant Community in Changing Thailand*, Anthropological Research Paper no. 30 (Arizona: Arizona State University, 1983), 391.

Chanthavong now works for the furtherance of Christianity in the area of the Nathan minor-district.

Hanks notes longevity of the relationship when he states that the patron-client relationship "varies with the degree of affection and trust," and "is voluntary and may be terminated unilaterally by either party. It rests on reciprocity, serving the two as long as it is convenient or until some grave incident destroys mutual affection."[85] Hanks additionally argues:

> An entourage endures only as long as a patron is able to continue providing for his clients. When a patron dies or is forced to curtail benefits, the entourage disappears. Because of the personal relationship of a man to his clients, there can be no successor to the patron. Most frequently, clients of a dead patron go their separate ways, and the most powerful among his clients seize the most valuable assets that remain. If someone new tries to take over the entourage, rarely can he hold all clients of the former patron and still recompense his own particular friends.[86]

In addition to his *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships with his parents, members of his household, kin elders, community elders and leaders, and his ancestors, an Isan villager is a client of one or more other patrons who have lien on him. Consequently, both the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* and patron-client relationships can hinder in the decision-making process of the Isan villager. The missionary or church planter has to compete for the loyalty of the villagers as their new patron. Hopefully, the missionary can transfer his patronage to the Patron, Jesus Christ. The vacuum created when a counterpart in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship or a patron in the patron-client relationship either dies or is no longer active provides an excellent opportunity for the missionary to minister to the individual, become his patron, and introduce him to Jesus Christ, our Patron.

If one is converted to Christ, he then comes under the protection and authority of the new patron—the pastor, the evangelist, or church planter—and also the Greatest Patron, the Lord Jesus Christ, who supplies all his needs according to His riches and glory (Philippine 2:19 KJV). To this effect, Phillips explains:

> The entire authority system is based upon the individual's willingness to consider himself a dependent subordinate to somebody else. But his dependency is phrased in terms of the reciprocal relationship existing between the subordinate and his superior. He remains dependent only as long as the superior satisfies his individual needs.[87]

For Isan villagers, the path leading to conversion comes through intimate relationships. Tom Chanthavong, pastor of Mekong Church Nathan in Nathan minor-

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[85]Hanks, "The Thai Social Order," 199.

[86]Ibid., 201.

[87]Phillips, "Thai Peasant Personality," 306.

district, agrees wholeheartedly that intimacy precedes conversion.[88] Tom tells the story of Paryai Pe's conversion. Paryai Pe is 82 years old and an elder of Loongpuk village in Nathan minor-district who recently became converted and was baptized. Tom and his wife began building relationships with him and his wife over a period of three months. They began by demonstrating their care and concern for Paryai Pe and his wife's health. They expressed their concern for Paryai Pe by offering guidance and advice to help him get out of debt and also assisted with his son's injury. Tom and his wife expressed to Paryai Pe, "We don't have money to help you, but we are concerned about you." Afterward, Tom's wife took Paryai Pe's wife to the market and bought her groceries. All of these expressions of love and concern led to an intimate relationship which resulted in Paryai Pe's conversion and baptism. The *Area Handbook for Thailand* suggests, "The only way to establish greater intimacy is to establish oneself as a superior or an inferior in the basic patron-client relationship.[89] The patron-client relationship can be a stumbling block to communicating the Christian message, but it can also be one of the greatest tools in spreading the gospel..

Group Solidarity of the Household, Kin group, and Village Community

The fourth social value exacting influence on the Isan's decision-making process is the group solidarity of the household (family), kin group, and village community. It is important to note that the household provides the basic unit for the kinship makeup, and the kinship structure becomes the foundation for the village community composition. However, in the context of the kinship system the household and the village community function independently. Additionally, Kluasner notes another important aspect of acceptable conduct contributing to group solidarity, "Family, religions, the spirit world and social pressures form the parameters of acceptable conduct."[90] All four environments—the household (family) and kin group, religions, spirits, and village community—should move in unison and conformity for the purpose of group solidarity. Solidarity stresses not the individual but the group. Even the individual must see himself in relationship to the group. This concept is no better expressed than in the words of German sociologist Niels Mulder who describes the Thai individual, "The Thai individual can not be defined by himself alone, but is defined by the others to whom he relates."[91]

The Solidarity of the Household (Family)

Within the Isan village, traditions bestow much of the decision-making authority in the household (family) and the household is the basic acting unit or

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[88]Tom Chanthavong, Pastor of Mekong Church Nathan, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani, Northeast Thailand, interview by author, 15 September 2006.

[89]Harvey H. Smith et al. , "Social Values," in *Area Handbook for Thailand* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 222.

[90]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 6.

[91]Niels Mulder, *Everyday Life in Thailand* (Bangkok: D.K. Book House Editions, 1975), 194.

grouping in the village.[92] Every household is related by blood or marriage to other households in the village or nearby villages. Consequently, any conflict among the households will also cause disruptions in the village or with other villages. Also existing in the household structure is the practice of reciprocity in economic and ritual matters.[93] Reciprocity is operative not only among the members of the household but among households in the kin groups and the village community. Embree points out:

> The structure of the family is a loose one, and while obligations are recognized, they are not allowed to burden one unduly. Such as are sanctioned are observed freely by the individual—he acts of his own will, not as a result of social pressure.[94]

Significantly, the households provide the basic economic, political, and religious cooperation in the entire village. Sangsingkeo observes the religious impact of Buddhism on the household system:

> The family value system in Thailand is marked by its persistent connection with the spirit of Buddhism. Buddhism, practiced by 95 percent of the population, remains a very potent force among the common people. Their lives are still deeply touched by its compassion, even though one can not tell whether it is deep enough to withstand the trails of a changing world. The Buddhist influence still is pronounced in its effects on the mental health and emotional security of Thai children.[95]

When a child is born into a household, he or she remains a part of that household until marriage. After marriage, the son normally moves in with his wife and her parents' household[96] while a daughter continues to live with her parents and unmarried siblings. When the first daughter marries, the parents' household (or nuclear family) evolves to include a stem family consisting of the daughter and her husband. Thus, the household now consists of the primary nuclear family (the parents) and the stem family (the married daughter), also called the "uxori-parentilocal stem family.[97] Prior to the marriage of a second daughter or after the birth of their first child, the first stem family (consisting of the first daughter and her husband) should establish a separate stem household, if possible, in the same compound as her parent's house. The land on which the stem family builds their house should come from the wife's parents. Although separated from the main household, the stem household still comes under the authority of the parental

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[92]Foster, *Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technological Change*, 14.

[93]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*," 15.

[94]Embree, "Thailand--A Loosely Structured Social System," 4.

[95]Sangsingkeo, "Buddhism and Some Effects on the Rearing of Children in Thailand," 294.

[96]Ibid., 290.

[97]Keyes, "Kin Groups," 282.

household and is economically dependent thereon.[98] Tambiah, who conducted one of the most comprehensive studies of the Isan region of Northeast Thailand, agrees:

> A stem family or a junior dependent family will not usually be reckoned as an independent unit for ritual activities—such as making a contribution to a collective Buddhist festival or to a communal propitiation of the guardian spirit.[99]

Although physically separating from the wife's parents, the stem household still cooperates with the wife's parental and sister households because of strong ties of filial obedience and affection. More significantly, when the stem family moves, it typically lacks enough rice paddies or land to provide for all their economic needs. Hence, the Isan household normally consists of a father and mother with their unmarried sons or daughters, married daughters and their husbands and their children. These all function under the authority of and are economically dependent upon the grace of the father-in-law. Only when the last parent dies or remarries into another household will the daughter and her husband gain full control over the land originally belonging to the wife's parents.[100] In addition, as noted by Mizuno, "As a rule, the sons do not inherit farm land. Instead, they get betrothal money and one or two buffaloes or heads of cattle. They give up their right to inherit farm land when they marry with the parents' financial help."[101]

When the male head of a household dies and leaves a widow with unmarried children, the kinsmen of the household will typically help the family for a defined period of time until the children are old enough to help or until the widow remarries. If an unmarried daughter weds, the new son-in-law will then become the head of the household. Potter notes, "In the Northeast, the sons-in-law 'take precedence over sons in families where the male head has died.'"[102] As the new head of the household, the son-in-law now has the "seniority and authority over the entire household's members, related by blood or marriage" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[103] Problems or conflicts among household members are normally resolved by the head of the household. In a typical household, the women "participate in making all important economic decisions and often actually control the cash available

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[98]Ibid.

[99]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 14.

[100]Keyes, "Kin Groups," 288.

[101]Koichi Mizuno, "Multihousehold Compounds in Northeast Thailand," *Asian Survey* 8, no. 10 (1968): 851.

[102]Potter, *Thai Peasant Social Structure*, 127.

[103]Suthep Sounthonpesat, "Krongsrang Sungkom Mooban Pak Tawan-Ok Chiangnua (Sociology of the Northeastern Thai Villages - โครงสร้างสังคมของหมู่บ้านภาค ตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ)," in *Sungkom Wittaya Mooban Pak Tawan-Ok Chiangnua (Sociology of the Northeastern Thai Villages*, ed. Suthep Sounthonpesat (in Thai) (Bangkok: Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, 1968), Suthep, *Sociology of Northeast Thailand*, 76.

to a family."[104] Charles F. Keyes and Damrong Thandee, Director and Associate Professor, Center of Korean Studies, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Ramkhamhaeng University, Bangkok, comments, "While men exercise nominal authority within the family unit, most important decisions are shared by husbands and wives. Outside the family, however, men tend to dominate."[105]

It is also important to note that parental control and authority over the children is all-encompassing and the children or household members usually do not question such authority or decision making.[106] As a result, many Isan villagers who are not heads of households dare not consider converting to Christianity if the household head is not Christian. Normally the members of the household respect and follow the religion of the household head. Sompan Changwan, age 30, a male, married, living in Bokmuang village, Khemarat district, Ubonratchatani province, responded in a personal interview when asked what is the single most important hindrance against converting to Christianity:

> I would say that the head of my household—my father—would be the single most hindrance against conversion to Christianity. As a son, I want to respect and honor him. Therefore, I will follow him. I will respect him by respecting whomever and whatever he respects. He is a Buddhist (trans. from the Thai by the author).[107]

Forming a household (family)

The decision to choose a bride can be made by the individual; however, once a couple has decided to marry, they are obligated to consult their perspective parents. With the parent's assistance, a *chao kote* (an elder of one's kin group-เจ้าโคตร) is chosen to serve as a 'marriage broker' for each side. The *chao kote* (เจ้าโคตร), who is always male, will make a decision on the bridal price and will discuss the suitability of the proposed marriage. A negotiator, who usually is a paternal uncle or a paternal grandfather for the male's side and a maternal uncle or maternal grandfather on the female's side, will also represent each side.[108] The most important matter to agree upon in advance is the bridal price.

Before the arrival of the groom, the grandfather of the bride would perform a ritual and make an offering to the ancestral spirits,[109] informing them of the

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[104]Keyes and Thandee, *Social Soundness Analysis*, 15.

[105]Ibid., 18

[106]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 6.

[107]Sompan Changwan, Bokmuang villager, Khemarat district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 15 August 2006.

[108]Keyes, "Kin Groups," 294.

[109]The ancestors of the female descent group include all men who have married into the group and reside within the same compound or area. All the children or new family members live on the ancestors' property and under their protection and influence. The calling of the spirits of the house as in the 'moving-in-ceremony'

impending wedding and that a new member, a future son-in-law, is about to be added to the household. The purpose of the ritual is to seek approval and blessing from the ancestral spirits who provide care and protection for the household. After the wedding, the ancestral spirits are again consulted. Stephen Sparkes observes, "The ancestors are consulted before and after the marriage ritual so that the new son-in-law may be accepted as a member of that household."[110] If proper rituals are not performed to seek approval and blessing from the ancestral spirits, punishment and misfortune are believed to be forth coming. More importantly, the son-in-law would not be considered part of the household, and he would be treated as an outsider without any right to an inheritance of land or the protection of the ancestral spirits.

The Isan believe that the kin group (which is a makeup of many blood/marriage-related households) is the "people of the same spirits."[111] It is important to note the following words of Klausner:

> As long as a bride price was paid to the girl's parents and family and village spirits advised, a village couple was considered married. A formal ceremony, while desired, was not necessary, and legal registration was very seldom undertaken.[112]

Because of its social and psychological significance, the wedding ceremony is usually performed. It allows the household members, kinsmen, villagers, friends, and significant others to participate in the marriage of the couple as well as the two households and their respective kinsmen.

The social recognition is additionally important as a preventive measure against any future separation or divorce. Although the choice of a marriage partner is principally and privately the individuals, a separation or divorce is viewed as the affair and responsibility of the household and kin groups. As the marriage ceremony is a public affair, the separation or divorce is also considered a public affair belonging in the jurisdiction of the household and kin group because it affects the solidarity of the households, kin groups, and village communities.

After the marriage ceremony, the groom comes under the direct control of his father-in-law and enters the world of his wife's compound and kin. Sparkes urges that the "full incorporation of the groom into the wife's family and descent group occurs over a long period."[113] The groom's true position of authority will not be realized until his father-in-law retires, dies, or when the groom and his wife

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when a new house is purchased refers to the calling of the ancestors. The eldest daughter of the compound is appointed as guardian of an altar to the ancestors and the male members of the descent group defend the territory of the spirits of the female descent group. The female members of the descent group will make offerings to the dead ancestors of the descent group on different festivals. If such offerings are ignored, punishment will be forth coming. (Refer to *Spirits and Souls: General and Cosmology in an Isan Village in Northeast Thailand* by Stephen Sparkes, 73-74).

[110]Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls*, 74.

[111]Ibid., 71.

[112]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 7.

[113]Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls*, 76-77.

completely separate and move away from the wife's parental household and compound. Keyes describes this rite of passage into adulthood for a man:

> After having attained the status of adult, ushered in by experience in the *wad* and/or through temporary urban employment, a man is expected to marry and take up the life of a householder. Between the ages of 20 and 40 a man should devote himself to create a new family and providing for its needs. By forty, a man has usually obtained full economic independence from his parents-in-law and has established a reasonably sound position with the group of heads of kin groups. Between the ages of 40 and 60 many men play a leadership role in community matters. . . . After sixty, if a person should be so fortunate as to reach the end of a fifth twelve-year cycle, consideration of one's status in the next life is uppermost in an individual's mind. It is the aged who frequent the temple most often and who are the most diligent in keeping the precepts of the Buddhist faith.[114]

Responsibilities of the members of the household

The households play an extremely important function in the village community. Therefore, an ideal system for the maintenance of unity and harmony in each of the households is essential. The focus of behavior control, conflict management, or decision making is typically in the household as Sounthonpesat points out:

> The households have an important part in keeping the peace and harmony in the village. For instance, when there is a theft or conflict in the village and it is discovered that the theft or conflict involves a particular household, the village head will give a warning to the head of that household to resolve the problem. If the warning does not prevail, the matter will then be presented to the village meeting (trans. from the Thai by the author).[115]

Usually the individual members' loyalty is to the other members of the household and each member has a binding claim on the others.[116] The binding claim also extends to other kinsmen who live in close proximity. Because of the high value placed on group solidarity or unity of the household, each member of the household has specific functions and responsibilities. Mizuno observes the following in the Isan family:

> While the individual members are relatively free from the group, they do not fail to observe their commitment to it by a sense of sympathy to other individual members. . . . This pattern of members' commitment to a group may be called dyadism. By this term the author does not mean dyadic contract, but uses it to imply a pattern of group solidarity in which individuals are bound together primarily by their attitude of valuing a sense of sympathy to other members who

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[114]Keyes, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 22.

[115]Sounthonpesat, "Krongsrang Sungkom Mooban," 75.

[116]Smith et al., "Social Values," 220.

are related dyadically to each of them, rather than by being obligated by authority.[117]

In Isan society, the male serves as household head and in a position of authority over female descent groups. First of all, the members of the household have domestic duties or responsibilities toward one another. The parents' responsibility is to teach the children to make merit and the teachers are to teach them about the activities of merit making.[118] The parents' role in raising their children can be described as follows: to train the children to make a living, to teach them to abstain from evil, to instruct them in good behavior, to find a marriage partner for them, and to pass on material possessions to them.[119] The children are responsible to reciprocate the parents' *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) by helping them in every way and as much as possible, to be trustworthy and good stewards in order to be recipients of their possessions, to respect and not disgrace them, to take care of them in their old age, and to continue observing religious traditions and customs so that the children can make merit for them after their death.[120]

If household solidarity remains strong, then the young ones would give most of their salary to their parents to show respect. When they are employed in the city, the adult children will return to the village periodically to help in the rice planting and harvesting work as well as to participate in the traditional village religious activities.[121] Additionally, the young ones are expected to seek the wisdom of the elders and defer to their authority. Academic achievements in the outside world do not allow them to "question, criticize, or challenge the elders who command respect in the community."[122]

The wife should attend to her husband by avoiding harsh words and abuse, abstaining from adultery, preparing meals and caring for domestic affairs, managing the property her husband has acquired, and respecting her household and kin group elders and her husband's kinsmen by following their instructions.[123] The husband is expected to respond accordingly to his wife by not belittling her, not speaking badly of her, not committing adultery, but entrusting to her all of his property and allowing her personal ornaments. In addition, he demonstrates his love for his wife by loving her parents and caring for their land and possessions. He must not be lazy, arrogant, or delinquent.[124] If he is the recognized head of the household after his father-in-law

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[117]Mizuno, "Thai Pattern of Social Organization," 130.

[118]Jasper Cooke Ingersoll, "Merit and Identity in Village Thailand," in *Change and Persistence in the Thai Society, Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 226.

[119]Mizuno, "Thai Pattern of Social Organization," 129.

[120]Ibid.

[121]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 124.

[122]Ibid., 150.

[123]Mizuno, "Thai Pattern of Social Organization," 129.

[124]Ibid.

either dies, retires, or remarries, he must attend the village meeting as the representative for his household.

Among the members of the household, it is understood that respect, honor, and deference is to be shown to mature males, parents, and elders. The man is expected to work for his father-in-law and submit to his authority. In return for his assistance in the rice paddies, the "son-in-law and his family earn the right to eat rice from his father-in-law's granary."[125] If the husband does not serve and endeavor to please his wife's parents, or if he misbehaves, he will be "denounced by his wife's relatives and it is said that his children will fall sick under the influence of ancestral spirits [the *phi sua-ผีเชื้อ*]."[126]

Each member of the household is expected, or obligated, to respect the head of the household, parents, elders, and ancestral spirits and to carry out the duties or responsibilities assigned to him or her. These expectations or obligations appear to be inflexible enough to disallow any member the right to entertain the idea of another religion, especially the kind that would interrupt the social organization with its accompanied expectations and assigned responsibilities each member. In addition, conversion to Christianity is usually perceived as rejection of the traditional household or family values, since it is based in Buddhism and traditional customs. Therefore, the high probability of losing economic dependency, one's inheritance of land and rice paddies, and the right to live in one's wife's parental compound greatly affects the decision-making process. Inherent in the social structure of the household's rigidity and inflexibility is an unyielding loyalty to tradition and hatred of outside change.

Given that the members of the household must submit themselves to the authority of the household head, and, in return the household head must submit himself under the elders of the kin groups, village community elders, and leaders (who primarily received their positions because of their faithful propagation of the traditional customs and the Buddhist practice) the possibility of any member of the Isan household changing or converting to Christianity is extremely low. The response of a woman in Nonthan village, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani province, illustrates this point well. Phimpha Pasawee, age 68 and married, gave this response when she was asked in an interview about converting to Christianity:

> I can not change to another religion even if it is good. My husband is the head of our household. I can not just change to another religion because my husband must lead the change. As for me, I will follow my husband. He is a Buddhist. I will respect that and will continue following him (trans. from the Thai by the author).[127]

Not only is the household solidarity reflected in the domestic relationships among its members; the household solidarity should be manifested in its public

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[125]Potter, *Thai Peasant Social Structure*, 125.

[126]Koichi Mizuno, Discussion Paper No. 18 of "Social System of Don Daeng Village: A Community Study in Northeast Thailand" (Kyoto: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1971), 86.

[127]Phimpha Pasawee, Nonthan villager, Nathan minior-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 15 August 2006.

responsibilities to uphold the kinship system as well as the social and religious institutions of the village communities. In an Isan village, the ultimate goal of every Isan woman is to marry and bear children. With a son, she is given hope that she will obtain vicarious merit through his ordination; with a daughter, she is assured that she will be taken care of in her old age as well as in her life after death. In the village households, the women are happy to "support the family and only through supporting the family while the husbands and sons are in the monkhood that these women will get some merit."[128]

The solidarity of the family is essential to carry out the religious and ritual functions which are required of every household in the village. The different religious activities, such as festivals, ceremonies, and rituals in the village normally require labor and contributions from the households. Each household's participation in these religious activities is expected. The village meeting normally assigns each household with different temple responsibility. Decisions as to how and when each of the households will participate are made by the village head and/or event committee.

Besides the regular monthly festivals, ceremonies, and rituals involving merit making, each household must participate in the merit-making act of providing food for the monks in a weekly cycle which is divided among the households in the village. The households are assigned other responsibilities by the village committee, especially participation in the 12 monthly merit-making rituals or customs. Sounthonpesat explains, "Anyone who does not follow or obey the consensus of the village meeting will be kept under the control of the head of the household until the next village meeting, which will decide the fate of the charged individual" (trans. from the Thai by the author).

Also, at a special rite held between six months and two years after the death of a household member, the family members must display solidarity. At this time, a group including the deceased's siblings, spouse, parents, children, grandparents, and/or grand children assembles for merit making for the deceased. All are expected to make monetary contributions toward the offerings made to the Buddhist monks in honor of the deceased.[129] This occasion serves to honor and make merit for the dead loved one and hopefully grants them rebirth into a better existence. Anyone not fully participating disrespects and rejects his parents, elders, or ancestors. After converting to Christianity, the author refused to participate in this special rite held in honor of a deceased relative. This non-compliance was perceived as disrespectful and disloyal, a betrayal of his own traditional customs passed down from the Isan and Lao forefathers. Thus, it was also interpreted as anti-social and disruptive to the solidarity of the household. On this ground, Christianity was rejected by a large majority of the author's bilateral kinsmen.

The Solidarity of the Kin Group

The importance of the Isan kin relationship can not be overestimated. Each individual in a typical Isan village has a large number of relatives or kinsmen.

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[128]Adul Wichiencharoen, "Social Values in Thailand" (Translation from Thai by Nopamas Dhiravegin), *Journal of Social Science Review* 1, no. 1 (March 1976): 152.

[129]Keyes, "Kin Groups," 294.

The Isan villagers depend on their kin relationships for social and economic support in difficult years. The long history of community life together in one village or in the same village communities and the economic and social interdependency have resulted in a "distinct in-group-out-group mentality.[130] Accordingly, the Isan tends to stress internal solidarity and intimate, trust relationships. The unity of the kin group is invaluable in times of trouble or crisis. Sparkes gives us an example of this significant kin group solidarity during a crisis moment:

> An example of how villagers pool their resources in a crisis occurred during my 1991 fieldwork. My neighbor's daughter was roughed up by a drunken boy at a festival in a nearby village. The boy was arrested and put in prison overnight. The village elders and relations of the boy visited my neighbor's compound on two occasions to settle accounts, that is, making a peace offering. My neighbor rounded up all his relatives who held administrative positions or were respected elders in the village and argued his case in front of the other group. This show of solidarity resulted in a payment of 3000 baht and a saving of face. Relatives provide a network of contacts to be called upon in need and are an important social framework that orientates the individual in society.[131]

The individual Isan is never left without help as long as he submits himself to the group mentality. His safety and security are found within his stable kin group. The stability of the kin group is based upon the size of the group, which determines the resources that the group can provide for its members. Expounding on this, American anthropologist Steven Piker at Swarthmore College points out, "As groups grow in resources, they grow larger and more stable."[132] Along with building the solidarity of the kin group, the material and human resources are of the utmost importance to relieve the hardship of the needy members of the kin group. Keyes agrees, "The kin groups who do not have sufficient food are dependent upon the charity of relatives [*other kin groups*] to maintain a bare existence."[133]

The primary character quality of the kinsmen is their ultimate concern for the other kinsmen's safety and well-being. The mark of a genuine kinsman is his availability and accessibility in time of troubles. Tambiah points out:

> Individual afflictions, life crises, and rites of passage are first and foremost the concern of the patients' and celebrants' family and household, then of the surrounding circle of close kin and finally of distant kin and neighbors and friends.[134]

The Isan villagers place little or no value upon independent living or thoughts. The Isan people basically have three kinds of fear—fear of the spirits, fear of not having enough money for expenses and for food, and fear that others will say that they are

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[130]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 65.

[131]Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls*, 22.

[132]Piker, *A Peasant Community*, 152.

[133]Keyes, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 14.

[134]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 15.

not acting like *banmuang* (*the rest of other people in our villages and cities*-บ้านเมือง).[135] These fears keep them passive and accommodating to the exigency of the kin group. Hence, according to the psyche or mental attitude of the Isan, a "person is ill-advised to try to fight one's own battles independently."[136] He defines his identify in relation to the kin group. Fordman also discerns that in Thailand, the "people are defined in large part by their relationship to other kin. Kinship to a great extent tells people who they are and defines many of their roles, rights and responsibilities."[137]

Although the individual Isan has the right to make his own decision, he will rarely make any decision without the moral support and backing of his household and kin group. When making a decision on matters that might affect his kin group's solidarity or social standing, he believes that approval or sanction from his kin group is indispensable. Without it, he is unlikely to pursue any major decision.

The Isan's sensitivity for approval or sanction from the kin group became apparent in an interview with a young man named Sarawut Namsaena, age 17 and single, who lives in Bok village, Nathan minor-district in Ubonratchatani province. He was asked whom he would consider the important people to influence his decision-making process concerning religion. Sarawut responded that he was the most important person in the decision-making process. The village community leaders and elders were given as those next in order of importance, followed by the head of his household, and then the elders of his kin group. When Sarawut was asked about converting to Christianity, he responded, "The elders of my kin group must lead the change. I wouldn't dare change to Christianity without their lead. I would not have the courage to change to Christianity alone" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[138]

A similar response was given by an Isan official named Naipat Chanthathong, age 66, male, married, who serves as a secretary of Gongpown sub-district administrative committee in Gonpown sub-district of Nathan minor-district in Ubonratchatani province. Chanthathong verbalized:

> When we are considering doing something significant, we need to consult with the elders of our kin group because we respect them. With respect to converting to another religion such as Christianity, they certainly will not be in agreement (trans. from the Thai by the author).[139]

The Isan realize the consequences of not listening to the counsel of the kin group elders who are responsible for the kin group's welfare and happiness. The negative sanctions against an entire household because a single member of that

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[135]Chansamone Saiyasak, "The Three Fears of the Isan People," Sermon on Sunday morning at Mekong Church Nonprasert, 17 September 2006.

[136]Piker, *A Peasant Community*, 152.

[137]Fordham, "Protestant Christianity and the Transformation of Northern Thai Culture," 5.

[138]Warawut Namsaena, Bok villager, Nathan minior-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 14 August 2006.

[139]Naipat Chanthathong, Secretary to the Gongpown Sub-District Administrative Committee and village elder of Nachoom village, Nathan minior-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 13 August 2006.

household is not acting in conformity to the kin group's norms can include discontinuation of protection, economic and labor support, and termination of relationships. Other kin groups in the village communities are also often advised of the negative sanctions. As a result, the sanction devastates one's livelihood, especially during times when support from the kinsmen is essential. In this regard, Potter noted:

> During a life crisis, such as marriage, ordinations, and funerals, one's bilateral kindred always come to help. Whenever it is necessary to build a new house, members of one's kindred will be the first people to offer assistance. In times of illness, scandal, or some other dreadful occurrence, one's uncles and aunts and cousins all come to visit and offer support.[140]

As a result, the Isan villagers continue to live with the mental attitude that "any man in the village is not alone. He has a moral claim on his friends and a large number of relatives to help or protect him."[141]

More importantly, the Isan villagers define a kin group as individuals related by blood or marriage under a common ancestral spirit. This delegates the intimate relationships and subordination to the control of the spirit. The intimate relationships include primarily the bilateral kinsmen. The importance of the bilateral kinsmen is described by Potter:

> Outside one's immediate family, the members of one's bilateral kindred are the people to whom one owes the greatest respect, affection, mutual support and cooperation. These are the closest relatives one has; and they are much closer than unrelated neighbors or fellow villagers in general.[142]

Srikompliw, an Isan graduate researcher, also noted the interdependence of the kinsmen: "Relatives/kinsmen will help each other by providing the labor in different festivals or activities which clearly demonstrates the interdependence of the kinsmen" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[143] In a typical Isan village, the whole village might consist of kinsmen. Keyes indicates the composition of the Isan village of Ban Nongtuen:

> In Ban Nongtuen [*Northeast Thailand*], as elsewhere, the members of the domestic groups . . . are primarily kinsmen. . . Recruitment of membership in a domestic group can be a consequence of birth, post-marital residence, or adoption.[144]

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[140]Potter, *Thai Peasant Social Structure*, 138.

[141]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 183.

[142]Potter, *Thai Peasant Social Structure*, 137.

[143]Parpatson Srikompliw, "The Relationship Between Relatives and the Development of the Village: A Case Study of Mu Ban Non Sang, Tambon Singkok, Amphoe Kaset Wisai, Changwat Roi Et (in Thai)," semi-thesis, Faculty of Graduate School, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen, Thailand, 1988), 33.

[144]Keyes, "Kin Groups," 274, 282.

As a result, the Isan of the Northeast still maintain the values of a traditional society. These values are derived from natural or environmental influences and living together in groups. They are acquired from living together as kinsmen. These values are also procured from Buddhist teaching and beliefs, such as belief in merit, power and fate, gentleness, *krengchai (เกรงใจ)*, hierarchical power, self-contentment, patience, and avoidance of conflict. When comparing the rural Northeastern Thais (Isan) and the urban Thais of Bangkok, the rural Northeastern Thais tend to preserve traditional values.[145]

Although kin group solidarity provides positive influences such as basic economic, social, religious cooperation and support for members within the group, it negatively inhibits an individuals' decision to change to a new religious path not shared by the group. This frame of mind and traditional values held by the Isan village communities have caused extremely slow Christian conversion growth for Protestant Christian work in Northeast Thailand. The author predicts that the influence of Isan traditional values and kin group's solidarity will continue to restrain the Isan's decision-making process to Christian conversion.

The Solidarity of the Village Community

The Isan society gives the village community a prominent role in their decision-making process. A strong relationship with other members in the village community is essential to maintain one's acceptance in the community. Rakjiwit notes this pattern:

> Because the villagers depend very heavily on drawing psychological security from the in-group, there is a strong psychological need for these villagers to be loved or to be accepted by their communities. They would go a long way to seek relationships with other members of the community.[146]

Also, village tradition causes most Isan villagers to believe that it is a good thing to comply with the decisions or desire of their village community. As a result, the people [village leaders] entrusted to perform community tasks have a strong moral force for coercing the villagers to obey.[147] Influenced by the value of community solidarity, the Isan villagers will respond to criticism or scorn by doing good for the ones who criticized or scorned them. They will seek to improve themselves, by consulting with the village leaders and elders for guidance in order to adhere to the will of the village community. By aligning themselves with the desire of the village community and its leaders and elders, they find psychological safety and security.

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[145]Penkhae Prachonpachanuk and Armeuan Sordmanee, Kaniyom kong chao chonnabot tai: Kaniyom tang wattookam kaniyom tang rapiep prapaynee (Values of the Thai Rural People: Materialistic and Customary Values-ค่านิยมของชาวชนบท ไทย: ค่านิยมทางวัตถุกับค่านิยมทางระเบียบประเพณี)(in Thai), Research Report no. 35 (Bangkok: Institute of Behavior Science, Srinakharinwirot University, 1986), 25

[146]Rakjiwit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 70.

[147]Ibid., 182.

Further research by Rakjiwit indicates that over 90 percent of Isan villagers (in Nakon Panom) are prepared to follow the suggestions or guidance of their leaders and 70 percent of them show their willingness to submit to the demand of the village leaders even against their own free will. Isan villagers will submit themselves to the will of the leaders for four reasons: the leaders (1) have close connections with the authorities and may use such connections to create trouble, (2) may use their authority in the village community to oppress the villagers, (3) are highly respected and trusted by the villagers, and (4) need to seek help from the leaders in time of need.[148]

The concept of the group in Isan society permeates every aspect of their life. Although this group identity may not strongly influence them while they are away working in Bangkok or in other places away from their villages, it has, however enough influence on them that one will find small communities of Isan or Lao people in Bangkok, other urban centers, and all over the world. The sense of group identity or belonging to the same group still continues even outside the village communities.

Phi puta as a symbol for the village community solidarity

The concept of an Isan village community can be discerned by the animistic concept of the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)*, an Isan village guardian spirit. As the village guardian spirit, the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* is the community chief spirit that provides protection for the people, the animals, rice fields, gardens, forest, and water sources within the confine of the village. In former times, the annual rituals performed to the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* were restricted only to members of the village.[149] The purpose of the rituals was to appeal to the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* for the well-being of the villagers and their animals that depend on the territory of the village for their sustenance. The *phi puta*'s direct concern is the membership of a specific village and its purpose is to establish or maintain the village community's boundaries. The protection of the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* is only effective inside the boundary of the village community exclusive of the outside world. As "the creators of a community's bounded realm,"[150] the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* help to delineate between the inside and outside worlds. The external world exists outside of the village community where the power of the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* is rendered ineffective.

The concept of the village guardian spirit (*phi puta-ผีปู่ตา*) presents an excellent model whereby one can grasp the concept of village community solidarity. Just as the household solidarity depends on the ancestral spirit of the *phi sua (ผีเชื้อ)*, so the village community's solidarity relies on the village guardian spirit of the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)*. The ancestral spirit *phi sua (ผีเชื้อ)* functions to keep members of the household

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[148]Ibid., 85, 97.

[149]Yukio Hayashi, "Reconfiguration of Village Guardian Spirit Spirits Among the Thai-Lao in Northeast Thailand," in *Founders' Cults in Southeast Asia: Ancestors, Polity, and Identity*, ed. Nicola Tannenbaum and Cornelia Ann Kammerer, Monograph 52 (New Heaven, Conn.: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 2003), 193.

[150]Ibid., 205.

in unity and cohesiveness. The village guardian spirit of the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* performs the same task but for the villagers who are residing in the limit of the village's boundaries. As a consequence, the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* serves as the best controller of the village community's solidarity.

Communal rituals as a pretext for community solidarity

Not only is solidarity strengthened by the village community's active belief in the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)*, it is also encouraged as they partake in the rituals or traditional customs of merit making together. Keyes indicates: "Those who live in the village are bound together by common participation in activities associated with three village institutions: the shrine of the tutelary spirit [*phi puta-ผีปู่ตา*], the temple, and the school."[151] Tambiah also shares the same perspective that although individuals or families receive benefits in merit making, the carrying out of merit making is always collective and thus strengthens group or community solidarity.[152] Bailey also indicates that the *kwan (ขวัญ)* rituals, amongst the Lao, are for the purpose of community solidarity.[153] The author makes the same observation. The *kwan (ขวัญ)* rituals in Northeast Thailand are primarily for the purpose of community or group solidarity.

All of the Isan's rituals, ceremonies, or festivals, whether they are animistic (worship of spirits), Buddhistic, or Brahmanistic, are functioning to foster community or group solidarity. The end result of any religious activity is to create cohesion in the village community. American anthropologist John Bowen defines the function of religion, "Religion serves to strengthen social solidarity by communicating specific ideas and sentiments, and by regulating and strengthening social relationships."[154] In reference to the purpose of merit making in Northeast Thailand, Keyes comments:

> The merit making in the village is a communal affair . . . The benefit of merit making redound to individuals (who, in turn, may "transfer" them to others), but the occasions at which such merit making is done serve to promote the solidarity of the community.[155]

The purpose of the Thai villagers' communal religious activities is also noted by Ingersoll, "As villagers make merit in communal rituals, they also enhance

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[151]Keyes, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 4.

[152]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 57.

[153]Bailey, "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness," 263.

[154]John R. Bowen, "Social Theory in the Anthropology of Religion," in *Religions in Practice: An Approach to the Anthropology of Religion*, 3d ed. (New York: Pearson Education, 2005), 16.

[155]Charles F. Keyes, "Economic Action and Buddhist Morality in a Thai Village," *Journal of Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (1983): 857.

community unity, peace, and the opportunity for enjoyment of life."[156] The village community and the kin groups, who make up the village composition, receive the benefit of bonding through religious rituals and ceremonies. Speaking to this effect, Klausner writes:

> Much Buddhist merit, Brahman ritual, and animistic spirit ceremonies involve the active participation and cooperation of the entire village society and serve to solidify existing communal bonds and strengthen the stability and solidarity of the closely integrated village community. Similarly, certain ceremonies involving extended family groups and the transfer of merit to their ancestors serve to strengthen kin cohesiveness over time.[157]

Religious traditions as the basic for community solidarity

In addition to religious activities, the Isan villages also look to tradition as the basis for unity and solidarity. Rakwijit agrees, "The Northeastern village tradition emphasizes 'unity and consensus.'"[158] As a result, the village leaders have the tendency to split up if the issue in question threatens internal unity or solidarity of the village.[159] The Isan society's conception of community solidarity naturally expresses itself in their village life as each household in the village is required to carry out their religious responsibility to uphold traditional religions as well as Buddhism. Refusal to participate in the weekly duties is perceived as disintegrating community solidarity and usually warrants negative sanctions by the village community. Sounthonpesat explains:

> The merit making of providing food for the monks in a week cycle is divided among the village households. The village meeting assigns households other responsibilities, especially participation in the events and the observance of 12 monthly rituals. Any one who does not follow or who disobeys the consensus of the village meeting will be kept under the control of the head of the household until the next village meeting, which will decide the fate of the charged individual.[160]

Because of their socially collective nature, merit making and animistic rituals always carry with them the goal of "strengthening the group or community,"[161] consequently, an imposed village sanction results for the villager or household that does not conform to the village social norms and participate in these activities. As symbols of community solidarity, these village religious activities related to Buddhism, Animism, and Brahmanism are powerful social control mechanisms.

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[156]Ingersoll, "Merit and Identity," 238.

[157]Klausner, *Reflections in Thai Culture*, 150.

[158]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 190.

[159]Ibid., 97.

[160]Sounthonpesat, "Krongsrang Sungkom Mooban," 76.

[161]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 57.

The use of sanctions against threats to community solidarity

Sanctions are effectively used in the Isan region of Thailand to keep social controls and prevent members of the Isan society from embracing or changing to another religion other than the one passed down by the Isan's ancestors. In defining sanction, Radcliffe-Brown states, "A sanction is a reaction on the part of a society or of a considerable number of its members to a mode of behavior which is thereby approved or disapproved."[162]

The standards of behavior by which Isan society judges its members are based on the norms which they have developed since their early history. Radcliffe-Brown further expresses that negative sanctions include expressions of disapproval through gossip, avoidance and ridicule within the local community. An organized sanction includes the burning down of houses or destruction of fences or trees. Ostracism, a diffused form of sanction, is often used to correct deviant behavior. Ultimately, banishment or imprisonment or death is the final one.[163]

The sanctions against converting to Christianity in the Isan region have ranged from expressions of disapproval to martyrdom. However, the most common sanctions are expressions of disapproval such as criticism, gossip, avoidance and ridicule. An Isan elderly woman, Pavong Chaiocha, age 50, expressed that changing to another religion would require involvement from the community leaders and elders in the process of decision making. The fear of sanction from the community occupies a primary place in the Isan thought process when considering changing to another religion. Pavong responded when asked about changing her religion to Christianity:

> If I change to another religion (Christianity) and begin attending a church, the community will ask where I have been and why I have not been attending to the Buddhist temple. Therefore, if I change to another religion, I have to discuss it with the community elders and leaders so that they will not criticize and scold me (trans. from the Thai by the author).[164]

The fear of being criticized and scolded by the Buddhist-dominant community seizes the minds of the Isan villagers and paralyses them from initiating any decision that would lead them from their old religion (Buddhism) to Christianity. Unless the community leaders and elders endorse Christianity, it is unlikely that the Isan villagers will consider Christianity as a religious option unless basic survival is at stake. Crisis situations can be an external force that could possibly bring openness to the closed, traditional Isan communities.

Another major threat to the solidarity of the Isan community are the outsiders. The Isan villagers strongly hold to a saying, "Familiarity is a closed kinsman" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[165] Intimacy and interdependence are more than valued principals and knowledge. Rakwijit noted this value among the Isan people of Nakon Pranom, "Distrust of outsiders, combined with paternalism and close

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[162]Radcliffe-Brown, "Social Sanctions," 192.

[163]Ibid.

[164]Pavong Chaiocha, Songkorn villager, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 23 September 2006.

[165]Somjitsripunya, "*Lokkatat chow ban*," 12.

family relations in the villages, tends to produce a strong sense of psychological interdependence among villagers."[166] The Isan people will give respect, love, and trust to people of the same region over some villagers from other regions. Somjitsripunya observes that the Isan's "respect and trust will be geographically restricted, with its greatest intensity starting from the nearest" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[167] Sounthonpesat additionally stresses this important worldview of the Isan as follows: "Culture and belief systems hinder the Isan village from cooperating with someone from outside of the village, even if the cooperation will prove to be beneficial to the betterment of the village" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[168]

The classification of outsiders includes not only the *farang (ฝรั่ง)* or white Westerners but also the urban or Central Thai from faraway cities, such as Bangkok or Chiang Mai. This position is supported by Keyes who states: "Northeastern villagers are never identified as being 'Thai,' for to be 'Thai' meant ceasing to be a northeastern villager."[169] Even if the Isan villagers relocate to another region in the country or to another country entirely, they tend to remain together as a group. Mole observes this pattern of behavior:

> The Northeasterner's strong emotional attachment to kinship groups and villages promote problems of cultural adjustment. Consequently most of them prefer to remain in the area, and when they do migrate, they generally settle in communities composed of other Northeasterners.[170]

Because of this behavior pattern, the author believes that the Isan villagers will be more open to change from Buddhism to Christianity if the change is initiated by Isan Christians themselves.

Community solidarity as protected and preserved by the spirits or phi

The protection and preservation of the unity within the Isan community involves not only communal Buddhistic and animistic rituals, ancestral traditions, and community sanctions but it also includes malevolent spirits—*phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* and *phi pob (ผีปอบ)*—to come to the defense of community solidarity. Sounthonpesat points out:

> Besides the influence from Buddhism, the Isan uses local beliefs or religious customs both to control the behavior of the villagers and to solicit labor and material cooperation for village activities, particular the belief system of the *phi*

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[166]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 62.

[167]Somjitsripunya, "*Lokkatat chow ban*," 14.

[168]Sounthonpesat, "Krongsrang Sungkom Mooban," 52.

[169]Charles F. Keyes, "Ethnic Identity and Loyalty of Villagers in Northeastern Thailand," *Asian Survey* 6, no. 7 (July 1966): 368.

[170]Mole, *Thai Values and Behavior Patterns*, 95.

puta (ผีปู่ตา) and the *phi pob (ผีปอบ)*.[171]

The belief system of the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* provides the village leaders with a way to govern and control the conduct of every member of the village. Villagers normally obey if the decisions are given through a *cham* (spirit doctor-จ้ำ) in the name of the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)*.[172] Also, the Isan believe that the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* will be the controller, ensuring that the members of every Isan household conform to the *chareet prapaynee* (ancestral traditional customs-จารีตประเพณี) or social regulations. The village heads often makes use of the Isan villagers' respect and readiness to obey the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* in order to keep control or to solicit cooperation.

Community solidarity as protected and preserved by the use of kalom

The Isan's *kalom (คะลำ)* are sets of taboo handed down from the Isan's ancestors which play a major role in social behavioral control within the Isan village communities. These taboos form important prohibitions which have regulated relationships in the Isan's households, kin groups, and communities for countless generations. As customs for regulating social behaviors and decisions among members of the Isan society, *kalom (คะลำ)* are an indispensable part of daily village life. Taboos are useful tools for governing and controlling the Isan society because the majority of Isan villagers are ignorant of the statutory laws as imposed by the government. In addition, the Isan villagers do not readily make use of the statutory laws, and they often any lack an oversight from the central government. As social norms, taboos are used to control personal behavior in society so that the villagers will behave according to what is considered to be good traditional guidelines (or customary laws). Normally, the villager only needs to hear, "Don't do that because it is '*kalom (คะลำ)*,'" and he will immediately cease whatever he is doing.[173]

Thus, *kalom (คะลำ)* is what the Isan forefathers used to control the daily lives of the Isan villagers. Without the need for explanation or reason, the Isan accept *kalom.* They will avoid breaking or transgressing any of these taboos because misfortune is believed to befall the one who does not comply as well as his community. Additionally, the one ignoring the taboos will be perceived as behaving outside of societal norms (นอกลู่นอกทาง), which results in bad luck on the community. Consequently, the society might despise him and impose a psychological sanction by disconnecting fellowship with him. Thus, historically, *kalom (คะลำ)*, has been used

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[171]Sounthonpesat, "Krongsrang Sungkom Mooban," 110.

[172]Ibid., 115.

[173]Korsorn Plaklang, "Lar kalom kong chao isan suksa chapraw karrarnee king amphoe srisomdet changwat roi et (Taboos of the Isan People: A Study of Srisomdet Sub-district, Roi Et Province--ข้อคะลำของชาวอีสาน ศึกษาเฉพาะกรณี กิ่งอำเภอศรีสมเด็จ จังหวัด ร้อยเอ็ด) (in Thai)," A paper, Srinakralinvirot University, 1993, 18.

very effectively as a way by which the Isan village community socially regulates villagers.[174]

Kalom *(คะลำ)* promotes community solidarity as a social control mechanism which keeps the Isan villagers from embarking on new social conducts and practices that might be perceived as violating the taboos. This effect has kept the Isan villagers in Nathan minor-district in check and keeps them from trying alternative lifestyles such as attending Christian churches instead of Buddhist temples.

The negative effect of *kalom (คะลำ)* not only has distanced the majority of the Isan villagers in Nathan minor-district from interacting with Protestant Christians, but it has also increased the distance between the Buddhists and their Christians relatives. Moreover, since most of the Isan *kalom (คะลำ)* consists of social behavioral prohibitions related to Buddhism and Animism, they are generally ignored by the Isan Christians. As a consequence, the Isan communities believe that those converting to Christianity have comparatively disregarded the value of community solidarity. Christianity is thus seen as a disintegrator of community unity and peace. Hence, the value of community solidarity poses a hindrance to the individual decision making for conversion since the decision is perceived as a lack of support for the whole community. This point was evident in an interview with 81-year old Isan elder Sorn Songsee, a Songkorn villager in Phosai district of Ubonratchatani. Commenting on the subject of changing religion to Christianity, Sorn remarked:

> Since we are living with the *banmuang* (others in the community-บ้านเมือง) from ancient time, we should consult the community leaders and elders if we can change to another religion because Buddhism is our primitive (old) religion. It is only if the community elders and leaders lead the change that we will change religion. They will make the change only if they know that the change will bring benefits to us all. In addition, since our kin group elders have led us to follow Buddhism and to practice rituals and merit-making acts, if I want to change religion now, I must seek their advice to see if they will agree with the change. More importantly, I do not think that I will consider changing to Christianity because the elders of the community probably will not initiate the change and I do not think that they will initiate the change anyway (trans. from the Thai by the author).[175]

Social Harmony

The fifth social value influencing the Isan's decision-making process is the Isan's tenacity for maintaining social harmony. The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines harmony: "When people are peaceful and agree with each other, or when things seem right or suitable together."[176] Good feelings within households, kin groups, and village communities are extremely desirable among the Isan people. The

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[174]Ibid., 1.

[175]Sorn Songsee, village elder of Songkorn village, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 21 August 2006.

[176]"Harmony," in *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Isan people will do whatever it takes to create and maintain social harmony at all levels. So strong is the feeling for social harmony in the Isan region (as well as with other regions of Thailand) that any action taken to maintain harmony is justified and upheld by the society. This case is comparatively illustrated by the recent military coup's takeover of Thai premiership by the Thai army Commander Gen. Sondhi Boonyaratkalin. After the coup it was announced by the Associated Press that the overthrow was needed in order to "resolve conflict and bring back normalcy and harmony among the people."[177] This same takeover was justified by the *Bangkok Post*, the Thai Independent English Newspaper based in Bangkok, which stated that 84 percent of the Thai people as a whole, including the Isan region, supported the coup and its promise to bring the country back to normalcy and harmony.[178] Although the ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had excellent economic records and was very popular among the rural Isan population, his inability to maintain harmony became the primary cause of his downfall.

The Isan's commitment to social harmony can not be overstated. Paul DeNeui, a longtime Protestant missionary to the Isan in Northeast Thailand, remarks on the Isan's value of social harmony, "It is not an overstatement to say that in Isan culture social harmony is a greater value than truth."[179] The Isan hold it as the highest value in each Isan household, kin group, and village community - people must be peaceful and agree with each other. DeNeui furthermore expresses the importance of maintaining the harmony with others by considering what they are thinking when he says, "From the interviews it became clear that an important worldview value for Isan people was the consideration of what others, particularly those of a similar peer or *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) group, might think."[180]

The Isan's resolve to uphold social harmony affects their attitude and their way of life. The Isan's apparent manner of non-aggressiveness is motivated by their supreme desire for social harmony. Klausner describes this motivation:

> Most symbolic of continuity, despite the thefts, cash orientation, and new life styles, is the still compelling belief in the value of social harmony and avoidance of confrontation. These latter attitudes also help explain why the villagers still remain, for the most part, reticent and diffident when faced with the power of officialdom and will suffer indignities and injustice rather than openly protest, criticize or challenge.[181]

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[177]The Associated Press, "Thai Coup Leader Recently Called Military Takeovers 'Thing of the Past,'" *International Herald Tribune* 20 September 2006, September 21, 2006 <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2006/09/20/asia/AS_GEN_Thailand_Coup_Leader.php>.

[178]"Most Agree with Coup but Have Reservations," *Bangkok Post* 21 September 2006, 21 September 2006 <http://www.bangkokpost.com/News/index.php>.

[179]DeNeui, "String-Tying Ritual," 268.

[180]Ibid., 210.

[181]Klausner, *Reflections of Thai Culture*, 154.

The establishment and maintenance of social harmony is significantly connected to the teachings of Buddhism. Isan village communities are falling back on the moral principles of Buddhism in order to maintain devotion to social harmony. Rakwijit accurately observes, "Buddhism teaches villagers to do good and avoid evil—the principle of moral conduct perceived to be vital to social harmony, domestic peace and unity."[182]

In order to effectively safeguard social harmony in the village communities, the people look to the household system as a control mechanism. Together with the village community, the household keeps its members acting in conformity to norms of social harmony. Sounthonpesat illustrates this point when he says:

> The households have an important part in keeping the peace and harmony in the village. For instance, when there is a theft or conflict in the village and it is discovered that the theft or conflict involves a particular household, the village head will give a warning to the head of the household to resolve the problem. If the warning does not prevail, the matter will then be presented to the meeting of the village.[183]

A similar concern for social harmony is found in African indigenous religions. James Cox confirms, "African indigenous religions concern themselves with means of providing benefits which are largely material and which promote the harmony of society."[184] Because Isan communities are driven to maintain social harmony by creating peace and agreement among its members, very little room is allowed for ideas or religious persuasions that might lead to disunity. The commitment to social harmony consequently creates great resistance to the introduction of Christianity since it would be seen as a threat to the social harmony of the village. A 30-year old Isan villager, Sompan Changwan, married, living in Bokmuang village in Khemarat district of Ubonratchatani, revealed this concern in an interview:

> In order to make a decision to change my religion, I would have to consult the head of my household. I am his son and, out of a respect for him, I will follow him. I will respect him by respecting whomever he respects. Then, I will have to consult my village community leaders and elders. I am living in a village community that is governed by the community leaders and elders. If I decide to change to another religion, will they allow me to continue living in the community because it is a Buddhist community? Lastly, I am afraid to separate from our Buddhist group and convert to another religion because they will not be in agreement with me (trans. from the Thai by the author).[185]

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[182]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 99.

[183]Sounthonpesat, "*Punha pak tawun auk chiang nua*," 75.

[184]James L. Cox, "Characteristics of African Indigenous Religions in Contemporary Zimbabwe," in *Indigenous Religions: A Companion*, ed. Graham Harvey (London: Cassell, 2000), 232.

[185]Sompan Changwan, Bokmuang villager, Khemarat district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 15 August 2006.

The sixth social value exerting influence on the Isan decision-making process is avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict. Sequential to commitment to maintain social harmony at any cost is the Isan's avoidance of "open expression of anger, annoyance, dislike, hatred, etc."[186] This view is also supported by Keyes who expresses that the Isan's (Thai-Lao's) cultural value on maintaining harmony "serves to prevent public confrontations"[187] and "there is a strong underlying value in the Thai-Lao village to attempt to void open conflict whenever possible."[188] Consequently, the avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict affects the development of the Isan's personality and social relationships. They tend to be shy and display more smiles to outsiders and exhibit an avoidance of conflict.[189] Also, even in the midst of conflict situation, their social relationships will display the apparent absence of conflict and confrontation and every effort will be made to circumvent "outward conflict and direct confrontation."[190]

The practice of avoiding all possible confrontation and/conflict is well illustrated in the relationship between the son-in-law and the father-in-law. Culturally required to submit under the authority of the father-in-law, the son-in-law's relationship with the father-in-law can potentially be eruptive. As a result, the Isan ancestors installed a set of taboos to govern the relationship of the father-in-law and son-in-law. Potter speaks to this matter thus, "The relationship is potentially explosive, and to prevent trouble there is an avoidance taboo between a son-in-law and his parents-in-law; they almost never speak to one another and avoid each other's presence if possible."[191]

First, it should be stressed that the value of avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict stems from their value judgment on confrontation and/conflict. In their appraisal of the value of confrontation and/conflict avoidance, the Isan believe (just as the Central Thai do) that those who effectively avoid all confrontation and/or conflict are most virtuous and possess good morals. Phillips observes the peasants of Bang Chan in Central Thailand who share similar personality traits as the Isan and concluded as follows:

> The majority of the peasants in Bang Chan Village described people who hide their feelings as 'good' and persons who do not want to cause trouble as 'just men' and also viewed that hiding one's feelings is a virtue that helps men to live

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[186]Klausner, A Memorandum to Research Officer, 3.

[187]Charles F Keyes, "Local Leadership in Rural Thailand," in *Local Authority and Administration in Thailand*, ed. Fred R. von de Mehdon, and David A. Wilson (Thailand: Academic Advisory Council of Thailand, 1970), 116.

[188]Keyes, "Peasant and Nation," 109.

[189]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 64.

[190]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 74.

[191]Potter, *Thai Peasant Social Structure*, 125.

together happily.[192]

Second, the Isan's attitude toward confrontation and/or conflict is religiously influenced. They perceive that abstaining from confrontation and/or conflict conforms to the teaching of Buddhism and its accompanying doctrine of karma. Klausner agrees:

> The villagers consciously justified their avoidance of confrontation and their desire not to publicly protest or to press either criticism or legal charges against their oppressors as being in conformity with Buddhist doctrines and teaching. Those who tyrannized would have to live with the bad karma resulting from their unjust actions.[193]

Because of its link to Buddhism, the realization of merit is believed by the Isan to be the end result of one's ability to distance oneself from any confrontation and/or conflict. Klausner also indicates that the Isan "credit themselves on the merit scale if they avoid open social conflict while entries on the debit side will, for the most part, only be made if there is open and direct expression of anti-social feelings."[194] In addition, the absence of confrontation can be seen in relation to belief in karma. The words of Mr. Nat, a Thai working in a small company in Bangkok, illustrate the point:

> I could only say that, in the end, karma will straighten things out. It is not for a humble man to decide whether a person deserves punishment or not. So in other words, in Thailand, we do nothing to those who offend us. Their karma will catch up with them in the end.[195]

Third, the Isan's value in the avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict can be demonstrated by the importance they place on face-to-face, smooth, interactive relationships. Since they desire face-to-face relationships to continue as smoothly as possible, they tend to steer away from any decision that might interfere with the peace and harmony of the relationship. Therefore, any options or choices which might potentially damage an existing harmonious relationship are consequently ruled out and considered psychologically disturbing. This includes the choice to convert to another religion or Christianity. Regarding these matters, Klausner writes:

> The villagers put a high priority on personal face to face relationships. At the same time, they place a very positive value on avoiding both confrontation and the overt and public expression of anti-social emotions. They find such open confrontation and conflict to be psychologically disturbing and try to avoid it at

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[192]Phillips, "Thai Peasant Personality," 340.

[193]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 3.

[194]William J. Klausner, "Popular Buddhism in Northeast Thailand," *Visakha Puja* (1971): 39.

[195]Catherine Bowers and Natayada na Songkhla, "Wild Ideas: Finding One's Manners," *The Nation* 8 February 2004, 28 September 2006 <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.arcview.php?clid=12&id=93184&date=2004-02-08>>.

all costs. Such values and attitudes have the inevitable result of muting protest, criticism, and/or legal actions when faced with unfair treatment and/or abuse of authority/power by either fellow villagers, private businessmen or district and provincial officialdom.[196]

The value of face-to-face interpersonal relationships, accompanying the avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict, provides the Isan with psychological comfort needed to deal with daily village life. Mole and Mulder agree that smooth interactions or smooth interpersonal relations are highly valued social rules of conduct among the Thai.[197] Describing the issue of saving face and confrontation among the Thais, American missionary to Thailand Mark Durene noted:

> Eastern culture frowns on confrontation. It is a negative concept because it serves to destroy rather than build social unity. Thais consider social harmony so important that harmony itself serves as their foundation of morality. The ethics and morality of social interaction is measured by the standard of social harmony. If the social interaction leads to disharmony, the conclusion is the interaction was bad or even immoral. Because confrontation causes immediate interpersonal discomfort, it must be bad. For this reason it is generally considered far more ethical to either ignore or compromise with someone who caused offence, rather than confront them. Avoidance and compromise become positive ethical values in social interaction.[198]

As a result, they will attempt every way possible to maintain smooth, face-to-face interpersonal relationships and to avoid confrontation and/or conflict.

Fourth, the Isan value the avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict because they fear offending or hurting individuals or spirits who might react in revenge. This fear of offending is heightened in relationships involving someone of equal or higher status. Redmond noted, "In general, one dares not displease someone who is perceived to be equal to or bigger (body-wise, face-wise, or money-wise) than oneself."[199] Working as a church planter among the Isan of Northeast Thailand, DeNeui experienced a similar situation. DeNeui elaborates, "Isan society values face-saving and conflict avoidance to such a high degree that difficult topics, such as religious issues, are intentionally avoided in public discussion lest someone be offended."[200]

Rakwijit ascribes the Isan's evasion of any serious tension to their fear of hurting others' feelings and their fear of revenge."[201] The Isan's fear of hurting

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[196]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 3.

[197]Mole, *Thai Values and Behavior Patterns*, 81; Mulder, *Everyday Life in Thailand*, 66.

[198]Mark Durene, "The Church and "Face"," *Journal of Asian Mission* 7, no. 1 (2005): 133-43, 137.

[199]Redmond, *Wondering Into Thai Culture*, 126.

[200]DeNeui, "String-Tying Ritual," 250.

[201]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 183.

others' feelings became evident in the "2003 Christmas for You" evangelistic crusade in the Phosai district of Ubonratchatani conducted by the Mekong Evangelical Mission (MEM) based in Ubonratchatani. MEM held an evangelistic crusade and invited the Reverend Prasert Thepchek, the Regional Chairman of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand in the Eastern Region to be the guest preacher. At the end of the preaching, an invitation was offered for salvation. Approximately seven adults came to the stage to publicly receive salvation. A week later, the MEM's Phosai church-planting team followed up with the seven adults in order to provide them with discipleship. The MEM's Phosai church-planting team was shocked to hear from the seven adults that their decision to come on stage to receive salvation was made to avoid disappointing the preacher who was a faraway guest to the village. One of the seven adults told the MEM's Phosai church-planting team as follows:

> I decided to get up on stage to receive salvation upon the call of the guest preacher to please the preacher who came from a faraway place to visit our village. We did not want to hurt his feelings; therefore, I was one of the people who went on stage to receive salvation (trans. from the Thai by the author).[202]

Along with the fear of hurting others' feeling is the fear of possible revenge in the form of "charms, spells, potions, magically induced poisons and the like. It is a crucial factor in strengthening the villager's bias towards avoiding confrontation; avoiding enemies; avoiding offense."[203] As result, the Isan develop an attitude of accommodation and compromise to the power of human nature and the spirits that are perceived to be of equal or greater strength. This compromising attitude of the Isan is no better described than in the words of Mulder:

> Soon one learns that one should let sleeping dogs lie, accommodate power, and keep the social process pleasant and superficial, because disturbed power may be vengeful and dangerous. Early in life one learns to keep one's feelings to oneself and to hide behind presentation.[204]

As a consequence of the fear of offending and of possible retaliation, the Isan people living in the Phosai district of Ubonratchatani continue to show an attitude of no responsiveness to the presentation of the Gospel, even if they are convinced that Christianity can provide a way to salvation. Eighty one year old elder, Sorn Songsee of Songkorn village of the Phosai district in Ubonratchatani responded to the author's interview about the issue of changing religion to Christianity as follows:

> The changing of religion to Christianity must be done in consultation with the village community leaders and elders. The leaders and elders of the community must be sought for advice to see if they can support the change from Buddhism to another religion because they have the influence over us in this matter since Buddhism is our present religion. Only if the community leaders and elders lead

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[202]Latsanee Muangsong, member of MEM's Phosai church-planting team, interview by author, 27 December 2003.

[203]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 8.

[204]Mulder, *Everyday Life in Thailand*, 66.

the change to adopt the new religion can we change, or, if the whole village changes, we can change. After consulting with our leaders and elders about changing religion, they criticize or scold us, we therefore should not change to another religion. We should pay attention to what the elders say. We should only echo what they say (trans. from the Thai by the author).[205]

Possible retaliation in the form of negative sanctions has kept the Isan villagers from acting on their own. An Isan villager realizes that if he gets too far out of line by not avoiding face-to-face conflict, "negative sanctions of non-cooperation and ultimately social ostracism may be imposed by his fellows."[206] As a result, the Isan's decision-making patterns are largely in conformity to the preference of the village community leaders and elders. This has greatly hindered the spread of Christianity in Northeast Thailand, especially where the Gospel is still relatively not understood and Buddhism still satisfactorily provides for the spiritual needs of the Isan people.

Fifth, the Isan value the avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict so reciprocal relationships can be maintained. Since the villagers are interdependent of one another for economic cooperation, assistance, safety, and protection, especially in crisis times, it is crucial that good reciprocal relationships be maintained. Being in conflict with or displeasing a leader, elder, superior, or patron in the village community is deemed extremely unwise. Klausner agrees:

> Subconsciously, there was also a realization that open confrontation and conflict would make it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the patterns of mutual co-operation and reciprocal assistance so much a part of village life. Surface friendliness among fellow villagers had to be maintained as one was dependent on others for assistance—albeit on a reciprocal basis—for building one's house, or planting and harvesting one's rice fields, and for contributions towards the costs of life-crisis ceremonies of one's fellow villagers, etc.[207]

Finally, the Isan steer away from conflict because of the fear that the other party will accuse them of the *phi pob* (ผีปอบ), or being possessed by an evil spirit called *phi pob* (ผีปอบ). A known conflict resolution practice employed by the Isan villagers is to accuse the offender of being the *phi pob* (ผีปอบ) or of being possessed by the *phi pob* (ผีปอบ). Several years ago Mae Kam and her husband Par Kam began attending the Mekong Church Nonprasert in Nathan minor-district of Ubonrachatani. Mae Kam married Par Kham after his former wife passed away. Mae Kam, who had a very low social status, was very much disliked by Par Kam's children who tried to persuade Par Kam to separate from her. In addition to this dislike, the children feared that Mae Kam would take over the family's property if Par Kam passed away. This dislike developed into a number of intense face-to-fact conflicts until it became clear that resolution could not be reached. After many unsuccessful attempts to separate Mae Kam from Par Kam, the children along with the kin elders finally decided to employ the ultimate sanction against Mae Kam in a final attempt to banish her from the

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[205]Sorn Songsee, village elder of Songkorn village, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 21 August 2006.

[206]Smith et al., "Social Values," 219.

[207]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 3.

village. They began circulating a false allegation that she has the *phi pob* (ผีปอบ), which immediately prompted the village community to react by banishing her along with Par Kam from the village. After investigating the allegation it was deemed false, and the author who served as the pastor of Mekong Church Nonprasert provided a place for them to live in the church compound. Sounthonpesat confirms the use of the *phi pob* (ผีปอบ) in this manner: "The belief system in the *phi pob* (ผีปอบ) also has an important role when conflicts arise between individuals or households in the village. The *phi pob* (ปอบ) is used as a tool to accuse the other party in the conflict which occurs between two individuals or families" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[208]

As "expulsion from the village is the ultimate sanction, usually reserved for persons believed to be witches (possessed by a *phi pob* [ผีปอบ], a ghoul spirit),"[209] the Isan have the underlying fear that conflict with other villagers in the village community might consequently lead to the false allegation of being possessed by the *phi pob* (ผีปอบ). As result, most of the Isan make it a social norm to avoid any kind of conflict or confrontation for fear of being accused of the *phi pob* (ผีปอบ) and thus banished from living in the protection and confinement of the village. This same fear of being asked to permamnently leave the village and not be able to live there if he converts to Christianity was expressed by Sompan Changwan, age 30, who lives in the Bokmuang village in Khemarat district: "I am living in a village community governed by the community leaders and elders. If I change to Christianity, will the leaders and elders allow me to continue living in the community since it is a Buddhist community?" (trans. from the Thai by the author)[210]

Valuing the avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict, the Isan people frequently make use of mediators to reconcile their differences. The elders of the kin group, the village chiefs and elders, and the religious leaders are important as mediators in the village communities. In 1994, the author worked as a church planter among the Isan in Nonprasert village, Nathan minor-district of Ubonratchatani. While returning from the nearby city of Khemarat, the author's pick-up collided with a water buffalo, badly injuring the animal and damaging the truck. He returned home and reported the accident to his uncle. The uncle immediately informed the elders of the author's kin group and that night they all went to the house of the owner of the injured water buffalo. The owner of the water buffalo assembled the elders of his kin group to meet with the elders of the author's kin group. The meeting was convened for more than two hours to discuss and settle the expenses of treating the injured animal and repairing the damaged truck. In the whole process of settling the case, the author and the owner of the animal were never allowed to have any input. The case was settled by the mediating elders of the author's kin group and the owner of the water buffalo's kin group. As the goal of the mediation was harmonious agreement between two kin groups (that of the author's and the owner of the water buffalo's), the author and the owner of the animal were not allowed any direct input so that direct confrontation could be avoided.

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[208]Sounthonpesat, "Krongsrang Sungkom Mooban," 115.

[209]Smith et al., "Social Values," 219.

[210]Sompan Changwan, Bokmuang villager, Khemarat district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 15 August 2006.

The Isan are willing to suffer any injustice rather than initiate a confrontation or conflict with a counterpart. Klausner explains:

> These latter attitudes [*social harmony and avoidance of confrontation*] also help explain why the villagers still remain, for the most part, reticent and diffident when faced with the power of officialdom and will suffer indignities and injustice rather than openly protest, criticize or challenge.[211]

Circumventing confrontation and conflict continues to be highly valued and prevalent and has historically experienced very little change. The research conducted by Thai sociologists from Khonkaen University in Khonkaen province of Northeast Thailand from 1985 to 1986 indicates that 96.3 percent of the 294 households surveyed in Nontabang village still observe the avoidance of a confrontational stance in daily life. The 96.3 was slightly reduced from 97.3 percent 15 years before.[212]

The strong value of avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict implies that the Isan's decision to reject or accept conversion to Christianity generally lacks a cognitive basis. They either make a decision to appease their guests, equals, elders, or superiors in order to avoid any confrontation and/or conflict with these people. Their decision-making process is based on the emotive drive to avoid hurt, conflict, or opposition in the household, kin group, or village community as well as in their relationships with significant others. This, therefore, could result in the lack of genuine conversion to Christianity.

The Attitude of Krengchai

The seventh social value exerting tremendous influence on the Isan's decision-making process is the attitude of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)*.[213] Dr. Wit Thiengburanathum, the well-known and well-accepted Thai scientist, lawyer, academician and author, defines *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* as "to fear to approach, to have consideration for, to be reluctant to impose upon."[214] Generally, the fear of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* is expressed by the youngsters toward their elders or the subordinates toward their superiors. In other words, the attitude of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* is shown from ones lower to those higher in the social hierarchy. In the case of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* shown to someone of equal status, the recipient is usually someone who has shown *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* to the person. Concerning this matter, Klausner writes, "*Krengchai (เกรงใจ)* is

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[211]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 271.

[212]Suwit Tirasawat et al., *Prawatsat isan* (History of Isan - ประวัติศาสตร์อีสาน) (in Thai), Report (Khon Kaen, Thailand: CIDA and Institute of Research and Development, Khonkaen University, 28 July 1988), 258.

[213]This word has various spellings: *krengchai, krengjai, kreng chai,* or *kreng jai.*

[214]"เกรงใจ - Krengchai," in *DID Talking Dictionary 5*, ed. Wit Thiengburanathum, Library Editions (Bangkok: DID International Co., 2004).

also observed in one's reticence to seek help or ask for something desired from a superior unless it is absolutely necessary."[215] Mole remarks, "The Thai value system of *krengchai* (เกรงใจ) consists of respect for superiors with humility and obedience to authority."[216] The 1986 study to investigate 720 upper secondary school students' opinions on values of traditions, religions, and conduct in Education Region 11 in Northeast Thailand reveals that the younger Thais will likely *krengchai* (เกรงใจ) the elders and are not likely to reveal their thoughts.[217] Wichiarajote states that Thailand as an affiliative society "has a high level of generosity which may result from a high level of support giving together with *krengjai* (having respectful fear of and consideration for another-เกรงใจ)."[218]

The attitude of *krengchai* (เกรงใจ) consequently affects the way the Isan relate to those who either have shown *bunkhun* (favor or assistance-บุญคุณ) or are a higher status, having more money, power, or education. In the workplace, *krengchai* (เกรงใจ) is apparent in the relationships between the workers and their superiors in a company. Henry Holmes, the author of *Working with the Thais* [whose organization specializes in consulting and training Thai for international companies in the fields of team-building, leadership communication, cross-cultural partnerships, and building the skills of assertiveness] says:

> Because of the inhibiting influence of *avuso* [*seniority*-อาวุโส] and the way bosses sometimes behave, Thais continue to be too *kreng jai* (deferent and cautious) when it comes to work. Consider the remark of one well-liked expert manager who said, "I really wish they would say 'no' to me sometimes." The result, he observed, is that his (even quite senior) Thai managers would always say 'yes', even when they knew they wouldn't be able to do the job. In the end, say six weeks later, the job wouldn't be completed as promised.[219]

The notion of *krengchai* (เกรงใจ) not only manifests itself in the workplace, but it also strongly presents itself in the village decision-making process. From the

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[215]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 259.

[216]Mole, *Thai Values and Behavior Pattern*s, 74.

[217]Sunai Yoodsook, "Kan suka kwam kithen kiewkup kaniyom kan kanoptaamniem *prapaynee* sasana le kwam prapeut kong nukrien mattayom suka ton plai ked kansuksa 11 petkansuksa 2529 (A Study of Upper School Students' Opionions About Values of Traditions, Religion, and Conducts in the Educational Religion 11 in Academic Year 1983--การศึกษาความคิดเห็น เกี่ยวกับค่านิยมด้านขนบธรรมเนียมประเพณี ศาสนา และความประพฤติ ของนักเรียน มัธยมศึกษาตอนปลาย เขตการศึกษา 11 ปีการศึกษา 2526) (in Thai)," M. Ed. thesis, Srinakalinvirot University, Mahasarakham, Thailand, 1986), 15.

[218]Wichiarajote, Theory of Affiliative Verses Achieving Societies, 12.

[219]Henry Holmes, "Managing the Cultures...Inspiring the Team: Now Find Out What Foreigners Think About You," *The Nation* 17 January 2005, 28 September 2006 <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.arcview.php?clid=6&id=111089&date=2005-01-17>>.

study and observation of Parpatson Srikompliw, the whole village of Non Sang, Tambon Singkok, Amphoe Kaset Wisai, Changwat Roi Et, contained kinsmen who were related by either blood or marriage. They came from two original families who founded the village and tended to be passive and less likely to express their thoughts and ideas. They deferred decision making to the elders and village leaders. Common expressions from this village include, "It is up to them [*elders* and *leaders*]," or "Whatever they decide, it is fine with us." The villagers had *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* and respect for the elders and the village leaders.[220] A very similar way of thinking was apparent in the response of Elder Soonai Sepeung, age 61, living in the Naweng village, Khemarat district of Ubonratchatani, when he was asked in an interview why he would not change to Christianity. He responded:

> Our village elders and leaders have led us to follow Buddhism and we therefore should follow them, especially because they have led us in the way of peace. Also, because we know that they will contest us if we decide to follow another religion, we probably will not approach our elders and leaders about the decision to change religion. We *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* them because they are our elders and leaders (trans. from the Thai by the author).[221]

Because of the Isan's adherence to the social value of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)*, they are very reluctant to approach parents, elders, leaders, superiors, or patrons for any support in their decision making, especially if they believe that their decision might cause a disturbance to the existing interpersonal relationships. Thirty five year-old Isan villager Chan Latpho, a resident of Laitat village in Nathan minor-district of Ubonratchatani, identified the elders of her kin group and community as obstacles prohibiting a conversion to Christianity. She said:

> We do not think it is possible to consider changing to Christianity. The first obstacle to our converting to Christianity will come from the elders of our kin group. They will say to us, 'We have our religion, Buddhism, and it is already satisfactory. We have received and followed this religion since our forbearers. The second source of opposition will come from the leaders and elders of our village community. They will say to us, 'We don't want you to change to another religion. We have lived together in Buddhism for a long time. We have practiced our present religion for a long time. We should stay as we are.' Thus, knowing beforehand how they feel, we do not think it is a good idea to approach them to support our changing to another religion (trans. from the Thai by the author).[222]

For this reason, the character quality of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* prevents the individual Isan from initiating a decision and causes the person to "stay within his

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[220]Parpatson Srikompliw, "The Relationship Between Relatives and the Development," 22.

[221]Soonai Sepeung, village elder of Naweng village, Khemarat district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 18 August 2006.

[222]Chan Latpho, Laitat villager, Nathan minior-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 18 August 2006.

own level and not to assume authority or privileges of a high social or military level."[223] Mole indicates further that "instead of instantly acting as events and conditions may warrant, the cultural inclination is to stop and wait for orders from a higher level."[224] As a consequence of the propensity for decision making from the top down (or hierarchical decision making), it is unlikely that under normal conditions the decision to change to Christianity will be made without being initiated from the person's leader, elder, superior, or patron.

A positive implication of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* is that if the missionary can develop a *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship or client-patron relationship with the Isan, it is probable that they will make a positive response to the missionary's urge for conversion. However, the missionary must then move quickly to solidify the decision and help develop the new found faith since the decision was likely made from the frame of mind of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* and obligation, not cognitive understanding of the Gospel. This concept is supported by Catherine Bowers, special reporter for *The Nation*, Bangkok's independent newspaper:

> Obligation, however, is something we live with in Thailand regardless of where we go because obligation involves the others we live with. It fluctuates between the social demands of any given day. We have obligations to our families and our friends. We feel kreng jai to everyone we know and give in to their expectations.[225]

The Attitude of Chaiyen

The eighth social value that influences the Isan's decision making is the attitude of *chaiyen* (literal 'cool heart'). It means to have "composure or self control." The idea of staying aloof and uninvolved is closely related to *chaiyen (ใจเย็น).* Moles remarks:

> To have a cool heart is to be uninvolved, not annoyed and to remain in control of one's emotional self. With a cool heart one avoids unhappy situations and takes whatever pleasure is available from each circumstance or situation. To best do this, one of the basic rules of Thai behavior is to avoid-face-to-face-conflict.[226]

To stay indifferent and unresponsive is a primary characteristic of *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* and to be attached to someone or something is to incur problems from that someone or something. Consequently, to be rid of any potential problems, the person

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[223]Mole, *Thai Values and Behavior Patterns*, 76.

[224]Ibid.

[225]Catherine Bowers, "Wild Ideas: Making Decisions Out of Obligation," *The Nation* 3 September 2006, 28 September 2006 <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.news.php?clid=33&id=30012575>>.

[226]Mole, *Thai Value and Behavior Patterns*, 73.

must apply *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* in relation to that someone or something. This means the person must remain uninvolved in the decision-making process so that tension or conflict does not result. One might say that "to feel that things are not intrinsically important, to be cool-hearted and to be as uninvolved as possible, are general Thai values."[227]

The value of *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* stays fairly constant throughout the Thai person's life, disregarding his religious adherence. Research seems to indicate that the Thai individuals retain the value of *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* prior to and after his conversion to Christianity. Philip Hughes, the senior research officer of the Christian Research Association in Nunawading, Australia, noted:

> The second highest value for the missionaries was 'helping other people', reflecting the importance this value has had in American Christianity. 'Calm contentment' [*chaiyen*], on the other hand, was tenth in the list of twenty values. For the Thai Christians, 'calm contentment' appeared as the highest value, along with the value of 'religion' itself, and 'helping other people' was sixth in the hierarchy, not significantly different from the place it had for the Buddhists.[228]

In the midst of apparent crises, the Thais are able to remain calm and cool. A classic example of the expression of *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* is the military coup on September 19, 2006 which ousted the Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.[229] The military takeover was conducted in such peaceful manner that it incurred the label "bloodless coup." Although the political conflict which led to the military takeover was intense among all parties involved, including the factions of the ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. They remained *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* or composed as if nothing had happened. Ingersoll explains, "The secular value of controlling one's temper and remaining calm in the face of frustration applies to all Thais."[230] The bloodless coup can only be explained in term of the Thai value of *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)*. This interpretation agrees with Klausner's observation that "the 'cool heart' is the ideal and the 'hot heart' is to be avoided."[231]

Klausner attributes the attitude of *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* to Buddhism when he concludes: "The Buddhist religion exercises a strong influence in maintaining the 'cool heart.'"[232] Therefore, the Thais, including the Isan of Northeast Thailand, strongly hold on to the value of *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* so that they can deal with their crisis situations and remain joyful in whatsoever state in which they find themselves. Mole

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[227]Smith et al., "Social Values," 223.

[228]Philip Hughes, "Values of Thai Buddhists and Thai Christians," *Journal of the Siam Society* 72, no. 1 and 2 (January & July 1984): 227.

[229]Seth Mydans and Thomas Fuller, "Army Takes Power While Thaksin is at UN," *International Herald Tribune* 19 September 2006, 21 September 2006 <<http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/09/19/news/thai.php>>.

[230]Ingersoll, "The Priest and the Path," 248.

[231]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 70.

[232]Ibid., 71.

affirms that "to have a cool heart is to be uninvolved, not annoyed and to remain in control of one's emotional self. With a cool heart one avoids unhappy situations and takes whatever pleasure is available from each circumstance or situation."[233]

The Isan villagers decision making for conversion to Christianity has been affected by the influence of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* that results in an attitude of noninvolvement and indifference, especially in regard to embracing a 'foreign' or a *farang*'s religion (Christianity) for which they will be scolded and negatively sanctioned by their kinsmen, village community, and, probably, household members. As founder and executive director of the Mekong Evangelical Mission (MEM), founded in 1994, the author has seen MEM plant ten Protestant evangelical churches in Thailand. The author has witnessed hundreds of Isan villagers attend church services but refuse to make the final decision to convert to Christianity. They continue to maintain the posture of *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* or noninvolvement with Christianity so that they can avoid probable unhappy situations if they were to make the decision to convert.

The Attitude of Snuk

The ninth social value influencing the decision-making process is the *snuk (สนุก)* orientation of the Isan people, as well as the other Thais. Thieng-buranathum defines *snuk* (สนุก) as "to have fun, to enjoy oneself."[234] Because the nature of the Isan people is more oriented to having fun and to enjoy the activities in which they are involved, any religion that does not appeal to such a nature is normally dismissed as unworthy. The religion of Buddhism effectively responds to the fun-loving nature of the Isan. Embree observes the religion of the Thais (Buddhism):

> Their religion not only provides a method of worship, but also a system of satisfying the social needs of the group. The temple is the focal point of the community, the center around which revolves the religious rites, the picnics, days for boat racing, sports, games, trips to holy places, shadow shows and festive parades. So even religion becomes '*snuk*' (fun-loving or pleasure-loving-สนุก).[235]

Buddhism plays an important role in providing an avenue for venting suppressed feelings ordinarily not sanctioned by the village community. Klausner substantiates this point thus:

> Groups of villagers, young or old, would not think of gathering together for feasting and drinking, banter and song, unless there was a special ceremony or occasion involved. . . During this time, friends will come to listen to the chanting, the gossip, and the reading of ancient fables. There will be joking,

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[233]Mole, *Thai Values and Behavior Patterns*, 73.

[234]"สนุก - Snuk," in *DID Talking Dictionary 5*, ed. Wit Thiengburanathum, Library Editions (Bangkok: DID International Co., 2004).

[235]Embree, "Thailand: A Loosely Structured Social System," 9.

singing, flirting and playing games. . . The ceremonies and festivals offer more than just the opportunity for merit and fun. They also serve as an acceptable channel for giving vent to suppressed feelings and carrying out activities that ordinarily are not sanctioned in the village.[236]

Thus, all of the religious activities related to Buddhism have a built-in fun-loving function which serves to respond to the Isan individual's fun-loving nature and to the collective fun-loving nature of the Isan's village community. The merit-making rituals and ceremonies in particular have the intent purpose of strengthening community enjoyment and morale. Tambiah reflects, "Merit making, although particularistic in intent, is usually done in a collective context…These collective context merit-making occasions are also characterized by festival spirit, fun and recreation."[237]

The fun-loving nature of the Isan affects not only his religious preferences but also his career choices. Unable to make the distinction between work and play, the Isan generally mixes work and play. Their longevity with a business or company is related to how much that business or company satisfies their *snuk (สนุก)* nature. Phillips describes the rural Thai working behavior:

> Villagers who have gone to take a job in the city, often involving a time-bound daily routine or continuous, sustained attention to a task (work in a small factory, for example) frequently return to the village explaining that they quit 'because it wasn't *snuk (สนุก)*. How can you work on a job if there is never any time for fun…Villagers will often take on free of charge a major job precisely because it is '*snuk (สนุก)*.'[238]

Mole also maintains a similar perspective: "Even a profitable task may be dropped if it does not prove to be enjoyable or fun. Many of the rural people seem to think that unless an activity has the potential of fun it is not worth doing."[239] As a consequence of this mentality, the Isan society seems to commit more to probationary or provisional decision making than a permanent one. To an Isan, if things do not work out, at least they can change without the holding of a permanent decision.

The influence of the *snuk (สนุก)* mind set on the MEM's evangelization work among the Isan can be particularly felt in church-planting undertakings. A recurring response from a large number of the Isan villagers presented with the gospel by the MEM's church-planting team has been that Christianity is extremely rigorous. If they remain as Buddhists, at least, they can still carry on different habits and conducts as long as they continue practice merit-making activities to offset their *bap (บาป)* or sins. The relatively less rigid and lenient nature of Buddhism in comparison to Christianity appeals more to the Isan villagers. This issue was discussed during an

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[236]William J. Klausner, "Ceremonies and Festivals in a Northeastern Thai Village," *Social Science Review* 4, no. 2 (25 September 1966): 2.

[237]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 57.

[238]Phillips, "Thai Peasant Personality," 110.

[239]Mole, *Thai Values and Behavior Patterns*, 85.

interview with Utit Phetpan, a 53-year-old elder of Nathan village in Nathan minor-district of Ubonratchatani, who commented on the leniency of being a Buddhist follower. He articulated thus:

> Buddhism is very easy to observe and it is not very involved. I do not have to practice rigidly and faithfully the religion of Buddhism. I can be a Buddhist and do not have to attend the temple or observe religious rituals. I can just follow Buddhism in name only (trans. from the Thai by the author).[240]

An interview with Elder Chanhorm Thayasut, one of the preaching pastors of the Mekong Church Palan in Palan sub-district of the Nathan minor-district in Ubonratchatani, also indicates a similar response.[241] Chanhorm reported that a number of Isan villagers had mentioned that Christianity was demanding in terms of religious activities, especially the required weekly attendance of church services. Instead of being *snuk (สนุก)* or fun-loving, adherence to Christianity proves to be a burden to them. DeNeui reveals:

> An additional cultural insight, that has implications for cognitive communication of the gospel message in Northeastern Thai society, is the high value Isan people place on interactive and entertaining participation. They like to have fun![242]

In summary, the Isan's social values which have a direct influence on their decision making for religious conversion to another religion can be summed up nine points. First of all, occupying one of the strongest values in the Isan value system, the social value of respecting or deferring one's major decision making to one's parents, elders, superiors, or ancestors, is expected of every Isan person if he still desires to be under their care and protection. This showing of respect includes being ordained as a monk and observing for the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs as well as conforming to the advice of the elders of the village and kin group because they are considered the upholder and defender of the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites.

Second, the social value of demonstrating gratitude (*bunkhun-บุญคุณ*), reciprocity and obligations has a prominent position in the Isan value system. The obligation in which the counterparts must reciprocate in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship is to be commensurate to what has been received. Thus, the obligation could be life-long or an eternal obligation. The failure to carry out the obligations in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship will be considered a sin (*bap-บาป*) and will result in damaging the person's character (*khon neerkhun-คนเนรคุณ*) as well as being met with negative sanctions which range from expressions of disapproval to death. Being constantly aware of the benefits and favors bestowed upon them and being ready to

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[240]Utit Phetpan, village elder of Nathan village, Nathan minior-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 12 August 2006.

[241]Chanhorm Thayasut, preaching pastor of Mekong Church Palan, Palan sub-district, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani, interview by author, 15 August 2005.

[242]DeNeui, "String-Tying Ritual," 287.

express appreciation are a highly valued character trait among the Isan people of Northeast Thailand.

Third, the social value which places important consideration for patron-client/subordinate-superior relationships also holds an important position in the Isan's value system. In the patron-client or subordinate-superior relationships, the patron or superior will bring into the relationship the provision of support, protection, and advice, while the client or inferior will offer loyalty, respect, deference, and honor to the patron or superior. As a result, while in the relationships, the decision-making authority is deferred to the patron or superior.

Fourth, the social value which places prominence on group (community) solidarity in the household, the kin groups, and the village community additionally maintains an important position in the Isan's value system. Solidarity implies importance of the group and the "parameters of acceptable conduct" for the individual which come from the household (family), social pressures from the kin groups (*yatphinong*-ญาติพี่น้อง) and village community, and the religions of Buddhism and Animism. Group solidarity is measured by its conformity or compliance to these parameters. Decision making, therefore, needs to be to support group solidarity.

Fifth, social harmony is one of the most important social values that affect one's decision making for religious conversion. The Isan people feel so strong about maintaining social harmony that they would almost justify and uphold any action with the intended purpose of preserving social harmony. Since social harmony is often perceived as being connected to Buddhism, the Isan people feel that to maintain social harmony, they must uphold the teachings of Buddhism.

Sixth, the social values which give priority to the avoidance of confrontation and conflict also have an important place in the Isan's value system. The avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict are viewed as virtuous and good morals, observing the teachings of Buddhism, protecting the face-to-face relationships, preventing a revenge, maintaining reciprocal relationships, and averting an accusation of being a *phi pob (ผีปอบ)*.

Seventh, the social value which emphasizes the attitude of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* also occupies a place in the Isan's value system. The *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* attitude is often indicated by a spirit of humility, obedience, and submissiveness. Because of the *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* social value, most decisions for religious conversion are deferred to those higher in the social status or those in authority.

Eighth, the social value which stresses the attitude of *chaiyen* (literal 'cool heart') also has a place in the value system of the Isan. *Chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* has the notion of staying aloof, being uninvolved and avoiding unhappy situations. The Isan strongly hold on to the value of *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* so that they can deal with their crisis situations and remain joyful in whatsoever state in which they find themselves. Thus, the Isan appear to be extremely slow in responding to any approach which encourages changes, in particular, the religious changes.

Finally, the social value which regards *snuk (สนุก)*, which means to have fun or to enjoy oneself, is considered by the author as the last social value to take up a position in the Isan's value system. Both Buddhism and the animistic beliefs in the spirit cults with their *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites as well as other traditional customs provide an opportunity for festivity, amusement and social gathering. As a communal affair, the Isan's present religion continues to offer a wide variety of entertainment activities which respond to the fun-loving nature of the Isan people. Thus, many of

the rural people seem to think that unless an activity has the potential of fun it is not worth a decision to participate.

Buddhist Religious Values

The second major group of Isan values which serves as a primary factor in their decision-making process is the Buddhist religious values. The Isan values emanate from their Buddhist religion and permeate and control every aspect of their thought and life. These Buddhist religious values act as a social mechanism that governs their social relationships and influences their decision making. Klausner notes, "The strongly held Buddhist beliefs of the villagers act to positively affect and regulate behavior and operate as a form of social control."[243]

Rooted in the Buddhist value system, the Thai generally view their social relations as one of inequality. People are positioned as younger-elder, inferior-superior, or client-patron according to a range of criteria: age, economic position, political power or various forms of status markers such as class, education and the like.[244] Commenting on Buddhist monks as the symbol of Buddhist religious values in the hierarchical structure of Buddhism, American anthropologist A. Thomas Kirsch, who served as Professor of Anthropology and Asian Studies at Cornell University, remarks:

> The Buddhist religious hierarchy emphasizes the superior moral position of the monk, and monks also form a particularly important status group in Thai society. In religious terms, monks are closer to ultimate Buddhist values and goals than any other group. As a status group monks are viewed as super ordinate, treated with special marks of deference and respect on all occasions by all Thai; in some respects they stand 'outside of' and 'above' the secular world in which most Thai live.[245]

Kirsch further states:

> Any man can alter his status in this way [*becoming a monk*] and attain the 'mana-filled' class; indeed he is encouraged to do so by the ideal that all men should serve a portion of their lives as monks. . . Buddhist values push men in the direction of achieving the status of *ong* [*deity* or *divinity*], as a monk.[246]

The current state of Buddhism is perceived by many to be in decline. A recent report from *The Nation* states:

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[243]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 5.

[244]Graham Fordham, *The Thai Peasantry in the 1990's*, Research Report (Bangkok: National Research Council of Thailand, n.d.), 9.

[245]A. Thomas Kirsch, "Economy, Polity and Religion in Thailand," in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society*, ed. G. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 187.

[246]Ibid., 188.

There are better ways of ensuring the relevance of our national religion than mass ceremonies or big temples. It has become customary for the Religious Affairs Department and Buddhist monastic authorities to intensify the enforcement of disciplinary standards for monks in the run-up to major religious holidays. With the approach of Buddhist Lent, which starts on July 11, they have decided to single out one monk in Nakhon Sawan's Takhli district who has won a huge following among the lottery-buying public for his supposed supernatural powers to predict winning numbers.

This monk is being investigated for breach of Buddhist precepts. If he is found guilty, Phra Lek of Wat Lad Tipparos could be defrocked and charged with fraud, a criminal offence. Monastic disciplinary enforcers will try to determine whether Phra Lek actually provided 'lucky' numbers in exchange for cash donations amounting to the more than Bt10 million he was alleged to have amassed.

It might be useful to make an example of an errant monk like Phra Lek if monks' code of behavior were consistently enforced. But Phra Lek is just a small fry among all the wayward monks who have sullied the good name of Buddhism in the Kingdom. The scope of what is ailing the religion is far greater than most of Thailand's Buddhists are prepared to admit.

Many observant Buddhists have become so cynical that nothing - not even the most outrageous and despicable act imaginable committed by such morally challenged monks - would surprise them any more. Precious little has been done by monastic authorities to reverse what many see as a precipitous decline of Buddhism.

All too many monks in this country do not observe even the most rudimentary precepts required of lay Buddhists - let alone the 227 precepts that saffron-robed monks, who are supposed to propagate and teach the religion, must observe.

What is particularly worrying is that many people no longer even care and seem to believe the state of Buddhism in this country is beyond salvage. Many who call themselves Buddhist are apparently content with superficially observing religious rites that they don't see as having much relevance to modern society - let alone their personal lives.

That's sad, considering that Buddhism was for centuries so closely intertwined with the development of our national identity. Equally important was its moral authority, which had a positive influence on public morality and social norms and contributed to our peace and prosperity.

Buddhist temples used to be centers of learning and guardians of our cultural heritage, but now many have turned into dens of iniquity. As Thailand evolved from a traditional society to a modern nation-state, the failure to reform Buddhism and keep it up to date with all the drastic social and economic changes resulted in the religion's diminished influence as a force for good.

Instead of continuing to serve society as a guiding light, Buddhist institutions

have become bogged down in anachronism and increasingly less relevant to our younger generations. Worse still, rampant misbehavior and corruption by monks has further eroded these institutions.

Lay followers, who share responsibility for supporting and nurturing Buddhist institutions, have consistently failed to demand drastic reforms that are so badly needed. Even the credibility of the Supreme Sangha Council has been compromised by high-profile scandals.[247]

Although Buddhism is in decline throughout the country as many Thai believe, its influence is still noticeable throughout the Thai kingdom, especially among the Isan of the Northeast. The rural Northeastern Thais (Isan) strongly hold to the teachings of Buddhism more than those in Bangkok or other urban centers which are more affected by modernization. Fordham's observations and predications may come to pass. He says:

In 1992 it is said [despite rapid modernization in Thailand and the gradual increase in the percentage of the population living in urban centers] that almost 80 per cent of the Thai population still live in rural areas. Some 76 per cent of the total work force are directly employed on the land, living the sort of peasant lifestyle described here. Relations with kin, patron-client relations and Buddhist religious values remain fundamental to Thai society. Given this, it is certainly not inevitable that further growth in the Thai economy will lead to the adoption of all western values and lifestyles similar to those found in the west.[248]

Sangsingkeo makes a similar observation:

Buddhism, practiced by 95 percent of the population, remains a very potent force among the common people. Their lives are still deeply touched by its compassion, even though one can not tell whether it is deep enough to withstand the trails of a changing world. The Buddhistic influence still is pronounced in its effects on the mental health and emotional security of Thai children.[249]

Not only is Buddhism strong among the rural Northeastern Thais (Isan), but Buddhism is also influential among the older generations. The Buddhist religious values are more diffused and its influence is more felt among the elderly villagers than among the younger generations. This is supported by a study conducted by Sunai Yoodsook which indicates that "the aged Thais have stronger religious values than the young ones."[250] The author has identified three dominant Buddhist religious

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[247]"The Sorry State of Thai Buddhism," *The Nation* 21 June 2006, Editorial, 25 September 2006 <<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/search/page.news.php?clid=11&id=30006916>>.

[248]Fordham, *The Thai Peasantry*, 19.

[249]Sangsingkeo, "Buddhism and Some Effects on the Rearing of Children in Thailand," 294.

[250]Yoodsook, "Kan suka kwam kitchen," 28.

values which characterize the Isan people: (1) sacred hierarchy and inequality, (2) merit and merit making, and (3) status, power and wealth.

Sacred Hierarchy and Inequality

The first Buddhist religious value that influences the Isan's decision-making process centers on sacred hierarchy and inequality.   The Thai Buddhists view the moral world to include "all animate life, the sacred hierarchy is seen to be discontinuous, composed of various 'levels' including 'gods' (*thevada*) 'human beings' (*manut*-มนุษย์), 'spirit' (*phi*-ผี), 'animal' (*sad*-สัตว์), and 'demons' (*prêt*-เปรต)."[251] The prevalent Buddhist hierarchical order of moral inequality is not perceived as permanent. Kirsch points out that according to the Buddhist worldview the "individuals are free to alter their position in the sacred hierarchy by appropriate moral and ritual action."[252] In addition, Kirsch furthermore explains that the Thai society might be viewed as:

> A single, internally differentiated, sacred hierarchy, extending from the layman farmer, through government officials, nobility, and the king, and topped by the status group of monks. Presumably this hierarchy could be extended still further, to include the 'gods' and other figures.[253]

The Isan individual, similar to other Thais, regards himself as "above or below but seldom precisely equal to those around him."[254] This kind of mental attitude is expressive in the Isan's language, expressions, gestures, and posture. The Isan people hold that individuals are fundamentally unequal (based primarily on their Buddhist religious values); consequently, they rank people from high to low or superior to inferior according to a "range of criteria, age, economic position, political power or various forms of status markers (class, education and so on)."[255] This same outlook is shared by Hanks:

> Each Thai regards every other person in the society as higher or lower than himself. The elder, more literate, richer persons tend to be higher due to greater virtue or 'merit,' as the Buddhist *bun (บุญ)* is usually translated. Based on these differences in social standing, a hierarchy arises where each person pays deference to all who stand above and is deferred to by all below. At the top is the king, and at the bottom some lone person who survives miserably in the dark jungle… In this society of inequality, Buddhist doctrine urges each person to do what he can for the benefit of those who stand below him in the hierarchy. By helping others a man gains a helper, increases his own merit, and raises his

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[251]Kirsch, "Economy, Polity and Religion," 182.

[252]Ibid.

[253]Ibid., 190.

[254]Smith et al., "Social Values," 218.

[255]Fordham, *The Thai Peasantry in the 1990's*, 9.

standing in the hierarchy.[256]

The hierarchical mentality hinders the individual decision-making process because decision-making power is generally deferred to the person occupying the highest position in the social order. Sanctions are commonly applied from the ones above onto the ones below in the hierarchy when the ones below appear to act unbefitting of their position. The preferred pattern of decision making is top-down rather than bottom-up or individualistically. It is normal for the ones lower in the sacred hierarchy to pattern their decision making after the ones higher in the sacred hierarchy.

This decision-making pattern was expressed in an interview with Kanungnit Keawmoon, the head of the women's ministry in the Mekong Church Ubonratchatani. Kanungnit had been witnessing to her mother in Det Udom district of Ubonratchatani for many years but has been rejected. Her mother finally disclosed that her decision was to not convert to Christianity out of respect for the Thai monarch. Since the Thai monarch continues to embrace and defend Buddhism, her mother's decision making in regard to religious faith was patterned according to the Thai monarch who occupies the highest position in Thai society, beside the monks.[257]

The same perspective was shared by Khunchit Vongthep, a resident of Muang district, Ubonratchatani province in an interview by the author on 17 September 2006. Khunchit stated that many people in his village continue to make religious decisions patterned after the Thai monarch. "Since the Thai monarch continues to follow Buddhism," said Khunchit, "most of the Isan villagers in our villages in Sisaket will continue rejecting the decision to convert to another religion in order to pattern their religious decision after the monarch" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[258] Because the Isan society is highly hierarchical, the decision-making process of the Isan people will continue to be patterned after the Thai monarch. It is predictable that the majority of the Isan will continue to remain Buddhists as long as the Thai monarch remains Buddhist.

Merit and Merit Making

The second Buddhist religious value that influences the Isan's decision-making process is merit and merit making. The Isan of Northeast Thailand practice folk religious beliefs which combine three religious streams: Animism (or spirit worship), Buddhism, and Brahmanism. These religious beliefs are best expressed through village life, and village life is almost totally dependent upon rice production. When rainfall is plentiful and the Isan have enough rice to eat, they enjoy a full village life. When rain is scarce, and rice is, therefore, scarce, every aspect of village

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[256]Hanks, "The Thai Social Order," 198.

[257]Kanungnit Kaewmoon, head of women's ministry, Mekong Church Ubon, Muang district, Ubonratchatani province, Northeast Thailand, interview by author, 17 September 2006.

[258]Khunchit Vongthep, a resident of Muang district, Ubonratchatani province, Northeast Thailand, interview by author, 17 September 2006.

life is adversely affected. This lack of rice caused by inadequate rain is the greatest and most debilitating fear of the Isan people.

They further believe that growing rice is difficult and crops are unstable because of nature and the spirits who control nature. This intense fear, the difficulty of farm life, and the uncertainty of the spirits causes the Isan people to resort to merit making as a means by which to influence and manipulate nature itself. Merit making is essential to them because it can remove them from their present social status and improve their social status in the next life. Their ability to grow rice, and in essence survive, depends upon magic-animist beliefs and practices which allow the Isan to manipulate power from nature, or the spirits who control nature, and thereby control their destiny in this life and in the life to come.

The Meaning of Merit

Merit making is the central ingredient in the religious experience of the Isan of Northeast Thailand. In practice, doctrinal Buddhism is studied and known by the monks and the elders, but the Buddhist laymen understand and observe the form of Buddhism that can simply be equated with merit making. Ruth Benedict, an American anthropologist, summaries this conclusion:

> To the Thai the essential doctrine of Buddhism is merit making, and their interpretation of merit making is that if a man exercises sufficient care in following the rules he need not be anxious. It depends on himself. Everyone repeats the proverbial maxim: 'In this world everything changes except good deeds and bad deeds; these follow you as the shadow follows the body.'[259]

Keyes made the same observation: "From their Buddhist world view, northeastern Thai villagers derive two basic notions of religious action: merit making and detachment from the passion."[260]

What is merit making? What is the significance of merit making for the Isan people of Northeast Thailand? What are the missiological implications for Christian witness to the Isan people, the Thai, and other groups who share similar cultural values, worldviews, and beliefs?

The definition of merit

Terwiel calls merit a "beneficial *karma* (กรรม)." "Merit," he adds, "is generally seen as a beneficial and protective force which extends over a long period of time and which links individuals together."[261] Mizuno adds his explanation on karma and merit:

> Villagers as good devotees believe in karma, the guiding law of the universe, by

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[259]Ruth Benedict, "Thai Culture and Behavior," Data Paper No. 4 (Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1952), 35.

[260]Keyes, "Economic Action and Buddhist Morality," 857.

[261]Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, 249.

which one's action inevitably brings its consequences in this or other worlds. Any acts done in accordance with the teachings of the Lord Buddha are deserved to be counted as merit (*bun*-บุญ), while acts against it are counted as demerit (*bap*-บาป). And it is only meritorious actions that bring good consequences; vicious actions result only in evil consequences.[262]

Karma is a belief system in which good actions are called merit (or *bun*-บุญ) and bad actions are called demerit (or *bap*-บาป). All actions, either merit or demerit (*bun*-บุญ or *bap*-บาป), ultimately affect a person, either in his present life or in his next lives or reincarnations. The consequences of one's past karma or actions are experienced in the present life and in the hereafter. The totality of one's life is viewed as an accumulative effect of one's past actions. Religious karma is similar to the Christian teaching on behavior and consequences from Galatians 6:7, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."[263] However, in the study of karma, the reaping or the effects of the actions will be apparent in the present and in the future through countless reincarnated lives. Therefore, the Isan of the Northeast hold that as a consequence of one's actions the power of karma is endlessly present to manifest itself in the life of the individual. Keyes describes the beliefs of the Isan in regard to karma:

> The villagers do accept that previous karma constrains their ability to act, but they all undertake acts that presume some control over their religious destiny… The world they know makes sense with reference to a world view predicated on the law of karma . . . Thai-Lao villagers accept the notion that being born as a villager is as distinct as being a nobleman or well-off urban dweller, it is a consequence of past karma.[264]

The meaning of merit

The Isan believe that their present circumstances are significantly less fortunate than those of Thai living in other areas of the country. Their only hope to emerge from this misfortune and rise to the social status enjoyed by the majority of Thai citizens is to gain more merit by performing various merit-making activities. One's social status is directly linked to his/her merit level. In addition, merit possesses the power to avoid misfortune and to bring prosperity and peace to a person, household, kin group, and community. Terwiel describes this in detail: "In the eyes of the farmer the concept of merit is closely connected with beneficial magical power and good luck."[265] The value of merit making for the present and future life is explored further by Terwiel:

The value of merit making is thus discussed by villagers under two aspects: first,

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[262]Mizuno, "Thai Pattern of Social Organization," 132.

[263]The Open Bible, King James Version

[264]Keyes, "Economic Action and Buddhist Morality," 856, 858.

[265]Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, 4.

it is said that one's fund of merit accumulated in this life will ensure a rebirth blessed with happiness, prosperity and wealth…While merit making is thus given ideological direction interims of somehow immunizing the consequences of death and ensuring a prosperous rebirth.[266]

Karma pervades every area of Isan life – causing the Isan to be conscious and mindful of every action. As a result, an Isan person carefully rates his actions and its subsequent results. Klausner writes the following in regard to the Isan's meticulous marking of actions as either "merit" or "sin":

A wide variety of everyday actions are explained and rationalized in terms of merit and its antithesis, sin. Since merit accumulated is the focal point of their religious thought, a good portion of the villagers' actions are bound to be justified and criticized in a merit-and-sin-context. As the villagers are ever anxious to build up their store of merit, it is quite natural that they would strive to tie the merit label to every act possible.[267]

In order to understand why the Isan is constantly aware of his actions and constantly trying to earn merit by them, one must understand the Isan view of the afterlife. The consequence of one's action, either merit or demerit (*bun*-บุญ or *bap*-บาป), are believed to certainly cause a person to be reborn in the future into one of three places: heaven, earth, or hell. Tambiah agrees:

Villagers say that, if a man has a large balance of merit over demerit, his *winjan* (soul-วิญญาณ) will go to *sawan* (heaven-สวรรค์) and when his merit is exhausted he will be reborn on this earth (*log*-โลก); if he has committed both *bun (*บุญ) and *bap*, he will first go to hell (*narog*-นรก) and stay there until his demerit is expiated, then he will go to heaven to enjoy his merit before being reborn; if his life was wholly sinful, he will be committed to hell or will wander a long time on earth as a disembodied spirit (*phi*-ผี) before he can be reborn.[268]

In addition to its effect on the future life, the consequence of one's action (or karma) is believed by the Isan to be evidenced in the present life. Its effects are observed in the present quality of life experienced. Tambiah explains the Isan's perception of the effect of karma:

*Bap (*บาป*)* has…clearly evident results in everyday life in the form of illness, death, misfortune and the pervasive existence of evil spirits…the result of *bun* *(*บุญ*)* are vaguely formulated as a desirable state of mind or a better rebirth.[269]

For that reason, the complementary doctrines of karma and merit form the core of both canonical Theravada Buddhism and the Isan's conception of Buddhism.

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[266]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 53.

[267]Klausner, "Popular Buddhism in Northeast Thailand," 39.

[268]Ibid., 54.

[269]Ibid., 56.

Pike explains thus: "The villager's paramount conscious motive for accumulating merit is the desire to enjoy in future incarnations those worldly privileges and prerogatives that have eluded him in this life and to have substantial wealth and influence."[270]

The Acts of Merit Making

Merit making is a central element of the religious experience of the Isan of Northeast Thailand. The notion of merit making is more than a concept; it is a way of life – consuming the resources and time of the Isan people. Most Isan villagers labor for an income that will be spent primarily on elaborate merit-making rituals and ceremonies. Merit-making ceremonies and rituals are scheduled weekly and monthly as mandatory activities in village life. These activities require the cooperation of the villagers. The twelve monthly rites or rituals (also called the twelve merit-making customs) and daily food offerings to the monks are prime examples. The Isan use the words *tham bun* (to make merit-ทำบุญ) and *aw bun* (to take merit-เอาบุญ) to refer to the giving of gifts to the Buddhist monks and the Buddhist temple.[271] Benedict expounds on these rituals:

> Those merit-making acts which figure in everyone's calculations are rather, giving food to the monks each morning, being a monk, plastering a few square inches of gold leaf on a Buddha, erecting some building in a *wat* (วัด), buying an inexpensive copper votive tablet, joining the feast at the days of worship of the footprint of the Buddha, and innumerable other observances.[272]

Buddhist monks are held in high regard by the Isan villagers because they have abandoned their family and all involvement in the material world. As a result, they are dependent upon the Buddhist laymen for support in their religious undertakings. To compensate the laymen for their financial and material support, Buddhist monks serve as the ritual authorities in Isan village communities and provide a means for the laymen's merit-making activities. In regard to the merit-making acts, Fordham comments, "Activities such as giving food to monks, listening to religious sermons, or providing financial support to the temple are all merit-making activities."[273]

The Classifications of Merit Making

Isan merit-making practices can be organized into five major classifications: (1) actions in support of the monks and the temple; (2) ordination into the order of monks; (3) observance of the Buddhist religious precepts, rituals, and ceremonies; (4)

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[270]Steven Piker, "The Relationship of Belief Systems to Behavior in Rural Thai Society," *Asian Survey* 8, no. 5 (May 1968): 398.

[271]Ibid., 53.

[272]Benedict, "Thai Culture and Behavior," 36.

[273]Fordham, *The Thai Peasantry,* 13.

performance of a task in the presence of a monk or in a ritualistic context; and, (5) provision of support for one's parents, elders, and charitable causes. They will now be discussed.

Actions in support of the monks and the temple

The first major way of acquiring merit is by supporting the monks and the temple. This is achieved by providing daily food to the monks and giving for the building or repairing of the Buddhist temple.

Giving food to the monks daily. The most common merit-making practices are those which provide food for the temple monks. Early every morning in each Isan village, town, and provincial capital the streets and roads are decorated with lines of monks in yellow robes, walking barefooted to receive the morning food offerings and to impart merit to faithful Buddhist women and young girls along with their families who allow them to make the offerings. Afterward, for the midday meal, the women and young girls will bring the food offerings to the temple for the monks to partake of their lunch. Again, the women and the young girls, along with their family, will receive merit for their offerings as soon as the offering touches the begging bowls of the monks. Tambiah made the same observation:

> Providing food for the monks is the most common religious merit-making act in which a villager engages…Men never offer food to the monks on their daily rounds, nor do they bring food to the monks' quarters for their midday meal…old women and young girls will bring food to the *wat* (วัด), set it to for the monks, watch them eat, and then carry the utensils back, having received the monks' blessings. A monk does not express gratitude or pleasure in receiving food, because he must show aloofness, and because it is he who confers merit by receiving it.[274]

The extreme poverty of the Isan villages and towns requires that villagers sacrifice significantly in order to provide these daily food offerings. Providing for the monks sometimes take precedent over the needs of their own families. However, with much gratitude, the Isan villagers eagerly give their offerings in hope that their future state will be enhanced and their lives healthier because of the merit gained from the food offerings. In addition, the merit maker has now accumulated merit into his merit storehouse to be sent to his deceased family members so that they can be assured of a proper rebirth in heaven or re-entrance into the world of humanity with a higher and wealthier social rank. The monk's role is to afford the Isan villagers the opportunity to earn merit so that they can reach their goal. Additionally, the Isan villagers anticipate that their merit can manifest its power by exacting a better life in the present.

Contributing to building or repairing a temple. Although the daily food offerings to the monks are performed more frequently and are of primary importance, the building or repairing of a Buddhist temple produces more significant merit. According to Tambiah, the most significant way of earning the greatest

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[274]Ibid., 144.

amount of merit is by sponsoring the construction of an entire Buddhist temple.   A
contribution to renovate or redecorate the temple is second only to being ordained as a
monk.[275]   Klausner also agrees with Tambiah's observation:

> In terms of relative importance of acts of merit, the villagers would, of course,
> view the protection, care, and feeding of the *bhikkhus* [*monks*] as of primary
> importance. On the same level of importance would be the repairing or
> beautifying of the temple and the participation in and working for the success
> of the various merit festivals throughout the year.[276]

Ordination into the order of monks

      The second major way of gaining merit is through ordination into the order
of the monk. The Isan village elders consider the ordination of the *lug-laan* (children
and grandchildren) to be the most exuberating and satisfying experience of their lives.
Because the village elders are endowed with the authority to pass on the Buddhist
traditions and the ancestral traditional customs, they highly anticipate the day when
their sons and grandsons follow in their footsteps. More importantly, the parents
themselves experience joy and gladness because they are believed to be the
beneficiaries of the merit which is gained by their son's ordination. The son who
takes the vow of the monk also receives merit for himself. On this subject Klausner
comments, "Entrance into the monkhood itself is very high on the scale of meritorious
acts, both for the boy and his parents."[277]
      The gender of an Isan mother prevents her from being ordained as a monk,
so her children are crucial and indispensable for her access to the meritorious power
to change her status in life, either in the present, the near future, or her distinct future.
Her hope of acquiring significant amounts of merit comes through her son's
ordination. However, if she has a daughter, she can still gain merit, especially after
her death, when her daughter can participate in the twelve merit-making rituals or
ceremonies (or the twelve merit-making customs) and send merit to her. Charles F.
Keyes explains:

> Marriage and the birth of children is the ultimate goal for all village women, for
> with a son, a woman is given the hope that she will obtain vicarious merit
> through his ordination, and with a daughter she is assured that she will have
> someone to care for her in old age and be concerned with her well-being after
> death.[278]

      Isan parents depend on the merit of their children. The best way an Isan
parent can avoid the horror of wandering the earth as a spirit or condemnation to hell
is by the ordination of a child and his/her performance of the monthly rituals and
ceremonies. As a result, the conversion of a son or daughter of the Isan villagers to

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[275]Ibid., 147.

[276]Klausner, *Popular Buddhism in Northeast Thailand*, 39.

[277]Ibid., 39.

[278]Keys, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 21.

Christianity is interpreted as a lack of respect and, even more significantly, as inflicting "injustice" to the mother and the father.

Observance of the Buddhist religious precepts, rituals, and ceremonies

The third major way of procuring merit is by observing Buddhist precepts, rituals, or ceremonies. This is accomplished by keeping the Buddhist holy days, observing the Buddhist religious precepts, sponsoring a *katin (กฐิน)* ceremony, and performing the twelve monthly rites or customs.

Keeping every Buddhist holy day (*wanphraa*). When the author moved back from the United States to live in Ubonratchatani, Northeast Thailand, he was surprised to see the absence of meat, pork, or chicken in the Isan fresh food markets on certain days of the month. The women in the markets said it was against the law to kill and sell meat, pork, and chicken on *wanphraa* (a Buddhist holy day-วันพระ). *Wanphraa* (วันพระ) is designed to encourage Buddhist followers to refrain from killing and to observe other teachings of Buddha. By keeping the *wanphraa* (วันพระ), one can expect to gain a relatively good amount of merit.

Observing the Buddhist religious precepts. One of the fundamental ways Buddhists avoid sin (or bad karma) and make merit is by observing the five Buddhist religious precepts. The five precepts consist of refraining from "taking life, lying, stealing, committing adultery, and drinking intoxicants."[279] The Isan believe that anyone who observes religious precepts and performs meritorious works in a religion will be reborn in his next life as an angelic being (*thevada*-เทวดา), who dwells in one of the highest levels of heaven. Commenting on the attitude and motivation of the rural Thais for keeping the five Buddhist religious precepts, Terwiel states:

> It is not for fear of breaking a precept that people refrain from killing animals or are rather embarrassed about doing so. After all, there is no apparent reluctance to break other precepts. The main reason why the killing of animals is surrounded with manifestations of guilt feelings appears to lie in the belief in the *karmic* repercussions of the act of killing.[280]

Sponsoring a *katin* ceremony. The *katin (กฐิน)* ceremony is one of the oldest merit-making customs of the Isan people. This annual ceremony mainly consists of providing the monks with a new set of robes or garments. The Isan village usually holds the *katin (กฐิน)* festival in the village temple, or they may wait for another sponsor or sponsors from other places to come and hold it in their temple. If no one has made a reservation, then the villagers collectively co-sponsor the *katin (กฐิน)* offering for the village temple.[281]

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[279]Klausner, *Popular Buddhism in Northeast Thailand*, 39.

[280]Punyaprachoom, "*Puttanadan kong prapanee taamboon papa amphoe muang changwat roi*," 196-97.

[281]Ibid., 62.

The Isan believe that holding the *katin (กฐิน)* offering in a sacred and holy temple gains more merit. As a result, many of the more remote temples have few outsiders when they sponsor a *katin (กฐิน)*. The Isan believe that all the people who are involved in the *katin (กฐิน)* offering will receive significant merit because they provide considerable relief to the monk in need of a new robe and other basic necessities.

Performing the twelve monthly merit-making customs. Although the Northeast, like most of Thailand, continues to face the forces of modernization, globalization, and the infiltration of other religions (including Christianity) this region (and certain other parts of Thailand) seems to withstand these disintegration powers. Punyaprachoom further indicates the changing situation in Isan as follows:

> In the present situation in our society, there are inflows of foreign cultures into the Muang district of Roi Et [*Northeast Thailand*], but our people remain strongly secured in carrying out the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites [*or the twelve monthly merit-making customs*] (trans. from the Thai by the author).[282]

Participating in these monthly customary festivals and working for their success provides the Isan with a ceremony that produces significant amounts of merit.

Performance of a task in the presence of a monk or in a ritualistic context

The fourth major way to obtain merit for oneself is by performing works in the presence of a monk. Rural development workers in the Northeast routinely secure support from the Buddhist monk prior to starting any village development project. This illustrates an underlying principle in the Isan worldview. The presence of a monk provides justification for any undertaking, not only because of the material benefit, but more importantly because of the merit that such an undertaking provides. Klausner states, "The monk's presence assures that the activity will be conceived of as one bearing merit and one which will therefore positively affect one's karmic balance."[283] Of course, only rituals where the monks are present can be considered merit making. Good deeds done for charitable causes are believed to earn some merit, but they do not have the same ability to produce merit as those done with the monks present.

Provision of support for one's parents, elders, and charitable causes

The fifth major way of gaining merit for oneself is to provide support for one's parents and elders, and for charitable causes. This is one of the rare actions that can contribute towards merit making. On this basis the female prostitutes from the Isan region of the Northeast justify their immorality. The money earned from an occupation of prostitution is sent home to support one's parents or elderly grandparents, to finance traditional merit-making ceremonies or customs, or to sponsor a charitable project. The action of providing support, not the act of

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[282]Ibid., 58.

[283]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 273.

prostitution, is then noted as producing merit for oneself. Klausner also attests to this belief among the Isan of the Northeast, "One gains merit by giving goods, comfort, or money to one's parents, elders, the blind, the poverty-stricken, or the orphaned. Any such help is translated into merit terms."[284]

Concurrently, an Isan person is always aware that one's meritorious acts in connection with the monks and the temple can be partially cancelled by "selfish, ungenerous, unkind acts in the social sphere."[285] Consequently, his or her daily actions must constantly be evaluated in terms of whether or not they will result in merit (*bun*-บุญ) and/or demerit (*bap*-บาป).

The Manner of Merit Making

The manner in which merit is made involves numbers of people at every level of authority in the Isan village. Each individual living under the protection of a particular village is expected to contribute toward that village's merit. A person who does not participate or contribute to the cooperative merit activities of the village, such as the twelve monthly rites (or merit-making customs), is perceived as disrespectful to the ancestral traditions and would likely be ostracized by the village. This type of social pressure to conform to the customs of the Isan villagers and to accept the social norms for merit making has created tremendous stress for the Christian converts in the author's area of ministry in Northeast Thailand. These problems pertain to converts who have recently turned from Buddhism and are still living in an Isan village where Buddhism is basically the only religion. Nevertheless, the merit-making activities of the Isan village can be seen in term of its individualism, collectiveness, and proportionality.

Individuality

The major axiom of Buddhism "*ton pen ti peung kong ton* (ตนเป็นที่พึ่งของตน)," which translates as "one must depend upon oneself," is demonstrated clearly in the daily life of the Isan Buddhists of Northeast Thailand. In keeping with this maxim, acts of merit making are viewed as an attempt to depend on oneself, and also to earn the merit needed for the living or for deceased parents and elders. In support of this notion, Tambiah writes: "From the doctrinal point of view the quest for salvation is a strictly individualistic pursuit. In the village context, merit making as the principal religious activity is certainly seen as having consequences for individuals."[286]

The beneficiary of the merit gained in a merit-making activity is primarily the individual merit-maker, who then has the option to allocate the merit to his or her deceased parents or grandparents for whom the merit-making ceremony was performed. Keyes also shares his view on allocating earned merit to others by the individual merit-maker, "The benefit of merit making rebounds to individuals (who,

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[284]Klausner, *Popular Buddhism in Northeast Thailand*, 39.

[285]Ibid.

[286]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 54.

in turn, may 'transfer' them to others)."[287] Although some scholars, such as American anthropologists David E. Pfanner and Jasper Ingersoll, do not perceive that doctrinal Buddhism allows for the transfer of merit to another human being, they agree however that the "villagers believe that they enhance their own merit as they share it with others: parents, teachers, ancestors, or fellow laymen."[288]

Collectiveness

While merit making results in the accumulation of merit for the individual, the acts of merit making are conducted collectively. Tambiah expresses, "The social unit engaging in merit-making need not be the individual—it may be a family, a household, a kin grouping, or even the entire village."[289] Because this is viewed as a group activity, merit making becomes the responsibility of everyone who lives in the village, and each member is expected to contribute to the merit-making events. As a result, the unity of the group is affirmed and strengthened. Keyes addresses this, "The merit-making in the village is a communal affair . . . the occasions at which such merit-making is done serve to promote the solidarity of the community."[290] The collective nature of merit-making activities provides significant problems for Christian converts within the village who no longer participate in merit making as individuals (the Buddhistic, Brahmanistic, and Magico-animistic elements of merit making prevent Christians from participating) and therefore no longer contribute to the overall merit of the village. The non-participating Christian villagers are thought to be creating division and deteriorating the solidarity of the community (group). However, in some cases, the problem of non-participation is not religious in nature. Thai sociologist Suthep Soonthornpesuch explains:

> The merit-making ritual of feeding the monks in a weekly cycle is divided among the village's households. The households are also assigned other responsibilities, especially in the observance of the twelve monthly rituals (*hiit-sipsong*-ฮีตสิบสอง), during the village meeting. Anyone who does not follow or obey the consensus of the village meeting will be kept under the control of the head of the household until the next village meeting, which will decide the fate of the charged individual (trans. from the Thai by the author).[291]

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[287]Keyes, "Economic Action and Buddhist Morality," 857.

[288]David E. Pfanner, and Jasper Ingersoll, "Religion and Economics in Village Thailand," *Journal of Asian Studies* 21, no. 30 (May 1962): 353.

[289]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 54.

[290]Keyes, "Economic Action and Buddhist Morality," 857.

[291]Suthep Sounthonpesat, "*Puttasasna taam bap chow ban pak tawan auk chieng nua* (Folk Buddhism in Northeast Thailand – พุทธศาสนาตามแบบชาวบ้านในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ) in *sang kom wittaya kong moo ban pak tawan auk chieng nua* (Sociology of the Northeastern Thai Villages – สังคมวิทยาของหมู่บ้านภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ), ed. Suthep Sounthonpesat (in Thai) (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 2511), 76.

Proportionality

The burden of merit-making activities is distributed among the male and female Buddhist followers. The female Buddhist faithfully takes the supportive role in merit-making performance while the male provides the leadership role in planning the events. The female followers are given the responsibility of making the daily food offered to the monks and they are considered to be in need of more merit because of their gender. Kirsch shares, "Women tend to be specialized with regard to routine merit-making activities, for women 'need' more merit than men."[292]

Female followers are not the only ones requiring extra merit-making activities, the poor and impoverished contribute more proportionally than the wealthy. Again, the poor Isan farmers, who are thought to occupy a low social status and lacking in merit, consider themselves to be in need of more merit so that they can escape their present condition in the near future or after their death. Pfanner and Ingersoll testify, "I believe that poorer villagers spend a larger portion of their income than do their wealthier neighbors on the making of merit."[293]

The Significance of Merit Making

Since the ancient past, Isan village communities have been able to maintain their cohesiveness through social, religious, and traditional customary values. These values are believed to have kept the Isan society on course with the intention of their forbearers. Merit-making acts have been a factor in strengthening these values. The significance of merit making and its subsequent effects can be seen in the following: (1) giving psychological security; (2) building a peaceful state of mind; (3) providing behavior control and incentives for good behaviors; (4) providing a secure and stable community; (5) establishing family and community solidarity; (6) communicating respect and gratitude for parents, elders, and ancestors; and, (7) offering mobility within the hierarchal system.

Giving psychological security

Merit making gives psychological security for the Isan villagers and their way of life. Throughout their history the Isan people have had to deal with matters of basic survival. Originating from Southern China and migrating to the Mekong River valley area in the Indochina peninsular or mainland Southeast Asia, the Isan people (formerly in the same group as the Lao under the Lan Chang kingdom) have contended with human, natural, and spiritual powers for their own protection and safety. The way in which they handle these powers affects their continual existence. Consequently, the matter of psychological security is the central concern of every Isan, and merit making has addressed these needs and offered psychological security. These concerns are related to Isan life in the present, near future, and distant future.

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[292]Kirsch, "Economy, Polity and Religion," 185.

[293]Pfanner and Ingersoll, "Religion and Economics," 357.

The present. The Isan believe that accumulation of merit qualitatively affects their present life. Every action is evaluated in terms of its meritorious value. Its significance on the Isan's present life can be observed in the words of Klausner:

> At every opportunity, the villagers make merit in its traditional forms while also, wherever possible, identifying their actions in a merit context. They accept their status and condition of life at any given time as the result of their karma but also are convinced that their lot could possibly be changed in this life if the merit gained in their present existence tipped the balance in their favor. If not, there is always a future existence where their condition would be improved.[294]

The consequence of one's merit can be observed in occupational undertakings. A rural Thai villager has the notion that "whatever the size of a farmer's fields, the size of his harvest is a function of his merit."[295] Most important is the traditional belief that the size of a farmer's rice harvest is a "function of the quality of merit." The Isan villagers view merit as a "value, however, by which people explain what happens in life, including poverty and wealth, illness and health, misery and happiness."[296] The relevancy of the value of merit is discerned in the words of Terwiel who says, "If a Buddhist wins a prize, or passes an exam he is reaping the result of his previous good deeds, but he will make sure that he will immediately perform a new good one to ensure that his luck will not run out."[297]

The near future. The Isan's concern for psychological security does not only rest just within the present, but also his near future and specifically his deathbed. When the Isan become elderly, they begin reducing their worldly involvement and shift their energy to life-after-death. Nevertheless, the quality and nature of their death experience is important to them. A person whose demerits outweigh his merit will not experience a peaceful death. Similar to the Central region of Thailand, the Isan village communities of the Northeast believe that "an individual with good karma will be free from mishap, whatever actions are taken and that a person who possesses bad karma will not be able to avoid a horrible death."[298] Consequently, merit making has meaningful significance in ensuring a positive death experience.

The distant future. A major concern of the elderly Isan does not only pertain to the experience of his death but also life after his death. His concern is for the future state of his life - whether he will be in heaven or hell, whether he will be reborn back to the world of humanity to join with loved ones and kinsmen, and whether he will escape a life of poverty and hardship when he is reborn. These concerns are expressed in the explanation of Terwiel:

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[294]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 7-8.

[295]Pfanner and Ingersoll, "Religion and Economics," 354.

[296]Ibid., 356.

[297]B. J. Terwiel, "Buddhism, the Villagers' Perspective," in *Buddhism and Society in Thailand,* edited by B. J. Terwiel. (Gaya, India: The South East Asian Review Office, 1984), 92.

[298]Terwiel, *Monks and Magic*, 24.

The soul leaves the body at death and awaits rebirth for an unfixed period. The appropriate time of rebirth for an individual arrives when a couple in a position to provide status commensurate with the accumulated merit of the dead individual conceives an offspring. At that moment, the *winyan* [*spirit or soul*-วิญญาณ] of the dead individual enters the womb of the new other to begin his next existence.[299]

Piker discusses the concern over the quality of life after the next rebirth into the human world as being a life of "psychological discomfort." The Isan people hope for a better reincarnated human life than the one they presently experience. Piker writes:

For the villager, then, merit and *karma* (กรรม) together signify most importantly a mechanism whereby he may attain in future incarnations the influence and effectiveness that escape him now. Influence and effectiveness, in turn, are thought to provide the means whereby the individual can reduce the psychological discomfort (rejection anxiety, fear of others, uncertainty) occasioned by the dual conviction that stable relations with others are highly problematical and, in any event, the notions of others vis-à-vis oneself are likely to be rejecting and/or hostile.[300]

The anticipation of achieving a high social status in order to escape the hardship of farming life is felt by every Isan farmer. This expectation can be realized by merit making. Keyes describes the objective of the Isan villagers as "attaining a nearer goal of higher status and reduction of suffering in a future life. Consequently, the religious action of villagers consists primarily of a merit quest to ensure the attainment of this objective."[301]

Local Isan graduate researcher in anthropology Kusuma Chavinit agrees that a majority of the Isan make merit in order to gain a better life in the future. However, he also identifies another desire for the after life – the desire to live in the next life under the protection and in the reign of the future Buddha Maitreya:

Isan people make merit so that they can join in the future reign of the future Buddha Maitreya. Under his rule Buddhists will enjoy a life of peace, prosperity, health, morality, equality, complete with resources which the Isan presently are lacking (trans. from the Thai by the author).[302]

This same point of view is shared by modern Isan villagers and Lao villagers along the Mekong River Valley Basin in Sakon Nakon and Nakon Pranom whose merit-making undertakings are performed to acquire enough merit to join in

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[299]Ingersoll, "Merit and Identity," 241.

[300]Piker, "The Relationship of Belief Systems," 399.

[301]Keys, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 23.

[302]Kusuma Chavinit, "*Sasana chow ban nai wanakam nitan puen ban isan*" (Folk Religion in Isan Folk Tales - ศาสนาชาวบ้านในวรรณกรรมนิทานพื้นบ้านอีสาน) (in Thai) (Master's thesis., Srinakharinwirot University, 1988), 300.

the reign of the future Buddha. This reign is characterized by the absence of fleecing, drought, and economic and political inequalities.[303] On the basis of this Buddhist eschatology, the Isan perceive merit making as an extremely significant vehicle to join in the reign or rule of the Buddha. As a result, they find the hope of a world of equality, peace, justice, and harmony.

Building a peaceful state of mind

Merit making builds a peaceful state of mind. Merit making allows the Isan villagers to cope with their present difficult conditions. Kusuma explains:

> The concept of karma provides a reconciliatory mechanism to explain the conflicts and misfortunes, disastrous or crisis situations, and injustices. It allows the Isan to compromise with and resolve present-life conflicting situations by shifting the responsibility to karma.[304]

Consequently, the law of karma serves as a control mechanism which holds the Isan in their present situation without striving towards self-improvement; rather, they accept present-life conditions, such as poverty and crisis, as normal. Mole also shares a similar point of view, "Thai culture encourages the idea that successes or failures are the result of karmic law more than they are present skillful or unskillful actions."[305] The apparent lack of control over one's actions is implied and thus results in the lack of individual responsibility. Mole furthermore explains:

> Life is not ideal and tensions do appear to be unavoidable in many instances. When these confront the individual and alternatives have negative value to him, he may simply escape the situation by leaving without a word. Thus many homes are broken up, families scattered, and the community seems to accept it as natural with the karmic law under-girding the whole fabric.[306]

By shifting the responsibility to karma, the Isan villagers at least have a mechanism by which they justify and cope with conflicting present-life situations. They only hope that in their next rebirth the result of their merit accumulation will be enough to tip the karmic balance in their favor. As for continuing their present-life in the midst of unfortunate circumstances, a peaceful state of mind can still be achieved by knowing that karma is in control. This peaceful state of mind is very important to the older Isan people whose hope is in merit accumulation. Such a person is represented by merit-maker Mae Pan Kantaw, who appeared in an interview of the *The Nation*, an English newspaper in Thailand, in October 2001.[307] At age 50,

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[303]Chaitieng, "Prosperous Society, Dharma Society, and the Fights," 7.

[304]Chavinit, "*Sasana chow ban*," 301.

[305]Mole, *Thai Values and Behavior Patterns*, 78.

[306]Ibid., 86.

[307]Tanchasanwat, "A Changing Merit," *The Nation* (Bangkok), 29 October 2001, 1.

residing in Song Dao district of Sakon Nakon, Mae Pan never misses a merit-making opportunity in her community. "If I have a million, I will give to the temple a million. . . It [*merit making*] is a must for us. If we don't make merit, our next life will not be better. We already suffer enough in this life," said Mae Pan.

Providing behavior control and an incentive for good behavior

The third significant effect of merit making is its provision of behavior control and an incentive for good behavior. Since actions are measured in terms of merit (*bun-บุญ*) or demerit (*bap-บาป*), the Isan Buddhists show considerable caution concerning their behavior or conduct when relating to others. By avoiding conflicts, confrontation, aggressiveness, and bad behaviors, they are believed to be making gain toward their store of merit. Klausners supports this interpretation:

> The strongly held Buddhist beliefs of the villagers act to positively affect and regulate behavior and operate as a form of social control. . . Villagers justify and explain their avoidance of both confrontation and expression of anti-social emotions and lack of aggressiveness, in terms of Buddhist *desirata* and as merit for themselves.[308]

Actions which express charitable intentions such as caring for the aged, sick, handicap and orphans; tolerance; and kindness - these are credited as merit and applied toward one's store of merit. Thus, the fear of receiving demerit (or sins) and the loss of merit become a behavior control mechanism for the Isan villagers to avoid any kind of conflict or confrontation and to behave beneficially towards others.

In addition, the merit provides desirable incentives for good behavior in terms of work ethic and financial motivation. Because of the attractive amount of merit that the monthly or special merit-making festivals produce, every Isan person focuses his or her economic resources on sponsoring at least one or two of the festivals in his or her lifetime. Pfanner and Ingersoll elaborate on the Isan's motivation for financial gain and their work ethic:

> Merit does, for sure, provide a strong incentive to produce more goods or services at times—to finance the expensive celebrations of family life-cycle events, especially ordination, marriage, and death. But the incentive here is to earn enough money to spend on the particular family celebration for merit and social prestige, not to accumulate more wealth to invest in a permanent increase in production.[309]

Merit making is viewed as the controlling factor in the Isan's philosophy of work and in their motivation to continue perserverance in an undesirable employment. It provides the inner strength to go through adverse and harsh conditions. As a result, merit making is very significant in relation to the Isan's behavior control, and it serves as an incentive for good behavior.

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[308]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 5.

[309]Pfanner and Ingersoll, "Religion and Economics," 356.

Providing a secured and stable community

The fourth significant effect of merit making is its provision of a secure and stable community. Every Isan villager desires to have a safe and secure place that serves as a harbor in the midst of an uncertain world controlled by karmic law. The stability of these communities is very important. The Isan believe that their birthplace or home village will always provide this needed security and stability. This explains why migrant workers from the Isan region employed in urban Bangkok will always consider their birthplace in the village in the Northeast to be their home. Several times a year, after earning or raising sufficient funds, the Isan Buddhists will return to their home villages and sponsor large merit-making festivals. In return, these festivals serve to strengthen the stability and security of their village. Merit, then, is also the natural result of the merit-making festivals. By carrying out the merit-making rites, the villages gain stability and will continue to be the place of refuge for Isan villagers in the world of change. Klausner observes the indispensable part of Buddhism and its role in protecting village stability, "Buddhism is necessary not only to better one's position on the merit scale but also to preserve the traditional harmony and stability of the village as the villager's religion pervades every aspect of his life."[310]

Establishing family and community solidarity

The fifth significant effect of merit making can be seen as it establishes family and community solidarity. The merit-making rituals and festivals give the households and village community a sense of unity and solidarity. As participants are able to relate to one another through the rituals and celebrations, the feeling of group identity is affirmed. Conformity to the demand of the group through the performance of the merit-making rituals and festivals provides cohesiveness for the relationships within the Isan village society. This same aspiration for group solidarity is shared by the Lao of modern-day Laos, as indicated by Bailey:

> Lao authorities look for the participation of each household, village, and province in every important national gathering and event. A representative from each household-village-province is required to satisfy the demands of the hierarchy.[311]

The Isan, who once belonged to the same kingdom (Lan Chang) as the Lao, also share the same worldview as the Lao that the "well-being of the group is unquestionably more important than that of any one individual."[312] Merit making as a group activity is stressed by Tambiah who states that merit making can be performed by a family, a household, a kin grouping, or even the entire village. The acts of merit making are always performed collectively and, consequently, strengthen the solidarity of the

[310]Klausner, A Memorandum to Research Officer," 4.

[311]Stephen K. Bailey, "Ritual, Relationship, and Religious Liberty in Laos," *The Brandywine Review of Faith & International Affairs* Spring 2004: 6.

[312]Ibid., 7.

group or community.[313] Along the same line of thought, Ingersoll expresses that the villagers sense a "bond of unity" between those who make merit together.[314] On this basis, it could easily be observed that merit making plays a critical role in establishing group solidarity.

Communicating respect and gratitude for parents, elders, and ancestors

The sixth significant effect of merit making is that it functions to communicate respect and gratitude for one's parents, elders, and ancestors. Here, the participation in the merit-making rituals and festivals indicate that Isan villagers are fulfilling their obligations of respect and gratitude to their authorities, namely their parents, elders, and deceased ancestors.

The Isan villagers believe that each child has a responsibility to repay his or her parents in some way for the care provided during childhood.[315] The merit earned from participating in the merit-making acts, rituals, or festivals is transferable to one's parents. Young men normally show respect and gratitude to their parents by discharging their filial obligations by entering the monkhood for a short period of time. Thereby, they make sufficient merit to transfer to their parents. The daughter, however, will perform offerings of food daily to the monks and serve as a representative of her parents, earning merit for the whole family. In the same manner, Keyes too observes, "It [*entering the monkhood*] also attests to a man's having fulfilled his duty to his parents by making merit for them."[316] The respect and gratitude shown by the sons and daughters toward their parents is still in effect even in the midst of fading traditional beliefs and values and despite the invasion of economic growth and consumerism. "Women as daughters are still expected to show their gratitude to their parents by helping with housework, and taking care of parents in their old age while sons can do so by becoming ordained as a monk," says a Thai sociologist Supang Chanavanich, Director of the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.[317]

In addition to paying respect and gratitude to one's parents, the merit-making acts also demonstrate respect for one's elders. The village elders are viewed as the ones endowed with the responsibility of passing on the Isan's ancient traditions of merit-making rituals or customs (or *chareet prapaynee*-จารีตประเพณี); consequently, the acts of merit making are signs of respect for the elders and their positions. Somjitsripunya affirms that "the elders recognized as leaders have the responsibility of teaching the younger generations to observe merit making and studying *hiit-kong (ฮี*

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[313]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 54, 57.

[314]Ingersoll, "Merit and Identity," 247.

[315]Keyes, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 13.

[316]Ibid., 21.

[317]Supang Chantavanich, "The Crisis of Women in a Theravada Buddhist Society," a paper presented at the International Conference on Buddhist Societies in Stability and Crisis, Sri Lanka (Bangkok: Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 1994).

ตคอง), and leading them to practice *chareet prapaynee* (traditional merit-making customs-จารีตประเพณี)."[318]

Ancestors are also important recipients of the fruit of merit-making acts. Living Isan villagers and their deceased elders share a relationship of interdependence. The living villagers depend on the protection of the deceased relatives while the spirits of the deceased relatives depend on the merit of the living relatives gained from their merit-making rituals and festivals. The act of merit making by the villagers can be seen as discharging a moral obligation or as an expression of respect and gratitude for what the ancestors had done while they were alive because the villagers are now reaping those benefits. Stephen Sparks additionally expresses the notion that merit making is a duty to the deceased elders who have performed beneficial deeds for their descendents, "Merit making for the dead does not imply reciprocity although it could be considered as an act of thanks or duty of the giver for all the deceased did during his/her life."[319] Therefore, the merit-making acts in the form of rituals, ceremonies or festivals function to express one's respect, thankfulness, and duty to one's parents, elders, and ancestors.

Offering mobility within the hierarchal system

The Isan social order is identical to the Central Thai order and is based on a hierarchy primarily rooted in Buddhism. The seventh significant effect of merit-making is made evident through this hierarchy. The Isan hierarchy pertains to the position or status of an individual, but a person may move up and down the hierarchy. The determinant factor in fixing a person to a particular position in the hierarchy is merit. Hanks describes this in greater detail: "In according with past merit, one being may be born a snake to crawl helplessly in darkness while another may be born an angel free to move unhampered by matter. After death their positions might be reversed."[320]

As individuals are not believed to be assigned to a permanent place in the hierarchy, the power of one's accumulated merit from past lives will function to place a person in a given position in society. "One need not to remain a peasant until the end of his days." says Hanks.[321] He additionally expresses:

> Social life is a continuous process of changing station by earning and validating a higher one, or falling to a lower one. At any moment the lowest man may catapult himself to a position effectively superior to the king; he need only take the vows of a priest. As long as he submits to the discipline of selflessness required by the rules of the order, he may remain in this lofty position.[322]

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[318]Somjitsripunya, "*Lokkatat chow ban*," 17.

[319]Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls*, 173.

[320]L. M. Hanks, "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order," *American Anthropologist* 64 (1962): 1248.

[321]Ibid.

[322]Ibid.

Kirsch also observes the same mobility within the hierarchy through an ordination into monkhood. At ordination, a man is re-categorized as a "mana-filled" monk.[323] As a result, an Isan farmer with a low social status can be ordained and instantly acquire sufficient merit to raise him in the hierarchy; suddenly he surpasses even the king of Thailand in social rank!

Hence, in this inequitable society, every Isan person is taught to be self-reliant in merit making and to support causes benefiting others who are hierarchically lower than himself. "By helping others," says Hanks, "a man gains a helper, increases his own merit, and raises his standing in the hierarchy."[324] Based on this reasoning, merit making is perceived as extremely valuable for upgrading oneself in the hierarchy.

Status, Power and Wealth

The third Buddhist religious value that influences the Isan's decision-making process is that of status, power, and wealth. For a long time, the Isan region of Northeast Thailand felt neglected by Bangkok in the modernization of Thailand. In spite of the attempt to incorporate the Northeast into the Thai (Siam) state, a respected sociologist, Erik Cohen at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, observes that the Isan region of the Northeast is still the "backwaters of the Thai state."[325] Still suffering from neglect in modern development, the Isan region is the "forgotten region of the country."[326]

The final significant effect of merit making is indicated by its ability to create access to status, power, and wealth. Traditionally a villager's status and identity are established by his accumulated karma from his past, which marks the "more fortunate villagers from those less fortunate, man from animals, and animals of higher form from those of lower form."[327] According to the statements of Tunwa Chaitieng, a lecturer at the Sakon Nakon's Ratchabhat University in Northeast Thailand, the sentiments or feelings of the Isan villagers, especially the farmers, are that they have been fleeced and have been taken advantage of by Bangkok.[328] The insecurity and instability of Isan villagers has increased and stems from the loss of land due to debt.

Economically and politically powerless to control their own future, the Isan look to their traditional religious beliefs and values which have guided them for

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[323]Kirsch, "Economy, Polity and Religion," 187.

[324]Hanks, "The Thai Social Order, 198-99.

[325]Erik Cohen, "Bangkok and Isan: The Dynamics of Emergent Regional Planning in Thailand," a paper presented at the Colloquium on the Social Science in Rural and Regional Planning and Development: Discipline and Profession in Memory of Professor Dov Weintraub (Jerusalem: Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 26-28 January 1986), 10.

[326]Ibid., 12.

[327]Ingersoll, "Merit and Identity," 240.

[328]Chaitieng, "Prosperous Society, Dharma Society, and the Fights," 17.

many generations. They still turn to merit making for access to status, power, and wealth. Thai anthropologist Ratana Tosakun Boonmathya at the Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University, Bangkok, stated that the failure of contemporary development in Thai society has caused the rural Northeastern Thai villagers to return to village wisdom, community traditional customs and rituals, and popular Buddhism.[329] Dissatisfied with the promises of modernization, development, and prosperity, the Isan villagers remain hopeful in the traditional custom of merit making. The traditional belief that better social status, power, and wealth can be accessed through merit making is still an attractive choice.

Accessing status

The Isan people are still convinced that higher social status is a result of one's merit from the past. They believe that a superior is in his position because he possesses a higher degree of merit.[330] According to Keyes,

> As adherents to a form of Theravada Buddhism, Baan Noong Tyyn villagers [*in Northeast Thailand*] believe that all actions (*karma-กรรม*) will have their effects on a person's status and degree of freedom from suffering not only in this life but in innumerable lives to come. To attain higher statuses with their concomitant lower level of suffering one must perform good acts which yield 'merit' (*bun-บุญ*) in order to offset the 'demerit' (*bap-บาป*) of bad actions.[331]

Not only is higher social status an indication of one's large surplus of merit, but those who hold higher social status must continue performing more merit so that they can remain in the same status or rise higher. The Isan society expects those in a socially superior position to express their status by "by meritorious Buddhist acts, by attending Buddhist ceremonies, by giving food and robes to the monks, and by building *wats* (วัด)."[332]

The utilization of a traditional religious route of accessing higher social status is relatively common among the Isan villagers of Northeast Thailand. However, some changes began taking place with the modernization of Thailand. Some of the Thai, largely in the urban setting, see the possibilities of investments for upward mobility. "To advance forward economically and socially, one now has to invest to earn more," says Amara Pongsapich, Director at the Social Research Institute of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.[333] However, in conclusion, Pongsapich accepts the following statements:

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[329]Ratana Tosakul Boonmathya, "A Narrative of Contested Views of Development in Thai Society: Voices of Villagers in Rural Northeastern Thailand," *Southeast Asian Studies* 41, no. 3 (December 2003): 275.

[330]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 273.

[331]Keyes, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 23.

[332]Hughes, "Values of Thai Buddhists and Thai Christians," 226. .

[333]Amara Pongsapich, "Socio-Economic Development and the Changing Buddhist Ideology and Values: The Relationship Between the Thai and Chinese in

Rural traditional farmers change slowly and many still adhere to the Buddhist values and worldviews . . . The Thais, the rural poor as well as the urban rich still follow ritualistic practices to ensure success when uncertainty in new or even daily ventures prevails.[334]

In regard to this subject, Ingersoll observes that "a villager . . . can define himself largely in terms of his merit and can discern his current merit largely in terms of his current status and fortunes."[335] The words of Mulder who says, "Social prestige is largely conditioned by religious merit,"[336] are appealing to the Isan villagers. As a result, the Isan people continue with the traditional customary practices of merit making as they believe it is an important tool for them to move upward on the scale of social hierarchy.

Accessing power

In addition to gaining access to a higher social status, merit making has been utilized for attaining influence and power. Piker explains how the villagers' desire for influence effectively forms the basis for their willingness to invest in merit making as opposed to magic and spirits.[337] Ingersoll also agrees that people are in positions of influence and power because of their merit.[338] Therefore, a person's meritorious accumulation allows him power or influence in this life and the next life. Living in the backwaters of the Thai state, as described by Cohen, the Isan people feel powerless and neglected economically, socially, and politically. The appeal of merit as an avenue for gaining access to influence and power can be extremely appealing.

Accessing wealth

The acts of merit making do not only produce accessibility to higher status and power, it also can be the avenue for accruing wealth. The Buddhist concept of a relationship between merit and wealth is also extremely attractive to the Isan villagers who struggle for daily survival. The relationship between merit and wealth can be compared to that of wind and fire. In the case of a forest fire, the wind strengthens the

National Development in Thailand," a paper presented at the International Conference on Buddhist Societies in Stability and Crisis (Kandy, Sri Lanka: The International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Sri Lanka; The Royal Institute, Thailand; Institute of Thai Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Sri Lanka; and Bank of Ceylon, Sri Lanka, July 28-30 1994), 16.

[334]Ibid., 21.

[335]Ingersoll, "Merit and Identity," 227.

[336]Niels Mulder, "An Evaluation of the Potential Role of the Buddhist Monk hood in Thailand in Processes of Guided Social Change," *The Journal of Social Science* 4, no. 2 (n.d.): 106.

[337]Piker, "The Relationship of Belief Systems," 399.

[338]Ingersoll, "Merit and Identity," 233.

fire to burn the forest, and the rapid-burning fire then causes the wind to blow stronger, which in return generates the momentum for the fire to grow more powerful. The wind and the fire are interdependent upon on each other and enable one another to grow in strength. Pfanner and Ingersoll describe the villagers' understanding of wealth and merit, "Wealth is a sign of merit already made and a means for making more merit. The more wealth possessed, the greater the merit must have been."[339] Keyes also observes the Isan villagers' behavior in regard to wealth and merit as follows:

> Villagers are also motivated to be productive so as to gain additional wealth because surplus wealth is necessary if one is to gain merit . . . The poor suffer in the here and now, a consequence of their lack of merit from previous existence, they also lack the means to alter their place on the moral hierarchy in the future. . . The rich, by way of contrast, reap rewards from their wealth now and, through its transformation into merit, in the future as well.[340]

Social and economic inequalities are explained in terms of one's karma and merit. The Isan villagers justify their economic disposition, namely extreme poverty, by attributing the cause to their lack of sufficient merit. Given the traditional explanation for wealth, merit making thus becomes extremely crucial as a channel to wealth. The more merit, the more wealth; the more wealth, the more merit. Hank puts it this way:

> Contrary to the Christian gospel, a poor widow, giving her all to the priest, remains less blessed than the rich man; both have performed meritorious acts, but the Thai observe that the effectiveness of ten thousand baht outweighs the window's battered coin.[341]

Comparing the Christian and Buddhist perception on wealth and merit, Hughes says,

> Villagers comment that increased wealth provides the opportunity for them to sponsor more elaborate merit-making ceremonies . . . for additional wealth can be utilized to maximize both this-worldly and otherworldly values of traditional village life.[342]

The importance of merit making can be observed in the recent response of village chief Amka Tawong of Peung Village, Muang District, Sakon Nakon province, who says that "the Isan villagers make merit not because they want to accumulate merit for merit's sake or they want to be reborn in the reign of the future

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[339]Pfanner and Ingersoll, *Religion and Economics*, 356.

[340]Keyes, "Economic Action and Buddhist Morality," 859.

[341]Hanks, "Merit and Power," 1284.

[342]Ibid., 39.

[342]Keyes, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 27.

Buddha, but they want to have money" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[343] The Isan's work ethic is that with the increase of wealth, they can sponsor more elaborate merit-making ceremonies, which in return will earn them more merit to guarantee a secure and better place for them in their next life. Because of their merit-making acts, they can have all the conveniences that money can buy.

In summary, the Isan's Buddhist religious values which have direct influence on decision making for converting to another religion can be stated in four major points. First of all, the strongly held Buddhist religious beliefs and values affect, regulate, and socially control the behaviors of the Isan people. Second, the Buddhist religious values which give priority to the concept of sacred hierarchy and inequality are also part of the value system of the Isan people. Because of their Buddhist values, the Isan people hold that individuals are fundamentally unequal. An Isan individual regards himself as above or below those around him. Thus, decision making is top-down rather than bottom-up or made individually.

Third, the Buddhist religious values which place importance on merit and merit making also play a part in the Isan's value system. The Isan of the Northeast understand and observe the form of Buddhism that can simply be equated with merit making. Acquiring merit through merit-making activities is essential because of one's bad karma (bad actions). The consequences of one's actions are ultimately experienced in the present life and will affect one's future reincarnations. The totality of one's life is viewed as an accumulative effect of one's past karma (actions). The Isan hold that their lower social status and their present suffering and misfortune are a consequence of their past karma. Thus, the accumulation of merit through merit making in the religion of Buddhism is necessary in order to be reborn in the next life to a higher status with better life conditions and to avoid going to hell. Merit is, therefore, believed to possess special power so as to bring prosperity and peace to one's life and to ward off any misfortune and disaster. The significance of merit making can be seen in seven objectives: (1) giving psychological security to the Isan people; (2) building a peaceful state of mind; (3) providing behavior control and an incentive for good behavior; (4) providing a secure and stable community; (5) establishing family and community solidarity; (6) communicating respect and gratitude (*bunkhun-บุญคุณ*) for parents, elders, and ancestors; and, (7) offering mobility within the hierarchal system.

Fourth, the Buddhist religious values put a tremendous weight on status, power, and wealth and have an influence in the Isan's value system. Merit making is believed to provide an avenue to access a better status and a way to receive power and wealth. Concerning accessing status, the Isan believe that a person's higher social status indicates his large surplus of merit; but to keep the same status or to rise higher in status, he must keep making merit. Concerning assessing power, the Isan are of the persuasion that people are in their positions of influence and power because of their merit. Feeling powerless and neglected economically, socially, and politically, the appeal for accessing power and influence through merit and merit making appear to be very attractive. Concerning the access to wealth, the Isan people have the notion that wealth is a sign of and a reward for merit already made and a means of more merit. Thus, it appears to them that merit making provides a vehicle for the impoverished Isan villagers to obtain wealth.

[343]Chaitieng, "Prosperous Society, Dharma Society, and the Fights," 19.

Traditional Customary Values

The third major set of values from the Isan value system which is a primary factor in their decision-making process are the traditional customary values (or values arising from the Isan's ancestral traditions or customs). The Isan's traditions or customs are referred to as the *hiit-kong (ฮีตคอง), prapaynee (ประเพณี), hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี), chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* or just *hiit (ฮีต) or chareet (จารีต)*. These traditional customary values tie the Isan back to their ancestral traditions, provide the basis for community stability and security, supply a means by which crisis is avoided, and regulate and legitimize social behaviors. Although society through its social values and Buddhism through its religious values give legitimacy to the activities of the Isan village communities and families, the traditional customary values form the final authority for their present thoughts and expressions. The main issue and the final authority in the Isan's decision-making process relates to their conformity to the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)*. *Hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* conceived by the Isan's forebears (ancestors) is maintained and disseminated by the village and kin group elders, and communicated by the parents as heads of the households to their children or household members.

The *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* is ultimately authoritative in one's thoughts and expressions because it expresses the will and wish of the Isan's ancestors, elders, and parents. The will, desire, and love of one's parents are believed by some to be more sacred and powerful than gods or other sacred powers or beings. This power was expressed by an Isan master of ceremonies in a wedding gathering at Na-Alon village in Nathan minor-district of Northeast Thailand in front of a crowd of approximately 1,000 people. Commenting on the sanction or approval of the marriage, the female master of ceremonies said, "The marriage has the approval of God, the chairman of the organization, and now it will have the blessing of the parents because the love and desire of the parents is more sacred and powerful than any other powerful beings [*which includes that of the gods or God*]" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[344]

The will and desire of one's forebears, elders, and parents must be honored and upheld above all other preferences. Punmee Wywong, a 68-year-old elder of Songkorn village in Phosai district of Ubonratchatani, responded to the author's question about changing to another religion, namely Christianity:

> The village community leaders and elders are the source of our dependence for our stability and life issues. If we change to Christianity, they will not be happy with us and will oppose the change. Personally, I am Buddhist since birth. It is the religion of my parents, grandparents, and ancestors. Since it is still a good religion, I do not see any need to change to Christianity (trans. from the Thai by the author).[345]

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[344]*Wedding Reception of Chittataam and Natchatya Sermthong* (Ubonratchatani, Thailand, 14 October 2006).

[345]Pumee Wywong, village elder of Songkorn village, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 21 August 2006.

Another 59-year-old Songkorn village elder, Tongpoon Insuwan, verbalizes a similar attitude, "It is up to the individual to choose his faith. As for me, I am holding to Buddhism, which was given to me by my parents and ancestors. As a result, I will not change to another religion, particularly, Christianity" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[346] An identical feeling is shared by an elder of another Isan village. Seventy six year-old villager, Peng Lowbutsee, residing in Tongkieng village of Nathan minor-district, responded:

> I consider myself the most important person in the decision-making process when contemplating the conversion to another religion. Secondary important to myself, the other persons who play a significant role in the decision-making process are my kin group elders and the village leaders and elders. Since Buddhism is already satisfactory, and I have been Buddhist since a young boy and my parents were Buddhists until their death; therefore, I will continue in the Buddhist religion (trans. from the Thai by the author).[347]

Adherence and conformity to the ancestral traditions or customs is primary to the village community leaders and elders. This can be seen in the words of 78-year-old Naweng village elder, Keo Wongkham. When asking who holds sway over the decision for converting to another religion, Elder Keo responded:

> I have the priority over making the decision to change to another religion. However, right now, I will not consider a change in my religion. Even if my village community changes to Christianity, I will remain a Buddhist. Presently, the old (ancient) Buddhist religion of my parents and ancestors is already satisfactory (trans. from the Thai by the author).[348]

The *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* or *chareet prapaynee* (traditions and customs-จารีตประเพณี) are perceived as the sum of all of the will and desire of the Isan's ancestors, and, consequently, it takes precedence over any other will or desire. Rakwijit explains,

> The Isan perceive an 'evil' man as one 'who lacks respect for the village tradition and customs and/or threatens the general security and well-being of the people of his own household…Northeasterners, wherever they are, should not accept customs and traditions of other people and reject their customs and traditions because it is a bad thing to do.[349]

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[346]Tongpoon Insuwan, village elder of Songkorn village, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 21 August 2006.

[347]Peng Lowbutsee, village elder of Tongkieng village, Nathan minior-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 18 August 2006.

[348]Keo Wongkham, village elder of Naweng village, Khemarat district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 18 August 2006.

[349]Rakjiwit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 73, 107.

As a result, the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* has tremendous bearing and first preference on the Isan's decision-making process. The author has identified five traditional customary values of the Isan people which arise from their *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)*. These values include the following: (1) continuity of the ancestral traditions; (2) avoidance of misfortunes and disasters; (3) psychological stability and security; (4) recreation; and, (5) sanction for anti-social expressions. These traditional customary values render enormous influence on the decision-making process of the Isan people.

The Continuity of the Ancestral Traditions

The first traditional customary value influencing the Isan's decision making is the need for the continuity of the ancestral traditions. The Isan village community emphasizes interconnectedness between the deceased ancestors and those living in this present life. The ancestors' will and desire acts as a guide for both the present and future ways of life. Chansoongnern shares his thoughts:

> The foundations for daily life of the villagers of Ban Nong Lai is exclusively derived from the respected beliefs and values that are continuing from the Isan ancient period, and, even though different social situations have changed, these beliefs and norms still have constant influence on the way of life of the villagers (trans. from the Thai by the author).[350]

The ancestral traditions and customs manifested in the forms of traditional festivals and ceremonies still impact the present Isan village communities. Even with modernization, the sense of continuing the traditions and customs of the ancestors remains strong. Klausner explicates:

> Even in the midst of all this change one finds continuity in the traditional festivals; in the merit making; in the continued use of traditional herbal medicine as well as use of modern drugs; in farm practices; in the traditional forms of entertainment of the shadow play and bard singers; in the beliefs and practices of the animistic world and Brahmanical ceremonies; in village attitudes focusing on social harmony and non-confrontation.[351]

The need to carry on the ancestral traditional customs and practices, including that of Buddhism and other animistic beliefs, was expressed by the majority of the Isan villagers interviewed by the author. One of them, 53-year-old village elder, Utit Phetpan, strongly asserted, "I will not change to another religion because Buddhism is the religion of my ancestors, and I do not want to disappoint them" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[352] A government official, Somchai Chaichek, a

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[350]Chansoongnern, "*Pittikum ti kiawkong kup chokrang*," 50.

[351]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 135.

[352]Utit Phetpan, village elder of Nathan village, Nathan minior-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 12 August 2006.

member of the Naweng Sub-district Administrative Committee of Khemarat district in Ubonratchatani, revealed:

> Christianity is a good religion. Even many people say that Buddhism is not a rich religion, but Buddhism is an ancient religion which has been a source of our dependency. I absolutely will not accept Christianity in any way even if some people close to me wanted me to convert to Christianity. I will be the first to protest against them converting to Christianity (trans. from the Thai by the author).[353]

Describing the *prapaynee* (traditional customs-ประเพณี) of the Isan village of Non Sang, Srikompliw states:

> Similar to other Isan villagers throughout Northeast Thailand, *prapaynee* (ประเพณี) and culture of Non Sang village is a *prapaynee* (ประเพณี) passed down from the Isan ancestors called *hiit-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบสอง). Currently, Non Sang village practices only seven months out of the 12 months (trans. from the Thai by the author).[354]

In addition, the need to continue the ancestral traditions prevails because of the respect for one's parents, grandparents, elders, and ancestors. The overwhelming majority of the people interviewed indicated the need to remain Buddhists because Buddhism was the religion chosen for them by the Isan ancestors for the Isan people. One of the respondents who follows Buddhism out of respect for his elders and ancestors is a 45-year-old teacher, Leungpratin Kiowsoot, who resides in Songkorn village of Phosai district in Ubonratchatani. He shares:

> When it comes to the issue of changing to another religion (Christianity), I must defer the decision making to the elders of my kin group who are gatekeepers for the traditions of our ancestors since our present religion of Buddhism has been passed on from our ancestors. If I change to Christianity, it will affect my ancestors because the elders of our kin groups are descendants of our ancestors who gave Buddhism to us (trans. from the Thai by the author).[355]

Others respondents disclose the reason for continuing with Buddhism as based on the need to stay connected to their ancestors through merit making. Changing to another religion, such as Christianity, would consequently disallow the Isan villagers from continuing the traditions of merit making which benefit the ancestors (including dead parents, grandparents, and other elders of one's kin group). Seventy five year-old

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[353]Somchai Chaichek, Member of the Naweng Sub-District Administrative Committee and village elder of Bokmuang Yai village, Khemarat district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 15 August 2006.

[354]Srikompliw, "The Relationship Between Relatives and the Development," 20.

[355]Leungpratin Kiowsoot, teacher and villager of Songkorn village, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 26 August 2006.

elder Luan Kiowngam of Songkorn village of the Phosai district expresses his feelings by saying:

> I am rooted and established in Buddhism since my birth. Buddhism was given to me from my parents and our ancestors. If I change to Christianity, Christians do not do merit making for one's deceased relatives. As a result, my deceased relatives will not have the portion of the merit that I want to send them.[356]

A 64-year female elderly woman, Nuchat Wongmant, a villager of Tongkieng of the Nathan minor-district, utters the same sentiment when asked about changing her religion to Christianity:

> My kin group elders and leaders will oppose and contest my decision to change to Christianity because we will not be able to worship the Buddhist statues or monks and will not be able to make merit for our dead relatives. They will say that I am not conforming to the way of the ancestors and that I am different from the other people living in our village (trans. from the Thai by the author).[357]

The ancestral *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี), *hiit-kong prapaynee* (ฮีตคอง ประเพณี), or *prapaynee* (traditional customs-ประเพณี) influences the decision making of the people in a village context. As the authority for village practices, *prapaynee* (ประเพณี) provides the legitimacy for dealing with village problems. An appeal to *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี) establishes the highest ground of justification for any decision a village leader or elder makes in settling disputes or in following a course of action. Police Lieutenant General Sakda Chuapratoom, who conducted a study on the Isan villager's worldviews concerning the governance, noted, "The committee of elders have the responsibility to give advice or counsel in self-governing, carrying out village activities, and settling disputes by the use of principles from *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี)" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[358]

As the highest source of authority in any Isan village, the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี) comes under the responsibility of the village elders and leaders who must ensure that every villager in their village follows and observes its regular prescribed practices. Chuapratoom furthermore states, "The elders recognized as leaders have the responsibility of teaching the younger generations to observe merit

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[356]Luan Kiowngam, village elder of Songkorn village, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 26 August 2006.

[357]Nuchat Wongmant, Tongkient villager, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 18 August 2006.

[358]Sakda Chuapratoom, "Lokkata kong chaoban kiewgup kanprokklong: suksakorranee ban nonglom amphoe muang changwat mahasarakham (The Villagers' Worldviews Concerning Governance: A Case Study of Nong Han Village, Muang district, Mahasarakham province--โลกกัศน์ของชาวบ้านเกี่ยวกับการปกครอง: ศึกษากรณีบ้านหนองหล่ม อำเภอ เมือง จังหวัดมหาสารคาม) (in Thai)," Semi-thesis, Srinakalinvirot University, Mahasarakham, Thailand, 1991), 17.

making and study *hiit-kong* (ฮีตคอง), and must lead them to practice *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี)" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[359]

        This need to continue the ancestral traditions and customs, primarily Buddhistic and animistic, and the recognized authority for any village actions conducted by the village elders, particularly religious ones, is tied to the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี), the traditional customary values connected to the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี) and control the actions and decision-making process of the Isan villagers. Hence, Rakwijit says:

> The top two characteristic patterns of behavior in the villagers' social interactions are good speech and manner and observance of village traditions and customs. When cultural violations occur, the wrongdoer should accept the verdict of village elders and mend his ways.[360]

        Since a conversion to Protestant Christianity and its subsequent practices is commonly perceived as rejecting the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี) and discontinuing the ancestral traditions, Christians are often seen as cultural violators. Varying kinds of sanctions are normally applied to cultural violators and these sanctions thus serve to hinder the decision making for conversion.

The Avoidance of Misfortunes and Disasters

        Avoidance of misfortune and disaster constitutes the second traditional customary value exerting influence on the Isan's decision-making process. A misfortune or disaster in one's life is believed to originate from two sources: bad karma (*bap*), implying the lack of merit, and offending spirits (primarily of the ancestors, community, or rice-field).

        Since a misfortune or disaster is strongly believed to be caused by the spirits or *phi* (especially the spirits of one's deceased ancestors-ผี), the Isan villagers are conscientious about not offending the spirits of their deceased relatives. As the author has mentioned earlier, the ancestors have passed away and become the *phi* (ผี). When an Isan transgresses or violates a teaching or traditional custom which was handed down from his ancestors, he is in reality transgressing against the *phi* (ผี) of his ancestors who gave the traditional customs. Phongphit and Hewison also have expressed this notion:

> For the community, *phi* (ผี) represent the social rules and values transmitted through the generations, and villagers believe that these are given by ancestors, who are now *phi* (ผี). Failing to observe such rules or committing an intentional transgression is an act against the *phi* (ผี) and is referred to as *phid phi* (ผิดผี).[361]

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[359]Ibid., 27.

[360]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 75.

[361]Phong*phi*t and Hewison, *Village Life*, 55.

The term *phid phi (ผิดผี)* means to "offend the spirits." When social rules, norms, or traditional customary values are broken, it is commonly referred to as *phid phi (ผิดผี)*. If an Isan man sexually violates an Isan young lady, he would be considered as *phid phi (ผิดผี)*. In order to make things right with the offending spirits, he has to make offerings and sacrifices to propitiate the *phi (ผี)* or spirits through a *cham* (spirit doctor-จ้ำ). If his sinful action of *phid phi (ผิดผี)* has not been corrected, the *phi (ผี)* or spirits are believed to potentially bring troubles, disasters, or sickness upon the whole village community. Bailey expresses a similar view on the cause of suffering and misfortune to the Lao:

> Suffering and misfortune are understood to be the automatic punishment for the violation of formal social rules which, by extension, are understood to violate the order of the cosmos. At the macro level, *karma* plays the role of reward and punishment. But even this law, which governs the consequences of social action, can be managed by ritual experts through alliances with earthly and cosmic powers.[362]

An annual ritual and festival is still being held in the Isan region of Northeast Thailand where the community spirit called *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* is propitiated so that protection and blessing for the village community and its villagers can be assured. Sounthonpesat describes it thus:

> Every villager is expected to contribute financially and cooperate in the ceremony and ritual to the ancestral spirit. It is believed that *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)* has the power to inflict the villager and his kin with illness or punish them with misfortunes and life crises (trans. from the Thai by the author).[363]

In addition to the ritual and festival conducted to propitiate the *phi puta (ผีปู่ตา)*, there are a number of rituals and festivals made by the Isan villagers to show respect to other important household, ancestral, community, rice-field, and nature spirits. In regard to the village rituals and ceremonies related to the spirits, Klausner writes:

> The village ceremony involving the spirit doctor accomplishes more than just assuring a mental comfort and psychological security on the part of the villagers. It also controls anti-social action, as those who have offended the sprits by improper conduct will quickly ask forgiveness and attempt to rectify their behavior. They do not wish to bear the brunt of continuing responsibility for village misfortunes.[364]

Not only are the customs of ritually and ceremonially appeasing the spirits valued as a measure against misfortune and disaster, the traditional customary practice

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[362]Bailey, "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness," 309.

[363]Sounthonpesat, "Krongsrang Sungkom Mooban," 111.

[364]Klausner, "Ceremonies and Festivals," 9.

of *baisee sookwan (บายศรีสู่ขวัญ)* is also given primary importance to ensure protection, prosperity, and good health. Bailey observes:

> *Kwan (ขวัญ)* rituals are a means of drawing on the moral and *saksit* power of the community to honor and strengthen individuals against the threat of misfortune, for the sake of the individual and also that of the household-village community.[365]

With the traditional customary value placed on *baisee sookwan (บายศรีสู่ขวัญ)* as a measure against any potential misfortune or disaster, a large percentage of Isan observe taboos or "*kalom (คะลำ)*." *Kalom (คะลำ)* is what the Isan ancestors used as an instrument to provide social control in village communities. The Isan believe *kalom (คะลำ)* are prohibitions which must be obeyed to avoid misfortune. The resulting misfortune would include any offending individual as well as the whole community. In addition, the one not observing the taboos will be perceived as behaving outside of societal norms (นอกลู่นอกทาง). As a consequence, he is believed to bring bad luck or evil upon the community. The society might begin to dislike him and discontinue fellowship with him, resulting in a psychological sanction. *Kalom (คะลำ)*, therefore, has historically become a way by which an Isan village community socially regulates its members.[366]

Any misfortune or disaster in one's family, kin group, or village community is normally interpreted as the malicious act of a spirit or *phi (ผี)* resulting from an offense that has been committed, so the Isan normally will begin correcting any such offense as soon as possible. Klausner speaks to this issue:

> The wrongdoer will be held accountable for the misfortunes that may befall a village because of his socially disruptive behavior. The wrongdoer will have to correct his behavior and make amends for it in order to placate the village spirit, but, in the literal sense, it will not be one's fellow villagers who have demanded such action. It is the offended spirits who have taken revenge on the village as a whole and, thus, put a heavy burden of guilt on the shoulders of the wrongdoer. . . Thus, the animist beliefs and practices preserve, in a variety of ways, the pattern of serene and harmonious social relationships.[367]

The constraint from the Isan's traditional customary value of avoiding misfortune, disaster, or crisis, and the need to avoid any misfortune that may befall his household, kin group, or village community hinders an individual from deciding to convert to Christianity, particularly because the Isan's traditional customary values stress adherence to Buddhist and animistic practices.

In the household, kin group, or village community where the overwhelming majority of members are non-Christians, the ones who convert to Christianity are commonly charged with violating traditional customary norms and values. As a consequence of the violation, the spirits are offended and any misfortune

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[365]Bailey, "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness," 282.

[366]Plaklang, "Lar kalom kong chao isan," 1.

[367]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 71.

or crisis in one's household, kin group, and village community is then blamed on the newly converted. A few incidents in the ministry of the author help to illustrate this truth.

In 1994 a 57-year-old Isan woman, Taptim Thayasut of the Nasay village in Palan sub-district, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani, converted to Christianity, and another member of her father's household became seriously ill. The spirit doctor discerned that the illness was caused as a result of an offense to the spirits called *phi tai* (ผีไท้), a spirit of her kin group. The offense of the *phi tai* (ผีไท้) was believed to result from Taptim Thayasut's conversion to Christianity.[368] A similar incident was reported by Chanarong Keawmoon, pastor of the Mekong Church Ubonratchatani, Muang district, Ubonratchatani. Keawmoon reported:

> In December 2005, when my 55-year-old father Sawai Kaemoon, a former government official serving as the chairman of the Kraseng Yai Sub-district of Kantanalak, Sisaket, Northeast Thailand, became converted, he began bringing my unconverted stepmother, Mee Keawmoon to church. Mee belongs to a kin group who worships an ancestral spirit (*phi*-ผี) who originated from Cambodia. A *mau taam* (a spirit doctor-หมอธรรม) told the elders and relatives of her kin group that her church attendance with her husband Sawai was offending the ancestral spirit. As a result, Mee became ill. Her illness was believed to be caused by her church attendance with her husband. A spirit doctor and her kinsmen performed a traditional ritual to appease the offended spirit on her behalf and she became well. Her kinsmen then prevented her from attending or from living with her husband and attending the church lest the spirit become offended and inflict her with illness again. Up to the present, Mee is forbidden to join with my Christian father in following Christianity for fear that the ancestral spirit will be offended and misfortune and crisis will befall the family (trans. from the Thai by the author).[369]

The fear of offending the spirits or *phid phi (ผิดผี)* and the resulting consequence in bringing misfortune, disaster, or crisis in one's household, kin group, or village community, therefore, exert influence on the Isan's decision to convert to Christianity or not.

Psychological Stability and Security

The third traditional customary value exerting influence on the Isan's decision making is the need for psychological stability and security. The Isan village community relies heavily on *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* or *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* to provide for its psychological stability and security. The traditional

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[368]Taptim Thayasut, villager of Nasay village, Palan sub-district, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani, Northeast Thailand, interview by author, 17 October 2006.

[369]Chanarong Keawmoon, Pastor of Mekong Church Ubonratchatani, Muang district, Ubonratchatani, Northeast Thailand, interview by author, 17 October 2006.

rituals and festivals as required by the Isan's *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* bring needed stability and security to the village communities. Klausner indicates that the ceremonies and festivals are "important in terms of giving the villager psychological security."[370] Klausner noticeably added, "The festivals and ceremonies . . . have as one of their functions the preservation of the psychological stability and security of the villagers."[371] Foster also similarly expresses this thought, "Most individuals find security in conforming to the standards of their culture's value system."[372]

The feeling of stability and security derived from observing the village's traditions and customs (primarily consisting of rituals and ceremonies) appeals heavily to the psychological needs of the Isan villagers. Commenting on the function of myth and ritual, William G. Doty, Professor of Humanities/Religious Studies at University of Alabama, United States of America, states, "In this same manner myths and rituals may reduce anxiety when they mesh with the individual's social order or provide associative identification within the immediate group."[373] Fiona Bowie, Senior Lecturer in Anthropology and Religious Studies at the University of Wales in Lampeter, also describes the functions of rituals:

> Rituals have many functions, both at the level of the individual and for groups or societies. They can channel and express emotions, guide and reinforce forms of behavior, support or subvert the status quo, bring about change, or restore harmony and balance. Rituals also have a very important role in healing. They may be used to maintain the life forces and fertility of the earth, and to ensure right relationships with the unseen world, whether of spirits, ancestors, deities, or other supernatural forces. The succession of a culture's most deeply held values from one generation to another may be facilitated by means of ritual.[374]

Stability and security are derived from the Isan traditional customs (*chareet prapaynee-จารีตประเพณี*). These include the twelve monthly merit-making customs to which the Isan village communities strongly cling. They disassociate themselves from anything that would reject or not be supportive of the *chareet prapaynee*.

The rituals and merit-making customs of *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* provide social norms and act as a social adhesive. Psychological stability and security is found in the group as it conforms to the Isan's *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* by following its merit-making customs and other rituals and ceremonies. Bowie comments on the identity of the individual: "Whoever we are, we do not exist as

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[370]Klausner, "Ceremonies and Festivals," 2.

[371]Ibid., 8.

[372]Foster, *Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technological Changes*, 19.

[373]William G. Doty, *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*, 2d ed. (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama, 2000), 71.

[374]Fiona Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction* (Malden, Maryland: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 151.

isolated individuals, but belong to a hierarchy of social groups."[375] The desire to follow the group in following the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* and its accompanying Buddhist religion was clearly expressed by an elderly 67-year old Isan woman. Udon Lowsing lived in Songkorn village in the Phosai district in Ubonratchatani. Lowsing said:

> I am now old; I have embraced Buddhism and have been attending the temple since I was a young girl. If I am going to change to another religion, I will only do so by following the action of our village community. I will not make a decision by myself. However, I know our village community will protest and criticize me if I decide to change to Christianity because I have followed Buddhism since a young girl. Since I have been attending the temple and making merit, if I cease to continue now, they will scorn me (trans. from the Thai by the author).[376]

In reference to the issue of security, Klausner noted, "Being part of a faction [*group* or *entourage*] also affords the members a sense of belonging and psychological security."[377]

Since Christianity has been perceived by the Isan village communities as an outsider's religion and also often as an adversary to the Isan's *chareet prapaynee*'s practices, those who convert to Christianity are finding themselves in an extremely unstable and insecure condition. This then acts as a deterrent or barrier from making the decision to convert to Christianity.

Recreation and Sanctions for Anti-social Expressions

Recreation and sanctions for anti-social expressions represent the fourth traditional customary value that influences the Isan's decision-making process. The Isan's *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* provides the opportunity for recreation and serves as an outlet for anti-social expressions which would not otherwise be enjoyed. The *prapaynee*'s rituals and festivals of the Isan, particularly the twelve monthly merit-making customs, allow them to express emotions and behaviors which are normally prohibited. Klausner agreed that the Isan's rituals and festivals serve as a release for anti-social expressions:

> The villager, although he may avoid expression of those anti-social emotions he feels, quite often will take psychological refuge in a variety of indirect actions that relieve much of his pent-up emotions. We have also noted the safety-value function of ceremonies and festivals e.g. the Bun Bang Fai [*one of the Isan's twelve monthly merit-making customs and festivals*] where direct expression of certain anti-social behavior is sanctioned.[378]

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[375]Ibid., 71.

[376]Udon Lowsing, Songkorn villager, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 21 August 2006.

[377]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 279.

[378]Ibid., 77.

Not only do the *prapaynee*'s rituals and festivals (including the twelve monthly merit-making customs) provide the sanction for anti-social expressions, but it also presents the occasion for recreation. Klausner further elaborates on this:

> Groups of villagers, young or old, would not think of gathering together for feasting and drinking, banter and song, unless there was a special ceremony or occasion involved. . . During this time, friends will come to listen to the chanting, to gossip, the reading of ancient fables. They will flirt, sing, joke and play games. . . The ceremonies and festivals offer more than just the opportunity for merit and fun. They also serve as an acceptable channel for giving vent to suppressed feelings and carrying out activities that ordinarily are not sanctioned in the village.[379]

The recreational time and the free expression afforded during the *prapaynee*'s rituals and festivals (monthly merit-making customs) strongly appeal to the psychological needs of the Isan people. As one of the Isan's social values is *snuk* (to have fun, or to enjoy oneself-สนุก) traditional customary recreation greatly appeals to their psyche.

Even though modernization has brought many changes to the Isan region and the lives of the Isan villagers have been touched by these changes, the traditional customary value attached to *prapaynee's* customs of merit making remains relatively unchanged. The *prapaynee*'s village activities remain at the top of the list of annual celebrations where all the villagers participate. Concerning the popularity of traditional customs of merit making, Suwit Tiraawat did research from 1985 to 1986 on 294 households of Nontabang village (Northeast Thailand). His conclusion was that the villagers changed their patterns very little in the 15 year period. From 98.6 to 97.6 percent of the people surveyed still conduct continuous merit-making rituals at the Buddhist temple. Traditional customary value is placed on the regular rituals and merit-making festivals. Every member of the village is expected to participate and provide for recreational time and expressions. These festivals pose a great hindrance for the Isan people in considering conversion to Christianity.

In summary, the Isan's traditional customary values which have direct influence on their decision making for converting to another religion can be seen in five important points. First of all, the traditional customary values (or values derived from the *hiit-kong* or the *chareet prapaynee*-จารีตประเพณี) bind the Isan to their forebears and provide the foundation for their present community stability and security. It offers a way to avoid crises, and to regulate and legitimize social behaviors. *Hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* is accepted as the sum of all the will and desire of the Isan ancestors. The final authority for the Isan's present thoughts and expressions is therefore invested in the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)*. As a result, when Christianity first presented itself, it was rejected because it did not live up to or adapt to the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)*.

Second, the traditional customary values place primary importance on the continuity of the ancestral traditions. By conducting the traditional customs and ceremonies, the Isan people can stay connected to the ancestors through merit making. Because of the blessing from their ancestors and the supernatural empowerment by the *thevada (เทวดา)*, the ancestral traditions (or *chareet prapaynee*-จารีตประเพณี) provide authority and legitimacy for settling problems and disputes among villagers.

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[379]Klausner, "Ceremonies and Festivals," 2.

Third, the traditional customary values emphasize the avoidance of misfortunes and disasters. This value denotes an avoidance of misfortunate and disaster that could be caused by angry spirits (*phi-ผี*). The *phid phi (ผิดผี)* is believed primarily to be caused by a person ignoring the traditional customs of the ancestors, social rules, and values, as specified in the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)*. The consequence of the *phid phi (ผิดผี)* often affects not only the individual but a misfortune could also befall others. In order to avoid the *phid phi (ผิดผี)* and not receive unfortunate and disastrous consequences, the Isan village normally observes the worship of the spirits according to the scheduled time as specified in the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)*.

Fourth, the traditional customary values place importance on psychological stability and security. While the merit making in Buddhism provides some psychological stability and security, the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* with its rites, rituals, ceremonies, and festivals also provides stability and security for the villagers. The Isan find security in conforming to the standards of their value system. The cultural rituals and ceremonies give a sense of psychological security that a person is doing the right thing. Not only is security and stability found in the rituals themselves but in the group context in which those rituals are taking place.

Fifth, the traditional customary values allow recreation and sanctions for anti-social expressions. The Isan's *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* and its rituals and festivals provide the opportunity for recreation and serves as a sanction for anti-social expressions which would not otherwise be enjoyed. Even though modernization has brought many changes to the Isan region and the lives of the Isan villagers have been touched by these changes, the traditional customary values attached to the *prapaynee's* customs of merit making remains relatively unchanged.

Summary Conclusions

This important chapter on the Isan's worldview values is placed between the previous chapter (Chapter 2) on their five belief systems and the following chapter (Chapter 4) on the decision-making process. The rationale for this order is that there is a strong relationship between beliefs and values and that together they directly influence the decision-making process. In fact, the Isan value system, consisting primarily of their social, Buddhist religious, and traditional customary (*prapaynee*) values, is the crucial component in the decision-making process of the Isan people, and particularly in relation to conversion to Christianity.

The criterion for selecting the sixteen Isan values was whether or not they directly influenced the decision-making process. The author's purpose was to achieve the goal of the study as outlined in the Introduction by following the stated objectives. Therefore, he first investigated the broad field of Isan values and selected those which appeared to have the most influence on decision making. These sixteen values were then analyzed individually so as to make valid conclusions related to the decision-making process and be able to draw missiological implications.

An analogy might be made to illustrate that the Isan value system is like a three stranded cable composed of three streams of thought—the social values' strand with nine distinct values, the Buddhist religious values' strand with three important Buddhist values, and the customary values' strand with four traditional values. These

sixteen values making up the Isan value system together with their five belief systems which undergird them all directly influence their decision-making process.

The nine social values will first be considered as a unit, followed by the three Buddhist religious values as a second major unit, and finally the traditional customary values as a third unit. However, because of the length of this chapter and because of the many observations and findings of the author, a more detailed summary will (usually) be given in Appendix AG through AJ. These appendices contain consolidated and simplified ideas from the long narrative text and expand on the key conclusions given at the end of the chapter in order to provide a better understanding of these important concepts.

The author has drawn three major conclusions regarding the Isan's value system and its relation to their decision-making process for religious conversion to Christianity. They are discussed as follows:

1. The Isan's value system primarily consisting of the syncretistic beliefs in Buddhism, Animism, and its social constraints (group solidarity, social harmony, respect for parents, elders, and superiors, and *bunkhun* relationships). The Isan's lack of responsiveness to converting to Christianity can be explained by the lack of support from their value system. Since the value system serves as a guide for decision making, any course of action or decision contrary to, or not in compliance with the societal values, would not probably be made in that direction. The Isan's decision to convert to Christianity would be seen as a behavior or conduct not expected or allowed by their society. Therefore, any Isan who might want to convert to Christianity will continue to face tremendous religious and social challenges in the Isan region of Northeast Thailand.

2. The Isan society predominantly holds to Buddhist religious values of sacred hierarchy and inequality, merit and merit making, and status, power and wealth. The decision-making process of the Isan people will, therefore, continue to be based on a number of important factors such as the following: (1) the pattern of religious choice set by the highest person in the hierarchy (the monarchy); (2) the support given to merit-making for gaining of merit to deal with their past, present and future life; (3) the acquiring of a better social and economic status for improving their their difficult livelihood; (4) the seeking of supernatural assistance or power for overcoming their helpless state; and, (5) the acquiring of wealth for purchasing the way out of their impoverished conditions. Because of these factors and this mentality, the majority of the Isan will continue to remain Buddhists as long as those in authority or in a higher social status, and especially the Thai monarch, continue to remain as Buddhists. Another significant factor for the Isan not converting to another religion, and especially to Christianity, is the social pressure for the individual to conform to the merit-making activities of the household, the kin group, and the village community.

3. The *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* is considered the final authority for individual and group behavior as well as religious and social decision making in the household, the kin group, and village community. The Isan's traditional customary values and its *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* have the primary function of connecting the Isan back to the past and providing a foundation for community psychological stability and security. Also, these rituals and codes provide a means of dealing with crises and normalizing human behavior. Also, Christianity has been

perceived by the Isan village communities as not only an outsider's religion but also as an adversary to the Isan's *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)*. As a result those who have converted to Christianity have found themselves in an extremely uncomfortable situation and their conditions have been both insecure and unstable. Consequently, these factors have unfortunately acted as deterrents or barriers for other Isan to make positive and courageous decisions to convert to Christianity.

CHAPTER 4

THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on the process of decision making at various levels of Isan society, mainly through their leaders and authority figures but also on the individual and personal level. It will seek to answer three major questions: (1) how does the male positional leadership authority affects the Isan's decision making?; (2) how do the Isan collectively and individually make decisions?; and, (3) how does this decision-making process influence them in religious matters and especially in regard to conversion to Christianity?

The Isan's decision-making process is largely influenced by their value system which is based on the Isan's social values, Buddhist religious values, and traditional customary values. In order to understand the Isan's decision-making process for conversion to Christianity, a broad examination of the general pattern of the Isan's decision making will first be made. Then the study will narrow its focus specifically relating to the decision making for conversion to Christianity.

The study will reveal important factors that lead to either the acceptance or rejection of Christianity by the Isan, and, also to the role of the village community elders, the kin group elders, the significant others, and finally the individual self in the decision-making process. The study will also reveal the identity of the principal decision makers in the decision-making process as choices are made on whether or not to continue in one's current religion (Buddhism), to change to another religion, or to convert specifically to Christianity.

In the general decision-making process, Foster appropriately expresses the following:

> Where does authority lie in a family? In a neighborhood group or barrio? In a village? How does this authority manifest itself in decision making, and what are the processes whereby a group decides on a course of action? Is an individual permitted to take steps he feels are desirable? The way in which these questions are answered in any specific situation will have much to do with the receptivity of a group to suggested change.[380]

Regarding the villager's decision making, Phillips states the following:

> The villager feels some sense of affiliation and obligation toward his family, friendship group, neighborhood, work group, village, or nation. None of these groups has an absolute lien on him—as most of our structural statements would lead us to believe—but they exist as competing institutions toward which he is

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[380]Foster, *Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technological Changes*, 105.

constantly making different *ad hoc* decisions based upon considerations of comparative advantage.[381]

Weerayudh Wichiarajote, who identifies rural Thailand as an affiliate society, makes the following note on decision making:

Affiliate society, in this case, means society emphasizing the importance of affiliation based on spiritualism as its cause and effect. The cause is the interpersonal relationship which is employed in the problem. This affiliate path is the means with which powerful people have the right for quick decision-making.[382]

Because the social and religious values of the Isan people are based on a hierarchical structure, their decision-making process is more personalized and subjective. Wichiarajote adds, "Affiliate society has a hierarchical power system and subjective decision-making while achievement based society has an equalitarian power system and objective decision-making."[383]

The Importance of Male and Positional Leadership Authority

Although the Isan's decision-making process is largely determined and limited by their values and norms related to their social affiliations, obligations, and hierarchical social structure, the author perceives that two more critical factors must be understood in order to arrive at a complete understanding of the Isan's decision-making process. These two factors both center on the issue of authority: (1) male authority; and, (2) the positional leadership authority.

Male Authority

The first critical factor is that of male authority. When it comes to decision making, especially the decisions which affect not only one's household but also his group and the community, the male figures generally have the final decision-making authority. Any decision affecting the social harmony and solidarity of the household, the kin group, or the village community becomes the area of responsibility of the recognized male members. In describing the decision-making pattern of the Isan people in Northeast Thailand, Sparkes agrees, "Formal decision-making appears to be the domain of men."[384] Although some domestic decisions affecting members of the household are made by women (usually the wife of the household leader), the legitimacy and force of the decisions are only felt after they are confirmed by the

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[381]Herbert P. Phillips, *The Scope and Limits of the "Loose Structure" Concept*, Southeast Asia reprinted no. 225 (Berkeley: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1969), 38.

[382]Wichiarajote, Theory of Affiliative Verses Achieving Societies, 4.

[383]Ibid., 7.

[384]Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls*, 26.

recognized male household head. Sparkes further adds, "Male authority is also evident in decision-making in the domestic sphere. Women rarely function as household heads, although many influence the decisions men make."[385]

In a study of elderly Thais across the nation of Thailand, Sudavadee Kittipovanonth, of the Thai Ministry of Health in Khonkaen province, observes the following decision-making patterns among Thai elderly people: "The elderly males make more decisions on household matters than the elderly females. However, the elderly females give more advice and do more activities in the household."[386] While the recognized Isan male authority figures are vested with decision-making powers recognized by other members, the Isan female members are critical in the complete decision-making process. When the consequence of a decision affects other members of his household, kin group, or village community, the male authority figure traditionally seeks the support of all the affected constituents (members).

In some cases, the male authority figure allows members (his wife or children) under this authority to make a provisional decision in order to evaluate the effect of the decision. Provisional decisions are perceived by the Isan society as informal, unrecognized, and non-binding decisions which usually have an expiration date attached to them. If the apparent result of the provisional decision shows minimal repercussions, the male authority figure himself subsequently will follow the provisional decision with a permanent, sustainable decision. If the outcome of the provisional decision incurs negative reactions from the constituents that outweigh the benefits, the abandonment of the provisional decision is commonly chosen as the better trade-off. The author has observed the use of provisional decision-making patterns by the Isan over a decade of his ministry among the Isan people of Thailand's Northeastern provinces of Ubonratchatani, Sisaket, and Amnatcharoen.

Positional Leadership Authority

In addition to the male authority factor is the positional leadership authority which is also a critical factor in understanding the Isan's decision-making process. On the local level, the Isan society entrusts decision-making authority to the positional leadership, such as the village leaders and elders, the kin group elders, and the household heads. The household heads are assigned authority and are expected to manage the affairs of the household. Likewise, the kin group elders are given authority over the affairs of all the kinsmen within a particular kin group. The village community leaders and elders have authority over the affairs affecting the whole village community. Although the individual has the ultimate right to submit or reject the authority of the positional leaders of his community, his kin group, or his household, his negative decision will have its consequences. This means that he will have some kind of sanctions placed against him because he does not have their confirmation and support. Bowie accurately emphasizes individual identity as it relates to the group when he says, "Whoever we are, we do not exist as isolated individuals, but belong to a hierarchy of social groups. We might simultaneously be

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[385]Ibid., 79.

[386]Sudavadee Kittipovanonth, "The Status, Roles and Quality of Life of Elderly Thais" (Ph. D. diss., School of Applied Statistics, National Institute of Development Administration, 2002), 119.

members of a household, a family, a town or village, a parish, a political constituency."[387]

As members of different social groups, the Isan villagers feel their decision making is conditioned by leaders and elders (*awooso-อาๆ ใส*) of the household, kin group, or village community. As an affiliate society, the Isan village community characterizes a closed society with relative fear of the positional leaders. Wichiarajote describes it this way:

> Affiliate society has a closed communication system which means communication between people is not free in respect to idea and press. This is because of the fear of those in higher positions. . . Fear is an obstacle to ideas, communication and exchange of opinion including the decision-making of a person.[388]

While the exchange of the communication idea and the decision making itself are restricted to those in positional leadership authority, certain conduct is also expected of them. Mole notes the following:

> Leaders are likewise expected to act calmly, in a self assured manner as they exercise their authority. Moreover, as these leaders occupy a certain authority position, no one below that level may challenge the decisions made by the one holding this position.[389]

Although traditionally, decision making has been the domain or area of only the male entrusted with both authority and positional leadership authority, modernization has affected the foundation of that authority. However, the effect has been mainly felt in the urban centers while the rural village communities have experienced minimal impact. Klausner comments on this point as follows: "Despite the cash income and the increased awareness of the world of technological change beyond the village borders, the influence of the youth in both family and village decisions remains minimal."[390]

As modernization begins to permeate the village communities, kin groups, and households, the challenge to male authority and the positional leadership authority will be more evident. However, the challenge will not be strong enough to change the base of the decision-making power of the male authority and the positional leadership authority, especially because its base is supported by the social system, Buddhist religion, and the traditional customary values of the Isan society. In regard to this subject matter, Klausner expresses the following:

> Given increased pressure to more directly involve the villagers in participating in decisions affecting the development of their community . . . villages in the

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[387]Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion*, 71.

[388]Wichiarajote, Theory of Affiliative Verses Achieving Societies, 11.

[389]Mole, *Thai Values and Behavior Patterns*, 73.

[390]Kluasner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 127.

future may no doubt be more prone to challenge and protest and no longer unquestionably accept the dictates of those in positions of power.[391]

In summary, the decision-making authority and process can be stated in three key points. First of all, even though the male familial head has the authority to make all final decisions for his family, kin group, and village community, he will not make such a decision without consulting all the member constituents involved and without giving consideration to the social values, the Buddhist religious values, and the traditional customary values of his family and community. The male head often allows the people under his authority to make provisional (informal, publicly unrecognized, and non-binding) decisions which may result in a binding decision or an abandonment altogether.

Second, the Isan entrust final decision-making authority to the positional leadership authorities such as the elders and leaders of the village community, the elders of the kin group, and the heads of the household. As a result, the Isan's individual decision-making power has been conditioned and limited. Third, the Isan's value system (consisting of the social values, the Buddhist religious values, and the traditional customary values) works through all their social institutions. Then, however, they subsequently place conditions upon the individual's decision-making ability. As a result, their value system affects their decisions and produces the "conditional decision-making process." This process will then operate at five levels: the village community, the kin group, the household, the individual self, and that of significant others.

The decision-making process of the Isan is studied according to its five levels and its three approaches. The five-level decision-making process is composed of: (1) the village community; (2) the kin group; (3) the household; (4) the individual self; and, (5) the significant others. The decision-making approaches themselves are also extremely important in the entire process. The threefold approaches are as follows: (1) the deference approach; (2) the consensus approach; and, (3) the piecemeal approach.

The Five-Level Decision-Making Process: Village Community, Kin Group, Household, Individual Self, and Significant Others

As a consequence of the effect of the Isan's belief and value systems, their decision making is significantly restricted or conditional. The social values, Buddhist religious values, and the traditional customary values operate through the social institutions such as the village community, the kin group, and the household to restrict or condition individual decision making. Because of the resulting effects on the Isan's belief systems and their value system, the author will call their decision the "conditional decision-making process." The conditional decision making occurs at five different levels: (1) at the village community decision-making level; (2) at the kin group decision-making level; (3) at the household decision-making level; (4) at the individual decision-making level; and, (5) at the decision-making level by significant others.

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[391]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 14.

Any matters affecting the general interest and welfare of the village community should be put forward for a village community decision. This would include anything touching on the health, happiness, security, prosperity, and social harmony and solidarity of the village community. Any problems or conflicting issues between two members of the village which can not be resolved at the household or kin group level will then be considered for village community decision. The use of any common property, land, facility, or resource also comes under the village community decision-making action. Regarding these matters, Rakwijit asserts:

> Village tradition demands that major decisions affecting the general well-being of the community must be made in the open—particularly at the village meeting—in which all the parties involved must be represented.[392]

The concept of community was believed to have been given by the Isan forbearers from the ancient past and still practiced by present-day Isan. According to the Cultural Director of Khonkaen province, Pranuan Phimsaen, the Isan have the notion that they come from a common couple, Pu Sangkasa and Ya Sangkasee, who were the first man and woman. Since every Isan in Northeast Thailand and every Lao in present-day Laos came from these common ancestors, they should watch and help each other because they are kin. In committing small offenses, the Isan normally would fine each other. If the offense is on a large scale, the Isan community would expel the wrongdoer from the village and would not allow him or her to participate in the village activities.[393]

Not only is the concept of community significant for understanding the Isan village community decision making, it is also important to understand the role of the village community as the keeper of ancestral traditions, which are expressed in the form of religious activities in the *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*. Any interruptions or changes to the performance of the traditional customary village activities which are crucial for the sustenance of the village community are to be brought forward for village community decision making. Klausner expresses the following:

> Ceremonies [*traditional customary*], such as *bun bungfai (บุญบั้งไฟ)*, were deemed absolutely essential to village survival and well-being. If the *bungfai (บั้งไฟ)* ceremony was to be postponed for any reason, the decisions affecting the village were discussed at village meetings.[394]

With respect to the religious affairs of the village community and their effect on the social harmony of the villagers, the village community decision-making body often discusses among themselves issues relating to religious matters affecting the lives of its people. The subject of conversion or change to another religion is considered a

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[392]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 182.

[393]Pramuan Pimsaen, "*Kwanchua*," in *kongdee Isan* (Isan Treasures-ของดี อีสาน) (in Thai) (Khon Kaen, Thailand: Khon Kaen Cultural Council and Khon Kaen Provincial Education, unkown), 53.

[394]Klausner, "In Remembrance of Things Past," 5.

community matter since it affects the social harmony, survival and well-being of the village community. Also, the change to another religion, particularly Christianity, is perceived as a rejection of the essential elements of the Isan's *chareet prapaynee (จารีต ประเพณี)* which consists primarily of Animism and Buddhism. The conversion to Christianity by any member of the village community is felt as a threat to village community integration and solidarity. As a result, the issue is often discussed at the village community decision-making body.

        However, under the current national constitution, Thailand guarantees religious freedom to its people. Although at the village community level, the sentiment is to protect the Isan's *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* and its accompanying practices, no legal or public actions can be taken against any conversion to another religion. Any such action would be considered unconstitutional and a violation of the statuary law.

The Foundation of the Decision-Making Authority for the Village Community Elders and Village Chief

        The village elders and the village chief, the two highest levels of authority in the village, lead the village community in the decision-making process. Prior to the organization of government in the Isan region, the government structure of villages recognized the village elders as the highest decision-making authority in the village community. When the central government began to have more of a governing role in Isan village communities, the role of the village chief became necessary. Both the village elders and the village chiefs are recognized and respected as the village community leaders.

        The village chiefs play a more official governmental role while the elders play more of the *prapaynee*'s role. The village community leaders, such as the elders and the chiefs, are respected because they are believed to belong to the line of *phi tan (ผีแถน)* and to have earned sufficient merit. By *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* they are connected to the ruling line of *phi tan (ผีแถน)* which gives them the right to rule, and by Buddhism, they are linked to the storehouse of merit which gives them the power to rule over the people. Regarding this argument, Chaivinit writes the following:

> The Isan society views the community leaders to belong to the line of the *tan (แถน)* spirit whom the Isan believe created the world. From the influence of Buddhism, the Isan society perceives the community leaders to possess significant amount of merit. The right to govern derives from his lineage from the *tan (แถน)* spirit and his power to govern from his merit. His position and influence as a community leader should be respected and obeyed (trans. from the Thai by the author). [395]

By relying on the way of the ancestors (or through *prapaynee-ประเพณี*), the Isan village communities and its members are finding security and comfort with the way in which village community decision-making processes are taking place. Chaivinit further states the following:

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[395]Chaivinit, "*Sasana chow ban,*" 294.

The model of the Isan local government and leadership goes back to the toad king whom the Isan believe to have ruled with prosperity and peace in the Isan region in the ancient past. Besides the meritorious action (บุญบารมี) of the community leaders that justifies and endows him with the power to govern the villagers, it is also believed to produce a prosperous and peaceful community absent from any misfortune or calamity. Since one of the key values of the Isan is the avoidance of misfortune or calamity, most of their life decisions are made with consultation and support of the community leaders (trans. from the Thai by the author).[396]

Somjitsripunya notes that, "The elders and village chiefs have continually observed some of the ancient [*boran-*โบราณ] laws until they have become traditional customs [*prapaynee-*ประเพณี]" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[397] The traditional customs which the present Isan villages are observing, namely the execution of fines, asking for forgiveness (*karkama-*ขอขมา), and village punishments, were formerly Isan laws before the execution of current statuary laws. Since the village community elders and village chiefs, along with the religious leaders (abbots), are given the right and power for decision making for the village community as a whole, very little or almost no space is given to the small minority of Christians in the communities to have any say or voice in the village community decision-making process.

The Power of the Village Community Elders and Village Chiefs in Village Community Decision-Making

According to the ancient Isan laws, the authority to judge a case was given to the elders of the village community. Even at the present time, most of the conflicts are solved by the elders of the village. The majority of the Isan villagers believe that most of the conflicts or disputes will be resolved more by the village elders than the court.[398] Somjitsripunya furthermore elaborates on this thought:

The Isan villagers expect the village elders to possess morals or moral standards, have experience in governing people, and sustain the Isan traditional customs (*chareet prapaynee-*จารีตประเพณี) from the ancient past. The elders are sought for advice on village activities and settling disputes in the village. When the villagers have important decision-making matters, they consult the village elders before making decisions.[399]

As the village community elders' roles are crucial to the decision-making process of the village community, even more important than the village chiefs, the act of consultation with the elders indicates a submission to their authority. The support from the elders shows their blessing. The consultation and support from the elders

[396]Ibid.

[397]Somjitsripunya, "*Lokkatat chow ban*," 268.

[398]Ibid., 233.

[399]Somjitsripunya, "*Lokkatat chow ban*," 268.

legitimize the decision. Seeking and receiving support from the village chief would mean an official approval.

In most cases, the village community will seek support and blessing from the religious leaders, namely the abbot, to provide the religious ground for village community actions so that merit would result for the participants. As a result, a large majority of the village community problems or conflicts are taken to the village elders by the household heads or by the village chief. The village community decisions are made by the council of elders (or village council) along with the village chief to bring resolution to the situation. Bailey describes similar decision-making patterns among the Lao villages in Laos:

> Lao villages are organized around the headman and the elders of the village. The elders are married men of varying ages, with children who live in the village. The headman makes decisions after discussion with other key village leaders and elders.[400]

Issues which could not be resolved informally by the elders and chief are brought to the village meeting for community decision. The village chief is responsible to call the meeting of the village with the village council, consisting of elders, and the representatives of different households, kin groups, or factions present.

The Process of the Village Community Decision-Making

The village community elders sit in the village council in order to make an official decision for the village. Rakwijit noted, "Village tradition makes the village meeting and the office of village headman—both dominated by village leaders—the highest decision-making bodies in the village."[401] Therefore, "most decisions concerning community affairs are made in village meetings."[402] Klausner also observes that the "decisions affecting the village over which villagers had control were discussed at village meetings and a consensus was reached."[403]

While informally many of the decisions are made by the village elders and the village chief, the village meetings usually are called so that formal (official) decisions can be reached. It is expected that all representatives of kin groups or factions will be represented in the village meeting for official village community decision making to occur. Keyes states the following:

> Most village decisions are made through a process of consulting representatives of all the constituent kin groups (a household—a nuclear family living independently or two or more families living under one family head) in the village. On some occasions, the headman may call village meetings which such

[400]Bailey, "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness," 188.

[401]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 182.

[402]Ibid., 80.

[403]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 151.

representatives attend. On other occasions, he will solicit opinions informally from among representatives.[404]

The goal of the village meeting is to respond to the interest of the group, not necessarily to address the need of the individual. The need of the community is upheld and the community solidarity is sought. Describing the Baan Noong Tyyn village of Northeast Thailand, Keyes articulates the following:

> The important bywords of decision-making are not leadership and authority but consensus and compromise. It is not the interests of individuals which must be taken into account in the process of arriving at some community decision. Rather, each of the 99 constituent kin groups in the village presents a common front to the outside world, although differences do exist between these groups and may need to be mediated.[405]

Since the village meetings (or 'town council' as called by Keyes) are basically attended by the male heads of households, kin groups, or factions, the village meetings officially recognize issues only brought up at the village meetings. Issues related to the minority groups or interests are usually left out or unrepresented in the village meeting. Keyes noted that in the "decision-making sessions of the 'town meeting' of the village, which only men may attend, it is not uncommon for such households to be unrepresented."[406] Activities or projects related to the *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*, Buddhism, and Animism commonly occupy the central stage of the meetings of the Isan villages. Keyes additionally noticed that the "school teachers (*khru-ครู*), especially the headmaster (*khruyai-ครูใหญ่*), and the monks also participate in some types of village decisions which affect their immediate concerns."[407]

After the village community has made a decision in the village meeting, the individual members of the village are expected to conform to the decision. Anyone that does not comply with the decision reached at the village meeting will be viewed as failing to observe the ancestral traditions, or *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*, which legitimize the decision-making right of the village elders in its village meeting. As a result, the person not in compliance with the ruling of the village meeting will be treated as an outsider and will not come under the protection of the village leadership. They will likely be subject to some form of sanction by the villagers. Therefore, either out of the fear of the consequence of noncompliance or out of the perception that the village elders and chief possess good intention for the villagers, the people still believe that adherence to the decision of the community is the better option. Rakwijit states:

> Village tradition makes most villagers believe that it is a good thing to comply with the decisions or wishes of their community. Hence, the people entrusted to

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[404]Keyes, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 27.

[405]Ibid., 10.

[406]Keyes, "Kin Groups," 290.

[407]Keyes, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 9.

perform community function have a strong moral force for persuading or compelling villagers to obey.[408]

A large percentage of the Isan villagers surveyed in the province of Nakon Pranom of Northeast Thailand indicated an aptness to obey the village leaders, whether it is the village community elders or the village chief. This finding shows that over 90 percent of villagers are disposed to follow the suggestions or guidance of their leaders, and as many as 70 percent of them would submit to the demand of certain leaders against their own free will.[409]

An example of the villagers taking the verdict of the village elders seriously is the case of a water buffalo ruining the young rice plants of a farmer in Roi Et province. Between September 1998 and April 1999, Miss Parpatson Srikompliw conducted graduate research in rural development in Non Sang village, Singkok sub-district, Kaset Wisai district, Roi Et province in Northeast Thailand. She reported an incident where a water buffalo from a neighboring village had destroyed rice seedlings belonged to one of the families in Non Sang village. The village council, consisting of the village community elders, had the responsibility to settle the dispute. After the elders made the decision concerning the matter, every villager had to accept the decision.[410] Somjitsripunya confirms, "In the case of destroying someone's property, the elders can make a decision to have the wrongdoer compensate the offended person and also pay a fine" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[411]

When it comes to carrying out the religious rituals, ceremonies, or merit-making activities of the village, every villager is required to participate. Each of them is assigned a certain responsibility for the event. The decision for each person's participation is often made by the council of elders or the event committee, consisting of the elders. Sounthonpesat asserts:

> The different religious activities, such as the festivals, ceremonies, or rituals in the village, normally require the labor and funds from the village's households. Each household's participation in the village's religious activities [*usually involving Buddhism and spirit worship*] is normally expected of each household. The village meeting normally assigns each household with a different responsibility. The decision for what each household is to participate in is made by the village head or event committee (trans. from the Thai by the author).[412]

Modernization and Its Effect on Village Community Decision Making

The changes from modernization greatly affect Thailand as a whole. Traditional values as well as social and Buddhist religious values have experienced

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[408]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 182.

[409]Ibid., 97.

[410]Srikompliw, "The Relationship Between Relatives and the Development," 32.

[411]Somjitsripunya, "*Lokkatat chow ban*," 14

[412]Sounthonpesat, "Krongsrang Sungkom Mooban," 76.

the impact of modernization like any other crossroad country in the world. The changes mainly have impacted urban centers like Bangkok and Chiangmai. As far as the provincial capitals of Northeast Thailand are concerned, the impact is also felt but to a minimal degree. However, in the Isan villages, the impact of modernization only touches economic and technological areas while the religious and traditional thought and way of life, particularly in regard to *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*, remain unaffected by the changes.

According to research findings conducted in 1987 by Somjitsripunya in Nong Lom Village, Mahasarakham province in Northeast Thailand, eighty-four villagers out of one hundred agreed that the governing of the village should be done according to the traditional customs (*prapaynee-ประเพณี*). In other words, decisions should be made according to tradition, which means decisions are made by the elders.[413] Also, the findings indicate that the majority of the villagers agree to have the eldership rule at the village (community) level because their words and teaching are beneficial for the villagers, most of whom are related by blood or marriage.[414]

The findings further indicate that eighty-four percent of the forty-nine villagers surveyed in 1987 will consult the village elders prior to every decision and will fully follow the elders' instructions because the elders were perceived to be entrusted with the decision-making power to govern and to solve conflicts.[415] A similar pattern was found in the research done by Theerasasawat and Srisontisuk in Nontabang village from 1985 to 1986 in Northeast Thailand. They reported the following: "Even though many things might have changed in the village social structure, the belief and traditional custom of respecting and obeying the elders in the village remains firm" (trans. from the Thai by the author).[416]

Kin Group Decision Making

Conditional decision making does not only affect the village community level but also the kin group level. While village community elders are significant and active in the functions of the village communities, the kin group elders, also called the heads of kin groups, are also important to the decision-making process within the kin group constituents. In the Old Testament, the group of Israelites that followed Moses from Egypt to the Promised Land was considered a community of God's chosen people. At Mount Sinai, Moses was instructed by the Lord to take a census of the people of Israel by clans (kin groups) and families (households).[417] One leader or head (elder) from each of the 12 clans or kin groups was chosen to assist Moses and Aaron in the census undertaking. They were the male leaders, the elders, within each of the clans or kin group, chosen from their community for the work of the census. Individually, the elders ruled their own clan or kin group; and collectively, they were

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[413]Somjitsripunya, "*Lokkatat chow ban*," 237.

[414]Somjitsripunya, "*Lokkatat chow ban*," 231.

[415]Ibid., 234.

[416]Theerasasawat and Srisontisuk, "The Economic, Political, Social and Cultural Changes in Esan Villages," 239.

[417]Numers 1:1-16.

a community of Israelite elders who ruled along with Moses and his assistant Aaron. The elders functioned with a community, a chief and a deputy chief.

In each of the Isan kin groups, there is an elder who commands more respect than the others; but together, the elders within a kin group provide leadership for the households and their members living under the protection of that kin group. Although there is some individual freedom within the kin group, the individuals generally respect and consult their kin group elders prior to any major decision. One of the most powerful and respected Isan kin group elders is the *chao kote* (เจ้าโคตร), which means 'clan leader.' Klausner describes him as one who is "chosen as the most respected elder within the kin group whose wisdom is recognized by all."[418] Klausner adds the following:

> This respected and revered elder, possessing 'good character' and practicing 'proper behavior' as an ideal villager, will act as advisor and arbiter in matters concerning blood relations. The appointment of *chao kote* (เจ้าโคตร) is an informal one and remaining in his position depends on how satisfactorily he is able to mediate and solve family problems and crises. The *chao kote* (เจ้าโคตร) may be called upon to settle disputes not only within kin groups but between such groups. Because of their respected position, their decisions are generally accepted. The *chao kote* (เจ้าโคตร) are invited to arbitrate such matters as marriage, divorce and separation, offenses against sexual taboos, quarrels between relatives involving petty theft, property rights etc. The *chao kote* (เจ้าโคตร) also acts as mediator in communication with the kin group's ancestral spirit who may be offended by bickering and social confrontation among kinsmen.[419]

The power of the *chao kote* (เจ้าโคตร) is to be feared, and his decision on behalf of the households or individuals within the kin group is to be respected. Some of the Isan villagers commented that the power of life and death is invested in the *chao kote* (เจ้าโคตร) because he is the appointed elder to deal with the ancestral spirits who either bless or bring calamity upon the kin group and households or individuals within the kin group.

Along with the *chao kote* (เจ้าโคตร) are *yatpuyai* (general designation for kin group elders-ญาตผู้ใหญ่) who are conferred with decision-making power. The *yatpuyai* (ญาตผู้ใหญ่), or kin group elders, of an Isan villager generally consist of his father and mother's brothers, paternal and maternal grandfathers, and grandfather and grandmother's brothers. A person's *yatpuyai* (ญาตผู้ใหญ่) will be consulted before making a major life decision. Any decision made without consulting the kin group elders is considered *barhoochakkwan* (an Isan word which means 'lacking in mores'-บ่อฮู้จักความ). As a result, he will be treated with disrespect, and other villagers will be informed to disassociate from a person who is branded as *barhoochakkwam* (บ่อฮู้จัก ความ). A repeated behavior of *barhoochakkwam* (บ่อฮู้จักความ) will eventually result in a sanction from the kin group.

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[418]Klausner, *Reflections on Thai Culture*, 82.

[419]Ibid.

Therefore, anyone making any decision affecting the perception of the kin group to which he belongs must consult and receive support from the *yatpuyai (ญาติ ผู้ใหญ่)* to avoid any stigma upon his character and probable sanction against him and his family. Generally, the Isan villager will defer decision making to the *yatpuyai (ญาติ ผู้ใหญ่)* so that he will not have to live with the disgrace. A 76-year-old Isan elderly woman, Udon Lowsing, responded to a question concerning what is involved in making the decision to convert to Christianity if she sees that Christianity is a favorable religion:

> If we are going to change religion to Christianity, we have to discuss with every one of the elders of our kin group. Whatever decision we decide to make, we can not make it individually. All decisions must be made collectively with the support of the whole village (trans. from the Thai by the author).[420]

An Isan male Nasa-at villager, Sommai Yawaroon, responded to questions of decision making to convert to Christianity by saying the following:

> If I decide to change my religion to Christianity, my kin group elders will raise objections to my decision. They will speak out, 'Why don't you follow the way of the community? Do you want to be left out? If you want to live in the community and be under its protection, you will have to follow what the community does. You can not just live life by yourself' (trans. from the Thai by the author).[421]

In regard to the decision making to convert to Christianity, an overwhelming majority of the Isan rely heavily upon the permission or consensus of their kin group elders in order to make a conversion decision. Because of this sentimental overtone, an individual decision for conversion without the support of the kin group elders will probably not occur. If it does, it has a meager chance for survival unless the new Christian community with which the convert identifies can provide the protection and support to disconnect the convert from the kin group elders and other objecting members of his kin group.

To be severed from the relationship with one's kinsmen is unthinkable for any Isan villager. A person's basic survival in the Isan region depends on his interpersonal relationships with his kinsmen and household members. A person without *yatphinong* (relatives or kinsmen--ญาติพี่น้อง) has the same status as an orphan or a social outcast. When a person converts to Christianity, especially one from a non-Christian family, he is rejected by his *yatphinong (ญาติพี่น้อง)*. The unconverted kinsmen will repeatedly attempt to persuade the converted kinsman to revert back to his old religion or at least to synonymously practice both the former and the new religion in order to still gain the acceptance of the kinsmen. If the converted individual continues to ignore the kinsmen's calling to lapse back to his former religion, his *yatphinong (ญาติพี่น้อง)* will probably sever relationships with him, but some of his

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[420]Udon Lowsing, Songkorn villager, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 21 August 2006.

[421]Sommai Yawaroon, village elder of Nasa-at village, Khemarat district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 18 August 2006.

unconverted household members will probably maintain the relationship with him on a limited basis. Much of the decision-making power is held in the hands of Isan households and kinship systems. Bailey expresses the Lao situation, which has a resemblance to the Isan of Northeast Thailand, thus: "The power of the group in the village finds its center in the household and in the extended kinship relations between households. There are also fewer and weaker alliances, and consequently, fewer power peaks in the village."[422]

Although the *prapaynee*'s traditional decision-making process of seeking approval from the kin group elders has been affected by modernization across Thailand, the impact on the Isan culture remains minimal. The main reason for the nominal impact can be attributed to the fact that the Isan culture is largely based on the observances of their ancestral traditions. From their research, Theerasasawat and Srisontisuk reveal the following:

> The survey of the 294 households in Bontabang village indicates that fifteen years ago the respect and obedience to the elders in the community or kin group has changed slightly from 99 percent to 98.3 percent. Additionally, the finding indicated that 96.9 of the 294 households still seek counsel with the elders of the community or their kin groups for different matters or decisions. There is a slight change from 15 years before which was 97.3 percent.[423]

With the decision-making power largely vested or deferred to kin group elders, who are strongly considered to be caretakers of the *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* and Buddhist practices, it is probable that the conversion to Christianity will be extensively restricted and kept under control by the kin group elders.

Household Decision Making

Apart from the village community decision making and the kin group decision making, there is also the household decision making which additionally conditions individual decisions for conversion to Christianity. The household (family) plays an extremely important part of a person's life. The Isan villager's immediate security and protection are found in his household and with other close kinsmen. Tambiah elaborates on this point:

> Individual afflictions, life crises, and rites of passage are first and foremost the concern of the patients' and celebrants' family and household, then of the surrounding circle of close kin and finally of distant kin and neighbors and friends.[424]

The households not only provide a secure and stable home for the individuals, but they additionally provide peace and harmony for the village community. As an agent preserving the peace and harmony within the village, the

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[422]Theerasasawat and Srisontisuk, "The Economic, Political, Social and Cultural Changes in Esan Villages, 272.

[423]Ibid., 258

[424]Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults*, 15.

households provide ideal systems for behavior control, problem solving, or conflict resolution. Sounthonpesat supports this interpretation:

> The households have an important part in keeping the peace and harmony in the village. For instance, when there is a theft or conflict in the village and it is discovered that the theft or conflict involved a particular household, the village head will give a warning to the head of that household so that the problem will be resolved. If the warning does not prevail, the matter will then be presented at the meeting of the village (trans. from the Thai by the author).[425]

When it comes to decision making, the village communities and the kin groups look to the households to exercise leadership to help the individual members make decisions that are in conformity to the social, religious and traditional customary (*prapaynee-*ประเพณี) values. The individuals have very little power to make their own decisions as a result of this conditioning by each of their households. The household is recognized as the smallest unit traditionally endowed with the rights and privileges of the *prapaynee (*ประเพณี*)* to make decisions. Foster argues:

> Individual decision-making is such a part of American culture that it is hard to realize that this is not a world-wide cultural pattern….In many other societies, however, the locus of authority and traditional decision-making processes are manifest in family structure and are quite different.[426]

In addition to the belief that the power of individual decision making is vested in the household, there is the thought that the male household head holds the decision-making authority in the household. Sparkes articulates, "Male authority is also evident in decision making in the domestic sphere. Women rarely function as household heads, although many influence the decisions men make."[427] Keyes and Thani add: "While men exercise nominal authority with the family unit, most important decisions are shared by husbands and wives. Outside the family, however, men tend to dominate."[428] Similar to the household decision-making process of the Isan of the Northeast is the Lao of present-day Laos. Bailey comments:

> A Lao woman or child does not normally make an important decision without consulting the head of the household. Normally, his decision is obeyed. At the same time, a father or husband does not normally make a decision that will cause his children or wife to lose heart.[429]

As the male decision-making authority figure, the father or father-in-law usually is recognized as the head of the Isan household and every member of that

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[425]Sounthonpesat, "*Punha pak tawun auk chiang nua*, 75.

[426]Foster, *Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technological Change*, 106.

[427]Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls*, 79.

[428]Keyes and Thandee, *Social Soundness Analysis*, 16.

[429]Bailey, "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness," 183.

household, including the son-in-law and his wife, is under his authority. Sounthonpesat describes such a household:

> The male marries and moves to become part of the wife's parental household and the female marries and stays in her parents' household, either in the same house or in the compound of her parents, having obligations and responsibilities as a part of her parent's household and their authority (trans. from the Thai by the author).[430]

Serving as the head of the household, the Isan male has responsibility not only to members of his household, but also to his kin group and the village community. When there is a village meeting to receive news or policies from the government or to solicit cooperation from the villagers, the village chief normally calls a meeting of the heads of the households. The heads of each household would then relay a message or an order to his household.[431] Since the head of the household has seniority and authority over all the household members related by blood or marriage, the problem or conflict normally is resolved.[432]

The individual's first loyalty is to his household under the father or father-in-law as its head. When it comes to making decisions affecting the well-being of the household, it is expected that the household at least be informed in the individual decision-making process every step of the way, primarily because the household head will have to be accountable to the kin group and village community for any behavior or decisions by any of the members of his household. John Henderson explains:

> The basic loyalty of the individual is to the family group forming his household, but the strength of kinship bonds outside the household depends largely on the accidents of proximity and personal preference. Among the people generally, kinsmen may maintain warm personal relationships with one another throughout their lives, but only the nearest relatives have binding claims, and the ties between friends and neighbors are often as close as those between all but immediate kinsmen.[433]

Theoretically, the Isan villager can ultimately choose to make individual decisions without the approval from or consultation with his household, kin group, or village community. Nevertheless, if he makes an adverse decision, he will face his own battle alone, sanctioned by members of his household and kinsmen. However, because of his loyalty to his household head, kin group elders, and village community leader and elders, almost every Isan villager will seek approval. Without their support, he will most likely not make any decision alone.

A 52-year-old female, Lit Muntalalck of Laitat village in Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani, responded to an interview question concerning who would be

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[430]Sounthonpesat, "*Punha pak tawun auk chiang nua*, 70.

[431]Ibid., 75.

[432]Ibid.

[433]Smith et al., "Social Values," 220.

the most important people to influence her decision to convert to another religion, in particular to Christianity. Lit replied:

> When it comes to changing my present religion to another religion, I will first of all have to consult my kin group elders for their support. Secondly, my husband who is the head of my household would have to make the decision concerning what religion we should hold. I will respect my husband because he is the principal leader of my household. Whatever religion he holds, I will hold that religion (trans. from the Thai by the author).[434]

A similar answer was given by a 65-year Isan woman, Urai Phetpan of Nonthan village in Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani. When she was asked about changing to another religion, she responded that the head of her household has the most influence over her decision-making process. Urai explains:

> The head of my household has the most influence over my decision to change to another religion. However, I will not make a decision to change to another religion, even if that religion is good, because the head of my household gave me Buddhism and I stay according to the religion of my parents (trans. from the Thai by the author).[435]

Another 51-year-old, Priyoon Tongsaen, a Songkorn villager, Phosai district, emphatically shared that changing religion to Christianity is a household affair which can not be decided alone. She explains her reasons as follows:

> My husband is the head of our household, and he should be the one deciding and leading us. As the head of our household, I must seek for his approval before deciding anything. If I am going to change to Christianity, I will need to give him the reason for any change. In addition, our whole household needs to be involved in the decision-making process. Our children are also important in the decision-making process. Even if my husband agrees to convert to Christianity, I still need to talk to our children to gain their support. If our children disagree for me to change religion, I will need to know the reason. Consulting with and gaining support from our children does not mean that they are our household's decision makers but because we want to act as a family unit. However, the final decision should come from my husband who acts as the head of our household. I will follow my husband's decision all the way. If he wants our household to become Christians, I will follow his desire; but, if he does not, I will also respect his decision (trans. from the Thai by the author).[436]

At the foundation of every decision is the household. While the decisions by the head of the household are upheld, the decision by the individual members of

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[434]Lit Muntalalack, Laitat villager, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 18 August 2006.

[435]Urai Phetpan, Nonthan villager, Nathan minior-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 15 August 2006.

[436]Priyoon Tongsaen, Songkorn villager, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 21 August 2006.

the household may not be honored until they are confirmed by the head of the household. Rakwijit similarly observes:

> At the substratum of the decision-making process is the system of extended families. 'Acceptable' or 'just' solutions to solve villagers' problems are normally those solutions which would permit reduction or neutralization of serious tensions at the level of the family or the extended family.[437]

Therefore, because so much emphasis is placed on the importance of the household as the locus for decision making, any member of the household who behaves in a devaluing way or brings a negative image to his household's status in the village community is sinful. Rakwijit further notes, "The Isan perceive an 'evil' man as one 'who lacks respect for the village tradition and customs and/or threatens the general security and well-being of the people of his own household.'"[438] As a result of this concept of 'evil,' the household system presents obvious obstacles to any openness to religious change because any religious change from the *prapaynee*'s traditional customs and Buddhism to another form of religion will certainly face tremendous sanctions.

The reliance on one's household for decision making is common among other people groups of Southeast Asian countries. Delbert Rice, Director of Evangelism for the Kalahan Mission, United Church of Christ in the Philippines, where he had served for 13 years among the Ilocano people in the Philippines, found that the Ilocano people had informal discussions with a small group before any decision was made.[439] Concerning the Ilocano's decision-making process, Rice further observes:

> Every decision influences a family unity (this is usually the extended family, not the nuclear family). The family as a unit takes part in the making of most of all decisions. No individual can take the entire responsibility for a decision upon himself; rather, he must include the other members of the family. This accounts, in large measure, for the custom, frustrating to Westerners and especially medical doctors, of calling home all of the family members whenever an individual becomes sick. The family members can not help medically, but together they make the decision concerning which physician to employ, etc., so that no one person needs to bear the responsibility. The family may not call a special meeting, but the discussion may take place during the regular times that the family is together; it is generally the family that makes the decision, nevertheless….no decision can be announced until the consensus is reached.[440]

The role that the household system has played in the decision-making process of its members has changed very little in the face of modernization. In the

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[437]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 95.

[438]Ibid., 73.

[439]Delbert Rice, "Evangelism and Decision-Making Process," in *Readings in Missionary Anthropology*, ed. William A. Smalley (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1978), 531.

[440]Ibid., 352.

village of Bontabang in Northeast Thailand, modernization has not affected the relationships within the household. Research conducted from 1985 to 1986 by Theeradsaawat and Somsak Srisontisuk, Isan sociologists from Khonkaen University, indicates that the changes in household relationships in the village of Bontabang, Northeast Thailand, from the impact of modernization in the past 25 years, have been very minimal. In addition, the research findings show that the relationships between members in the kinship system have also experienced very minimal changes.[441]

Individual Decision Making

The individual Isan villager depends largely on the council, support, and, approval of the village chief and the elders of his village community, his kin group elders, the head of his household, and significant others. His significant decisions are therefore conditioned by these constituents. Without their consent and support, he likely will not make any significant decisions. The Wright Distinguished Research Professor in the Merrick School of Business, Baltimore University, Hossein Arsha, who teaches decision science, states:

> Organizations use decision-making processes that vary from elaborate designs with numerous decision points to relatively simple procedures. In each case, the process relies on a mix of the three types of decision making inherent in human thinking: individual decision making based upon self interest, group decision making based upon consensus, and authoritative decision making based upon values, rules and hierarchies. The organizations that succeed during both good times and bad times are those that maintain an effective balance between these three ways of choosing a course of action.[442]

Although any of the three types of decision making are available options for the Isan villager, when it comes to a decision to convert to Christianity, the Isan villager tends to cling to group and authoritative decision making. Even in group decision making, the individual Isan villager's right to participate in group decision making is not attained until he has met certain qualifications: be an owner of a rice paddy, be a household head, and be a male. Keyes describes the right to group decision making:

> The right to participate in the making of decisions affecting the whole village is determined by one's status in a domestic group. If one is to play an active role in village affairs one should be male, own some paddy fields, and be the head of an independent domestic group.[443]

The individual freedom to make a decision among the Lao in present-day Laos is described by Bailey:

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[441]Theerasasawat and Srisontisuk, "The Economic, Political, Social and Cultural Changes in Esan Villages," 239.

[442]Hossein Arsham, *Overcoming Serious Indecisivness*. 25 February 1994, 25 October 2006 <http://home.ubalt.edu/ntsbarsh/opre640/partXIII.htm>.

[443]Keyes, "Kin Groups," 290.

While acknowledging the unique individualism of Lao society, I have attempted to show that the dominant issue among the Lao (especially in the village) is the interdependence of the social group. Individuals have freedom to choose their own paths as long as they act in ways that benefit the well-being of the group. The influence of the group is strongest at the level of the household, where maternal kinship ties and obligation are strongest.[444]

The Isan villager is not alone, but, rather, he is described as one who has a "moral claim on his friends and a large number of relatives to help or protect him."[445] As others, such as his household members, kinsmen, and patron, have their claim and lien on him, it is rare that he would feel that he can carry on individual decision making without the support from these individuals. A common response from the Isan villagers about changing to another religion would be something like the reply from a 76-year-old village elder, Sing Tamkom of the Songkorn village in Phosai district, Ubonratchatani, who answered:

> If I change to another religion, I would have to first and foremost have the village community leader and elders and also my kin group's elder's participation in my decision-making process. I do not think that they will support my change of religion because the elders will express opposition and ask why I want to change from Buddhism to Christianity. When I become sick in the future or my life falls into a misfortunate situation, they will attribute it to my conversion to Christianity and say that I have forsaken *puraksa* [*personal protector—God, gods, spirits, or powerful beings*-ผู้รักษา]. I will stay as I am, a Buddhist (trans. from the Thai by the author).[446]

As a result, the individual decision-making power of the Isan is relatively conditioned and restricted to a great extent, and it is probable that conversions to Christianity will continue to be minimal. The conditions and restrictions on individual decision making are based on the Isan's value system which is expressed through the village community, kin group and household systems.

Decision Making By Significant Others

The last form of the decision-making process is that of decision making by significant others. Since the Isan village communities rely heavily on the *bunkhun* (บุญ คุณ) relationships, the superior-inferior relationships, or the patron-client relationships, the individual villagers tend to defer their decision making to significant others. The significant others could include any person who is obliged to the person to the extent that the person's decision-making process is conditioned or restricted by his obligations within the relationship. Decision making by significant others is well illustrated by the story of a 50-year-old Isan woman, Napawong Chaiyaocha.

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[444]Bailey, "Communication Strategies for Christian Witness," 373.

[445]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 183.

[446]Sing Tambom, village elder of Songkorn village, Phosai district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 21 August 2006.

Napawong had been divorced from her husband. After the divorce, she went to live with her children and her older brother. She is now living as a client under her children who act as her patrons. Her brother, too, is functioning as her patron. When asked about possible conversion to Christianity, she expressed her view as follows:

> If I am going to change to the Christian religion, my children would have the first priority over my decision making. Second to that would be my older brother because I am living with them and depending on them for my life support. I can not change to another religion without them deciding for me. Regarding the village community elder and kin group, the matter is less important. If my children and brother do not agree to let me be a Christian, I will not make the decision to change to Christianity (trans. from the Thai by the author).[447]

Another case where significant others became the decision maker is exemplified in the life of an Isan Christian woman, Sorn Khammongkon, who had converted to Christianity and now is no longer a practicing Christian. About three years ago, Sorn's older sister, who is a devoted Christian, went from the United States to meet with the author in Northeast Thailand. The older sister discussed with the author about her younger sister (Sorn) who is not a Christian and expressed the desire for her younger sister and her sister's husband to become Christians. She mentioned to the author that she has regularly supported Sorn's family financially and had bought her a pickup truck so that Sorn could use it to start a business.

One day before leaving for the United States, Sorn's sister brought Sorn and her family to the author's church and also asked the author to give special attention and care to Sorn and her family. Although Sorn was indifferent toward Christianity, because of the *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) that she owed her Christian sister for her sister's benevolent acts, Sorn decided to convert to Christianity. Initially, Sorn was faithful in attending the church but she eventually dropped her Christian faith altogether. When she was asked by the author's church leaders concerning her decision to convert to Christianity, she responded that her decision making for converting to Christianity was made by her sister and that she was just following her sister's decision because of *krengchai* (เกรงใจ). As a consequence, her decision to convert to Christianity was not continuing.

The social values of *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) or client-patron relationships and *krengchai* (เกรงใจ) are crucial factors in the Isan's decision making to convert or not to convert to Christianity. The social values therefore can be an important contributor to bring some to Christian conversion but it also can be a great inhibitor.

In summary, the author finds six significant points with regard to the five-levels of decision-making process. First of all, the village elders and the village chiefs are the primary recognized and respected village community leaders who have the authority to make community decisions. Their right and power to govern is directly related to their merit and their inherited role in the bloodline of the *phi tan* (ผีแถน) as well as their position of leading the Isan to follow in the way of the ancestors and observe the Buddhist faith and the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี). As a result, an Isan

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[447]Napawong Chaiyaocha, Nonthan villager, Nathan minior-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 15 August 2006.

must consult the elders and the village chief prior to making any religious decision in order to maintain a spirit of submission to their authority.

Second, the process and context of community decision making is the village meeting where most communal decisions are made. The verdict of the meeting is only effective when a consensus has been reached by all constituents (heads of households and kin groups) represented at the meeting. After the village community has reached a decision, the individual members of the village are expected to carry out the decision. Those not conforming to the village community decision will be regarded as outsiders and will not be allowed to live under the protection and support of the village. Apart from a few villages in Northeast Thailand which have a majority of Christians, the villages in Northeast Thailand predominantly support Buddhism, *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)*, and its merit-making and animistic activities. As a result, village community decisions have always been to represent Buddhism and the *chareet prapaynee(จารีตประเพณี)*, and, thus, discourage any decision in support of any religion other than a religion that conforms to its belief and value systems.

Third, the elders (*yatpuyai*-ญาตผู้ใหญ่) of the kin groups command respect from the households and provide leadership and protection for those within their kin group. Concerning religious matters, such as possible conversion to Christianity, the kin elders or *yatpuyai (ญาตผู้ใหญ่)* expect to be consulted prior to the making of any decision. As the upholders and defenders of the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites and other traditional customs, the *yatpuyai (ญาตผู้ใหญ่)* of the kin group will normally advise his people to stay on course with the traditional customary (*chareet prapaynee*) way of the ancestors and to continue making merit to ensure a brighter future life. When a member from a non-Christian Isan family converts to Christianity and continues to live in his home village, the elders of his kin group and his other relatives will try to persuade him to return to Buddhism. If their attempt is unsuccessful, it is likely that he will be rejected by his *yatpinong* (ญาตพี่น้อง) or allowed only limited fellowship with them.

Fourth, the heads of household also can restrict or effectively prevent individuals from making a decision to convert to Christianity. Endowed by *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* with the rights and privileges to make key important decisions for the individuals, the household head can provide security and stability for its household members. Although the village community has significant power over its members, the household is where the greatest measure of authority lies and where the traditions and customs of the ancestors are most diligently practiced and enforced. Under the obligations to the predominantly Buddhist village community and kin group elders and leaders, the Isan household heads typically make decisions that would be in harmony with them. As a result, it is very difficult for any Isan individuals to gain support from the household heads for a decision to convert to Christianity.

Fifth, the individual's first loyalty is to his household and the authority of either his father or father-in-law. A person who decides to follow Christ without the support of his either his father or father-in-law will face negative consequences for his action and will have to maintain his family alone without his father or father-in-law's support. A person converted to Christianity would often be considered an "evil person" because he is viewed as disrespecting the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* and, thus, threatens the well-being of his household. In general, even thought the Isan individuals have the right to make individual decisions, they perceive individual

decision making as dependent upon the advice, support, and/or approval of the elders and leaders of the village community, the kin group elders, the head of his household, and perhaps also significant others (a patron or superior). As a result, an Isan would rarely believe that he can carry out an individual decision unless he has received the advice or support of others who are close to him or who have an active interest in his life.

Sixth, the Isan people depend heavily on the significant others in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships, the patron-client relationships, or the superior-inferior relationships when considering a religious decision. Consequently, they have the propensity to defer their decision making to those significant others who are counterparts in these relationships or seek their advice and support. Because of the obligations in these relationships, their own individual decision-making power is conditioned or restricted. However, if the Isan are already in a *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)*, patron-client or superior-inferior relationship with Christians, it is likely that those relationships can contribute greatly to bringing them to a conversion decision.

The Approaches to Decision Making

The influence of the social values continues to impact strongly on the Isan's decision-making process. These seven groupings of social values include: (1) the respecting of one's parents, elders and superiors; (2) the meeting of obligations and encouraging reciprocity; (3) the maintaining of patron-client and subordinate-superior relationships; (4) the keeping of the group solidarity of the household, the kin group, the village community; (5) the preserving of social harmony; (6) the avoiding of confrontation and conflicts; and, (7) having attitudes of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)*, *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)*, and *snuk (สนุก)*. In addition, the Buddhist religious values (particularly karma and merit) and *prapaynee*'s (traditional customary) values continually permeate every area of the Isan's thought and way of life. As a result, the Isan villagers tend to develop decision-making approaches corresponding to these values.

The author has identified three major approaches to decision making utilized by the Isan villagers when faced with a decision, especially the decision to convert to Christianity. These three decision-making approaches are: (1) the deference approach; (2) the consensus approach; and, (3) the piecemeal approach.

The Deference Approach

Generally, the Isan villagers do not feel that they have power over their own lives and situations. The value system, and especially the Buddhist religious value of karma, serves to thwart the Isan villagers from initiating improvements and transforming to their own unfortunate and powerless situation. They feel powerless against the surrounding human, natural, and supernatural powers. They have used religious beliefs and the value system to deal with their uncertainty. As a result, they tend to defer their decision-making power to others for a variety of reasons which stem from their belief and value systems.

Observers from the Isan villagers of Non Sang village, Singkok sub-district, Kaset Wisai district, Roi Et province, Northeast Thailand, Parpatson Srikompliw found that the whole village consisted of kinsmen who were related by either blood or marriage, stemming from two original families who founded the

village. As a result, the villagers tended to be passive and less likely to express their thoughts and ideas. They deferred decision making to the elders and village leaders. Common expressions are: "It is up to them [*the elders and leaders*]," or "Whatever they decide, it is fine with us." The villagers had *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* and respect for the elders and the village leaders.[448]

The deference approach to decision making is evident in the response of a 73-year-old elderly Isan woman, Duang Pomsing, living in Nonthan village of Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani. When she was asked what would be involved in her decision to change religion, she replied:

> I am responsible for my own life and my own decision. Currently, I am Buddhist because my parents and my ancestors have led me to Buddhism. As far as religious adherence, I stay with the religion of our village community. If I am going to live with the village community, I must hold to the same view as them. If they will not convert to Christianity, why should I convert? I will only decide to convert to Christianity if my village community makes a decision to convert (trans. from the Thai by the author).[449]

As much as the deference approach works against converting Isan Buddhists to Christianity, this approach can also act in favor of the effort for Christian conversion. This case is well illustrated by Khammee Thayasut, a 100-year-old Isan elderly woman who converted to Christianity in 1992. After her conversion, many of her kinsmen have tried on numerous occasions to persuade her to renounce Christianity and return to her former religion of Buddhism. Each of the attempts was unsuccessful. Recently, one of the non-Christian villagers asked her why she had made the decision to convert to Christianity when the elderly men or women typically are more inclined to defend their local religions (Buddhism and Animism) and *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* rather than joining a new religion (Christianity). Being the paternal great grandmother of the author, Khammee responded to the inquirer: "I decided to follow Christianity because of my grandson [*the author*]; I stay with them and depend on them, I will be like them. I must decide to follow the religion that they have decided to follow." The deference approach used in the Isan's decision-making process for conversion to or not conversion to Christianity emphasizes the tendency for the Isan villagers to yield their decision making to those whom they respect or with whom they have a *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) or reciprocal relationship.

The Consensus Approach

The second decision-making approach frequently practiced by the Isan people is consensus. The free encyclopedia *Wikipedia* defines consensus decision making as "a decision-making process that not only seeks the agreement of most participants, but also to resolve or mitigate the objections of the minority to achieve

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[448]Srikompliw, "The Relationship Between Relatives and the Development," 22.

[449]Duang Pomsing, Nonthan villager, Nathan minior-district, Ubonratchatani province, Thailand, interview by author, 15 August 2006.

the most agreeable decision."[450] The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines consensus as "a generally accepted opinion or decision among a group of people."[451] In reference to the Isan's decision-making process, Keyes indicates: "The important bywords of decision-making are not leadership and authority but consensus and compromise."[452] When it comes to group decision, whether in the village communities, kin groups, or households, the Isan believe that a consensus must be achieved before a decision is considered sustainable. Klausner agrees: "Those decisions affecting the village over which villagers had control were discussed at village meetings and a consensus reached."[453] When a consensus decision has been realized in a meeting, compliance is expected of everyone. Sounthonpesat argues:

> Anyone who does not follow or obey the consensus of the village meeting will be kept under the control of the head of the household until the next village meeting which will then decide the fate of the charged individual (trans. from the Thai by the author).[454]

In a situation where a consensus cannot be reached, a decision may be postponed until the next time or be defeated. Rakwijit elaborates on this point:

> Before a community decision is to be passed, all major parties in conflict must agree to accept the verdict of the community. So long as such consensus can not be obtained, normally the presiding officer or council of village elders will not force villagers to vote or make a decision on the matter. A series of informal discussions or meetings are likely to follow until a consensus can be reached; the matter may simply be left to quiet down without any decision.[455]

The role of the village chief (headman) is crucial in the decision-making process to reach a consensus. His ability to mediate and influence the kin group constituents and household heads is an advantageous characteristic. Concerning the importance of the village chief's role in consensus decision making, John Henderson states, "In the village the headman leads by persuasion and by guiding villagers to a consensus in the village meetings rather than decree."[456] The significant part of consensus decision building relates to all of the unofficial efforts made by the village chief and the elders leading up to the time of the official village community meeting. This informal undertaking with all the meeting participants prior to the formal village

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[450]Wikipedia, *Consensus Decision-Making*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_decision-making>.

[451]"Consensus," in *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[452]Keyes, "Baan Noong Tyyn," 9.

[453]Klausner, *Reflectsions on Thai Culture*, 151.

[454]Sounthonpesat, "Krongsrang Sungkom Mooban Pak Tawan-Ok Chiangnua," 76.

[455]Rakwijit, *Village Leadership in Northeast Thailand*, 183.

[456]Smith et al., "Social Values," 220.

meeting will often determine the outcome of the group decision, whether a consensus decision will be achieved or not.

The author had been to a couple of critical village meetings to settle on key proposals which affected the whole village. The first village meeting took place in Nasai village, Palan sub-district, Nathan minor-district in Ubonratchatani province in the year 2001. The author and his Christian kinsmen made a proposal to his home village of Nasai for a piece of land to build a church sport field which would also be used for non-Christian villagers. Being a predominately Buddhist village, the proposal was discussed and opposed by the participants who were not favorable toward Christianity. Unable to reach a consensus in the meeting, the proposal was nevertheless voted on and defeated. The outcome of the meeting split the village into two groups: those who favored Christianity and those opposed it.

Afterwards, the situation became worse with the rift widening between the two groups. Being unable to expand their Christian efforts under the current conditions in Nasai village because of the lack of consensus among the village leaders and elders, the author and his kinsmen removed their Christian entourage to join with Na-alon village in the same sub-district (Palan). With a general consensus among the Na-along village leaders and elders for the author and his Christian entourage to freely practice their faith among their group, Christianity has continued to experience relative growth through the author's various ministries and organizations: Mercy Foundation, Mercy Christian School, Mekong Evangelical Mission, Mekong Community Radio Station, Mekong Bible Institute and Seminary, and the Mekong Churches. However, a consensus was never reached which would allow the non-Christian Na-alon villagers to convert to Christianity at their choosing. As a result, not one single Na-alon villager has converted to Christianity since the author and his entourage joined Na-alon village in 2001. The numerical growth of Christianity in the author's ministry has come from outside of both the Nasai and the Na-alon villages.

The second critical village meeting took place in Na-alon village in the same sub-district of Palan. When the author's brother, Jay Saiyasak, joined the author's ministry to participate in the effort to advance Christianity among the Isan of the Northeast, he realized the need to apply for the Thai authorities to recognize his Thai citizenship. In the application process, the government district authorities of Nathan required a village community's consensus decision be made in an official village meeting in support of Jay's application for the recognition of his Thai citizenship.

Being a Christian, Jay addressed the non-Christian Na-along village council meeting, made up of the village elders and chaired by the non-Christian village chief. After much discussion, the village council reached a consensus, made a motion and voted to add Jay to the Na-alon village membership and grant him recognition as a Thai citizen. The vote was unanimous. The minutes of the village meeting were drafted with signatures of the meeting attendees which contained the motion and the vote. A picture of the meeting with the participants voting, along with the minutes of the meeting were submitted to the district authorities as evidence. About six months after the submission of the documents, the district commissioner officially recognized Jay's Thai citizenship. The approval of Jay's Thai citizenship was largely dependent upon the consensus among the decision-making body of Na-alon village. But without a consensus, a decision would probably not have been realized.

The last of the three approaches to Isan decision making is the piecemeal approach. The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines piecemeal as something "not done according to a plan but done at different times in different ways."[457] This approach presupposes an unorganized, structureless reaction to urgency or crisis. The decision-making process by the piecemeal approach is not integrated by a single theme or purpose. Rather, decisions are made bit by bit as critical situations demand. Pike describes this kind of decision making as follows: "Decisions are often made in a piecemeal fashion as exigencies arise, and few decisions have an enduring influence on the subsequent course of the villager's life."[458]

One of the most distinct character qualities of the Isan villagers is their work ethic summed up in the "quick job-quick pay" mentality. In the last six years, the author has employed over 500 construction workers and subcontractors to work on various building construction projects. The average project lasted approximately two to three months. The Isan's work mentality is to work hard and long in order to get enough money and then to stop working and enjoy spending the money acquired until it is all spent. (Most of the money earned is spent in merit making.) Afterwards, one will then look for another "quick job for quick pay."

The life philosophy of living from pay-check to pay-check dictates the work habits of most Isan villagers. The Isan's work habits are parallel to their decision-making process. Decision making is based on situational urgency or crisis. Since 1992, the author has been working in Ubonratchatani province, Northeast Thailand. During those years, the author has seen many Isan individuals profess conversion to Christianity. The basis for their conversion arises from different motivations. The majority of the time, their decision to convert to Christianity seems to be motivated by a crisis or a critical need in their life.

One example of the piecemeal approach to decision making for conversion was the case of Mr. Chanchai Muangsong. In 2002, Chanchai was brought to the author's church in Nathan minor district of Ubonratchatani by his sister Kruawanh Adonsee who was a Christian and a member of the church. Chanchai was in a multi-level crisis involving his marriage, personal finances, health, and legal problems. He was on the brink of divorce; he was bankrupt and in debt; he was experiencing physical health problems which required continuous treatment; and, he was in trouble with the law. Hopeless, without any prospect for the future, Chanchai began working with the author to deal with the issues underlying his crisis. Because the inner, spiritual structural support was essential to the recovery of Chanchai, the author recommended that he focus on restoring his spiritual foundation as the initial step in dealing with his crisis, and then walk on the road to recovery. Chanchai made a decision to convert to Christianity as a response to his crisis. He was convinced that his hope to full recovery was through rebuilding his spiritual foundation. His decision to turn to Christ was not planned, but the urgency of his crisis situation called for a drastic decision. This type of decision can be categorized as piecemeal decision making.

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[457]"Piecemeal," in *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[458]Piker, "The Relationship of Belief Systems," 390.

Another example of the piecemeal approach is the case of Mae Kam and her husband Par Kam who began attending the Mekong Church Nonprasert in the Nathan minor-district of Ubonratchatani. Because Par Kam's children and relatives disliked her, Mae Kam was charged with possession of *phi pob* (evil spirits-ผีปอบ), which immediately prompted the village community to react by banishing her (along with Par Kam) from the village. Their crisis situation brought them to the church and, as a result, they made the decision to become Christians - primarily motivated by the need for community protection against those who sought to kill them. For humanitarian reasons, the author's church afterward made the decision to provide a place for them to live and to find a job for them so that they could provide for themselves. As a consequence, the piecemeal decision-making approach has contributed effectively and positively toward the conversion of many Isan people to Christianity.

In summary, the author has observed three important points in regard to the Isan's approaches to decision making. First, the Isan primarily approach their making of major decisions regarding conversion to Christianity by deferring to others with whom they respect, owe *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)*, have reciprocal relationships, and to those whom they feel can better make informed decisions. Specifically, they are the elders and leaders of village community, the kin group elders, the household heads, or significant others. The deference approach to decision making stems from their belief and value systems, which are based on the social values, the Buddhist religious values, and the traditional customary (*prapaynee*-ประเพณี) values. As a result, most of the Isan people feel powerless against their environment and fear change or transformation. Second, the Isan often practice a consensus approach to group decision making. The Isan believe that a decision in a group meeting is enforced only after a consensus is reached. Subsequently, compliance is expected of everyone in the village. Concurrently, it is common for a Christian minority to not have their concerns presented in the village meeting. Usually they are ignored by the super majority who feel under no obligation to address their concerns. Third, the Isan frequently employ the piecemeal approach to decision making. This approach denotes that decisions are made based on a response to an urgency or crisis in one's life.

Summary of the Two Types of Decision-Making Interview Research

As part of the research into the decision-making process of the Isan people of Northeast Thailand, the author conducted two types of interviews to substantiate his proposals.

First Interview Research: Reasons for and against Accepting Christianity

The First Interview Research Project was conducted in 2004 with 64 from four locations: Nathan minor-district, Phosai district, Khemarat district, and Muang district of Ubonratchatani. The 64 interviewees were divided into three categories: (1) those who had heard the Christian message and had converted to Christianity (a total of 20 people from four districts); (2) those who had heard the Christian message and were still interested (a total of 25 people from four districts); and, (3) those who had heard the Christian message and had decided to reject it (a total of 19 people from

4 districts). The purpose of the interviews was twofold: on the one hand, it was to to discern the reasons for those who converted to Christianity; and, on the other hand, it was to also find out the reasons why some opposed and rejected Christianity. .

First Group: Those Who Had Heard the Christian Message and Had Converted to Christianity

The first group of interviews was conducted among 20 Isan believers scattered in different districts in the Ubonratchatani province. A mixture of people from various age groups, sex differences, social classes, and career groups were interviewed. Both rural villagers and urban dwellers were represented. They were chosen randomly from among those who converted as first generation Christians from Buddhism to Christianity through the author's ministry. The purpose of the interviews was to discover the factors contributing to their decisions for converting to Christianity. (See Appendix O for questionnaires used in the interviews.)

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 1 about when they first heard the Christian faith responded as follows:
     5 (25%) heard from their parents or relatives;
     4 (20%) heard from an evangelist;
     3 (15%) heard from a teacher;
     3 (15%) heard from a pastor;
     3 (15%) heard from a friend;
     1 (5%) heard from a Christian; and,
     1 (5%) heard from a radio broadcast or a gospel tract.

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 2 about how they felt when they first heard the Christian faith responded as follows:
     8 (40%) became interested;
     7 (35%) were indifferent;
     2 (10%) had doubts;
     1 (5%) was uninterested;
     1 (5%) felt strange; and,
     1 (5%) did not understand.

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 3 about their previous religion and practice responded as follows:
     14 (70%) said they were Buddhists by *prapaynee* (traditional-ประเพณี);
     4 (20%) were strict followers of Buddhism;
     1 (5%) was a Roman Catholic; and,
     1 (5%) was a Prot. Christian by *prapaynee* (a professed Christian but not saved)

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 4 about having Christian relatives or friends prior to conversion responded as follows:
     13 (65%) had no Christian relative or friend prior to conversion; and,
     7 (35%) had either one or more of their relative or friends as Christians.

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 5 about opposition or support for their conversion responded as follows:
     6 (30%) indicated opposition;

6 (30%) had no opposition;

5 (25%) had support;

2 (10%) had both opposition and support; and,

1 (5%) had neither opposition nor support.

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 6 about the impression they had that caused them to be interested in God and Christianity responded as follows:

7 (35%) responded that they were interested in God;

5 (25%) answered that Christians provided good examples;

3 (15%) were convinced by an evangelist;

2 (10%) were impressed by prayer for healing;

2 (10%) were impressed by sermons; and,

1 (5%) was impressed by the power of the Christian faith to change lives.

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 7 about attending church services/activities one or more times prior to conversion responded as follows:

13 (65%) had attended a church service/activity 2-5 times;

3 (15%) had attended 1 time;

3 (15%) had not attended at all; and,

1 (5%) attended more than 5 times.

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 8 about having received tangible or intangible help from Christians responded as follows:

16 (80%) said that they had received tangible or intangible help; and,

4 (20%) said they had never received any tangible or intangible help.[459]

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 9 about attending one or more evangelistic services, Christmas programs or open-air meetings responded as follows:

10 (50%) had never attended; and,

10 (50%) had attended one or more of the meetings.

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 10 about who had played a key role in their decision to convert to Christianity responded as follows:

9 (45%) indicated that no one had played an important role in their conversion;

6 (30%) indicated a pastor;

3 (15%) indicated a relative;

1 (5%) indicated an evangelist; and,

1 (5%) indicated a church member.

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 11 about the reason for their conversion to Christianity responded as follows:

5 (25%) answered that it was the changed lives of other Christians;

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[459]The tangible help included electricity, material things, funds for children's uniform and education, funds for medical treatment, loans, jobs, and debt payment. The intangible help included encouraging words, visitation, and giving a ride to see a doctor.

3 (15%) answered that it was the life of Christ;
3 (15%) answered that they were seeking inner peace;
2 (10%) answered that they had heard from the Bible being taught;
2 (10%) answered that they wanted true friends;
1 (5%) answered that he/she was encouraged by his/her Christian relative;
1 (5%) answered that he/she hoped to be healed;
1 (5%) answered that he/she wanted to marry a Christian;
1 (5%) answered that he/she was following his/her grandmother's advice; and
1 (5%) answered that he/she was ready to ready to receive Christ.

The 20 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 12 about what their expectations were in becoming a Christian responded a follows:
9 (45%) would like to have have a close and loving family;
2 (10%) would like to go to heaven;
2 (10%) had no special expectations;
1 (5%) wanted good health;
1 (5%) hoped to have God meet all the needs;
1 (5%) wanted encouragement;
1 (5%) wanted to be freed from evil spirits;
1 (5%) wanted to serve God;
1 (5%) wanted to learn to know God better;
1 (5%) wanted to learn to play music.

Second Group: Those Who Had Heard the Christian Message and Were Considering Conversion to Christianity

The second group of interviews was conducted among 25 nonbelievers scattered in four districts of Ubonratchatani province, Northeast Thailand, where the author has been ministering. A mixture of people from various age groups, sex differences, social classes, and career groups were interviewed. The interviews included the following 11 open-ended questions. This group consisted of both rural villagers and urban dwellers. They were randomly chosen from those who had heard the gospel through the author's ministry and had shown an interest but had not yet decided to become a Christian. The purpose of the interviews was to find out the factors which hindered them from making a decision to convert to Christianity. (See Appendix P for questionnaires used in the interviews.)

The 25 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 1 about when they had first heard the Christian message responded as follows:
10 (40%) heard from an evangelist;
9 (36%) heard from a radio broadcast or a gospel tract;
4 (16%) heard from a friend; and,
2 (8%) heard from a pastor.

The 25 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 2 about how they felt when they first heard the Christian message responded as follows:
15 (60%) said the Christian faith was a good religion;
8 (32%) were indifferent;
1 (4%) had doubts; and,
1 (4%) did not like Christianity.

The 25 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 3 about their previous religion and practice responded as follows:

19 (76%) said they were Buddhists by *prapaynee* (traditional-ประเพณี); and,

6 (24%) were strict followers of Buddhism;

The 25 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 4 about having relatives or friends prior to conversion responded as follows:

13 (60%) had no Christian relative or friend prior to conversion; and,

7 (40%) had either one or more of their relatives or friends as Christians.

The 25 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 5 about opposition or support for their conversion responded as follows:

15 (60%) had no opposition;

4 (16%) did not respond;

3 (12%) had neither opposition nor support;

2 (8%) had both opposition and support; and,

1 (4%) had support.

The 25 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 6 about the impression they had that caused them to be interested in God and Christianity responded as follows:

11 (44%) answered that Christians provided good examples;

6 (24%) had no good impression;

5 (20%) responded that they were interested in who God is;

2 (8%) had a good impression; and,

1 (4%) had the impression that it was good moral teaching.

The 25 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 7 about attending church services/activities one or more times prior to conversion responded as follows:

11 (44%) had attended a church service/activity 2-5 times;

11 (44%) had not attended at all; and,

3 (12%) attended 1 time.

The 25 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 8 about having received tangible or intangible help from Christians responded as follows:

15 (60%) said that they had received tangible or intangible help;

9 (36%) said they had received some tangible or intangible help; and,

1 (4%) did not respond.

The 25 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 9 about attending one or more evangelistic services, Christmas programs or open-air meetings responded as follows:

15 (60%) had attended one or more of the meetings; and,

10 (40%) had never attended any of the meetings.

The 25 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 10 about who had played a key role in persuading them to convert to Christianity responded as follows:

10 (40%) indicated that no one had played an important role in their conversion;

5 (20%) indicated a church member;

3 (12%) indicated a pastor;

3 (12%) indicated an evangelist;
3 (12%) indicated a self-interest in Christianity; and,
1 (4%) indicated a friend.

The 25 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 11 about the reasons for not making a decision to convert to Christianity responded as follows:
8 (32%) said their longheld Buddhist traditions;
5 (20%) said they were afraid they could not fulfill the conditions of Christianity;
3 (12%) said they lacked the time to study Christianity;
1 (4%) said they were opposed to Christianity;
1 (4%) needed time to study further;
1 (4%) held a belief that all religions were about the same;
1 (4%) was self-dependent;
1 (4%) thought Christianity was unscientific;
1 (4%) did not respond; and,
6 (25%) gave miscellaneous reasons.

Third Group: Those Who Were Against the Decision to Convert to Christianity

The third group of interviews was conducted among 19 nonbelievers from four districts (Nathan minor-district, Khemarat district, Phosai district, and Muang district) of Ubonratchatani province, Northeast Thailand, where the author has been ministering. A mixture of rural villagers and urban dwellers from various age groups, sex differences, social classes, and career groups were interviewed. They were chosen randomly from among those who have heard the gospel through the author's ministry but who have decided against converting to and/or strongly opposed Christianity. The purpose of the interviews was to determine the root causes of their decisions against converting to Christianity as well as their strong opposition to Christianity. (See Appendix Q for questionnaires used for the interviews.)

From the 19 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 1 about when they first heard the Christian faith responded as follows:
12 (64%) heard from a radio broadcast or a gospel tract;
3 (16%) heard from an evangelist;
1 (5%) heard from a pastor;
1 (5%) heard from a friend;
1 (5%) heard from a relative; and,
1 (5%) had never heard before.

From the 19 interviewees replied who replied to QUESTION 2 about how they felt when they first heard the Christian message responded as follows:
6 (32%) said the Christian faith was a good religion;
5 (26%) were not interested;
3 (16%) had doubts;
3 (16%) were indifferent;
1 (5%) wanted to study further; and,
1 (5%) feft sorry for Jesus.

The 19 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 3 about their previous religion and practice responded as follows:

11 (58%) said they were Buddhists by *prapaynee* (traditional-ประเพณี); and,

8 (42%) were strict followers of Buddhism;

From the 19 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 4 about the reasons that they could not accept Christianity responded as follows:

10 (53%) indicated that none of their family members or relatives were Christians;

3 (16%) did not respond;

2 (11%) indicated that they did not like Christianity;

2 (11%) indicated that their village follows Buddhism;

1 (5%) indicated that he/she was not interested; and,

1 (5%) said that Christianity was not credible.

The 19 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 5 about what they think their village felt about Christianity responded as follows:

6 (32%) responded that they were unsure;

5 (26%) said that the village absolutely could not accept Christianity;

3 (16%) said that conversion was up to an individual choice;

2 (11%) responded that their Christianity made a good impression on their village;

2 (11%) did not respond; and,

1 (5%) responded that Christianity was not credible.

The 19 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 6 about what Christianity should do in order to be accepted by the villagers responded as follows:

13 (68%) responded that they did not know the answer;

3 (16%) said more evangelism;

1 (5%) indicated the providing of education;

1 (5%) said that accepting Christianity was left to individual choice; and,

1 (5%) responded that Christianity was absolutely not acceptible.

From the 19 interviewees who replied to Question 7 about the possible interest in Christianity in the future responded as follows:

13 (68%) said that they would never be interested in Christianity;

4 (21%) said that they might be interested in the future; and,

2 (11%) did not respond.

The 19 interviewees who replied to QUESTION 8 about having received tangible or intangible help from Christians responded as follows:

15 (79%) said they had never received any tangible or intangible help; and,

4 (21%) did not respond.

In summary, the results of the First Interview Research Project concerning the reasons for the Isan's conversion to or their opposition to Christianity can be stated in nine important points. First of all, the effectiveness of the gospel message is linked to the messenger more than the message. The first group of interviews (those who had accepted the Christian faith) from the First Interview Research Project indicated that 95% received the gospel for the first time from a personal contact with

someone who is a Christian. Only 5% of the interviewees in this group had received the message from a gospel tract or radio broadcast. The second group of interviews (those who had heard the gospel message but were still considering a possible conversion to Christianity) shows that 64% had heard from a personal contact with a Christian. The third group of interviews (those who had decided against being converted to Christianity and/or were opposed Christianity) indicates that 36% had heard from a personal contact with a Christian. This suggests that a personal contact with a Christian seems to have more impact on a person becoming a Christian than through impersonal means such as the gospel tracts or radio broadcast.

Second, 73 percent of the people participating in the First Interview Research Project were new converts to Christianity from Buddhism by *prapaynee* (ประเพณี). This indicates that those who are Buddhist by *prapaynee* are more receptive to coverting to the Christian faith.

Third, 35 percent of those who became converts to Christinaity had first heard the gospel from those in *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationships (parents, relatives or teachers), whereas NONE of those who decided against converting to Christianity had heard about the Christian faith from those in *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationships. The next highest percentage (25%) of converts to Christianity indicated that they had received the Christian gospel message through a gospel tract or radio broadcast. This shows that hearing the gospel message from those in the *bunkhun* relationships raises the percentage of those converting to Christianity from those from other sources. In addition, those who were opposed to Christianity heard about Christianity through sources other than their *bunkhun* relationships. The credibility of the Christian faith is therefore linked to a *bunkhun* relationship.

Fourth, 35 percent of those converted to Christianity had either one or more of their relatives or friends as Christians prior to their conversion, while 65 % of the converts did not. This seems to indicate that Christian family members were the most influential factor in winning other relatives to the Lord.

Fifth, 45 percent of those who are converted indicated that they expect to have a loving family as a result of becoming a Christian. This points out that evangelism which targets the family will result in the most responsiveness to the gospel message.

Sixth, 80 percent of those who became converts had received tangible and/or intangible support/help from Christians. Also, 60 percent of those who had heard the Christian message and were interested (but still deciding whether or not to become Christians) also had received tangible and/or intangible helps. Interestingly, NONE of those who had indicated a disinterest in converting to or had expressed opposition to Christianity had received any tangible or intangible helps from Christians. This finding indicates that help (tangible and intangible) given to the Isan unbelievers plays a very crucial role in leading them to conversion, primarily because it helps create *bunkhun* relationships which are the major influence for the Isan's decision to convert.

Seventh, 45 percent of all of those in the three groups who had heard the message of Christianity thought that it was a good religion. However, the credibility of the Christian faith does not always produce conversion decisions. Although Christianity was accepted by almost half of the Isan people as a good religion, their decision making as to whether or not to accept Christianity still depends on the social dynamics of their communities, their kin groups, their households, and their significant others.

Eighth, 53 percent of those who had indicated a disinterest in converting to or expressed opposition to Christianity stated that they absolutely would not accept Christianity because their household had already inherited Buddhism as a religion. Another 11 percent indicated that they had based their rejection of Christianity on the fact that their village had and would not accept Christianity. This finding shows that Buddhism is still a strong obstacle for a member of any household to convert to Christianity.

Ninth, 68 percent of those who had indicated a disinterest in or opposition to Christianity stated that they absolutely would not choose Christianity as a viable option in the future. Although the majority of the Isan have absolutely ruled out Christianity as a better religion for the Isan people, yet 32% of the people have not closed their door to Christianity. An evangelistic strategy which targets that 32% should result in a number of conversion to Christianity.

Second Interview Research: Decision Making Involving Nine Areas of Life Choices

The Second Interview Research Project was done in 2006 with 89 non-Christian Isan people who were randomly chosen from three districts in Ubonratchatani province of Northeast Thailand where the author has been ministering. They are Nathan minor-district, Phosai district, and Khemarat district. Of the 98 people, 32 were male and 57 were female; 3 were under 20 years of age; 18 were ages 21 through 40; 41 were ages 41 through 59; and 27 were ages 60 and up. Five interviewees were widows; four were divorcees; three were singles; and fifty-seven were married. Although some of the people who were interviewed may have heard about Christianity, almost all of them have not been exposed to Christianity. The purpose of this interview research was to discover the Isan's decision making in nine social areas which included: (1) marriage and divorce; (2) career choice; (3) medical treatment; (4) education/schooling; (5) inheritance; (6) building a house or choosing a residence; (7) religious observances; (8) religious change; and, (9) conversion to Christianity. The interview sample was chosen randomly from a number of villages scattered throughout the three districts of Nathan, Phosai and Khemarat in Ubonratchatani. (See Appendix R for the questionnaires used in the interviews.)

All the groups of interviewees were questioned concerning these nine areas of decision making. At least half an hour was spent with each of the interviewees. The research findings indicate from the overall response that five groups of people have a major part in the decision making process of the individual (Appendix B). Theses five groups of decision makers include the community, the kin group, the househouse, the individual himself, and the significant others.

In summary, the results of the Second Interview Research Project concerning principal decision makers who were considered to be a part of the Isan's daily decision making indicated the following: First of all, the 89 interviewees indicated that they would consider community leaders and elders a part of their decision-making process: conversion to Christianity, 40% (36 interviewees); changing one's religion, 65% (58); religious observances, 87% (77); building a house or choosing a residence, 34% (30); inheritance, 23% (26); education/schooling, 21% (19); medical treatment, 26% (23); career choice, 27% (24); and marriage and divorce, 42% (37). In changing to a religious belief not well-known in the community, 65% of the Isan look to the village authority to participate in their

decision making. However, when it comes to changing their religion to Christianity, only 40% of the Isan people indicated that they needed the village authorities to take part in their decision making. This was partly the case because Christainity was known in the communities where the interviews took place. Also, it is significant to point out that 87% of the people believed the village elders and leaders had unquestionable authority on how a religion is to be observed and practiced in a village (Appendix B).

Second, the Isan desire to have the kin group elders (*awooso*) participate in their decision making: conversion to Christianity, 58% (52); changing one's religion, 76% (68); religious observances, 92% (82); building a house or choosing a residence, 82% (73); inheritance, 80% (71); education/schooling, 89% (79); medical treatment, 85% (76); career choice, 90% (80); and marriage and divorce, 93% (83). When it comes to a matter of changing to another religious faith such as to Christianity and of deciding religious observances, the kin group elders play the most important role in one's life, household, and village community. Even though 58% of the Isan people expressed the view that they would have the kin group elders take a major role in their decision making to convert to Christianity, yet it is significant also to point out that 42% of the Isan people did not feel that the kin group elders needed to play a part in their decision making process for converting to Christianity. This finding shows that Christianity still has an opportunity to influence a large number of the Isan people even if most of the kin group elders or other village elders and leaders do not see Christianity as an option. At the same time, it is also important to mention that a large percentage of the Isan did not feel that they needed the kin group elders to participate in their decision-making process if they wanted to change to Christianity. However, it is unlikely that they will make a decision to convert to Christianity without the support of the kin group elders.

Third, the Isan also indicated that they wanted household leaders to participate in the decision-making process: conversion to Christianity, 38% (34); changing one's religious, 61% (54); religious observances, 64% (57); building a house or choosing a residence, 63% (56); inheritance, 64% (57); education/schooling, 76% (68); medical treatment, 65% (58); career choice, 72% (64); and marriage and divorce, 78% (69). This shows that the authority of the household leaders takes a slightly lesser role than the village leaders and elders when it comes to religious matters. However, their authority in the religious matters of the household members still commands respect.

Fourth, the individuals view themselves as part of the decision-making process: conversion to Christianity, 82% (73); changing one's religious, 98% (87); religious observances, 98% (87); building a house or choosing a residence, 99% (88); inheritance, 99% (88); education/schooling, 99% (88); medical treatment, 97% (86); career choice, 100% (89); and marriage and divorce, 100% (89). This finding reveals that the individual self still occupies the highest authority in the decision-making process, including religious decisions. However, his decision-making power is conditioned by the social dynamics.

Fifth, moreover, the 89 interviewees considered significant others to be a part of the decision-making process: conversion to Christianity, 28% (25); changing one's religious, 36% (32); religious observances, 24% (21); building a house or choosing a residence, 47% (42); inheritance, 29% (26); education/schooling, 29% (26); medical treatment, 88% (78); career choice, 38% (34); and marriage and divorce, 24% (21). Even though the significant others play a lesser role in a person's

religious decision-making process, yet, they along with other social dynamics create a still significant force in the Isan's decision making for converting to Christianity.

Sixth, 3% (3 people) of the 89 interviewees expressed that they are the sole decision makers when it comes to marriage and divorce (Appendix F); 3% (3), career choice (Appendix G); 1% (1), medical treatment (Appendix H); 3% (3), education (Appendix I); 2% (2), inheritance (Appendix J); 3% (3), building a house or choosing a residence (Appendix K); 0% (0), religious observances (Appendix L); 11% (10), religious change (Appendix M); and, 28% (25), conversion to Christianity (Appendix N). The finding indicating that 28% of the Isan people responded that they could make their own decision to convert to Christianity without needing to consult others assumes that all the conditions are in favor of a person making a decision to convert to Christianity. At the same time, 72% of the Isan people felt that they needed to consult others.

Seventh, there are no sole decision makers in this area concerning religious observances or observing one's own religion (Appendix L). Forty-nine percent of the 89 interviewees considered that the elders of the kin group were the principal decision makers among four other decision-making groups (community, household, individual self, and significant others) in comparison with community leaders and elders as the principal decision makers, 20%; individual selves as decision makers, 28%; and, household heads as principal decision makers, 2%.

Eighth, 11% of the 89 respondents expressed the view that they themselves are the sole decision makers when changing to another religion. However, 44% considered themselves as only one principal decision maker along with four other decision-making groups: the kin group elders, 25%; community leaders and elders, 16%; household heads, 15%; and significant others, 1% (Appendix B).

Ninth, the total responses from the 89 respondents revealed that when considering conversion or a change of religion to Christianity, the individual as the only decision makers was 28% (Appendix N). By contrast with the other four decision-making groups as the only decision makers the statistics were as follows: the household heads, 2% (Appendix N); the individual selves plus another decision-making group, 15% (Appendix N); kin group elders plus another decision-making group, 10% (Appendix N); household heads plus another decision-making group, 3% (Appendix N).

Tenth, the individuals (individual selves) are important decision makers along with the four other decision-making groups. 82% of the respondents saw themselves to be among the decision makers when it comes to changing their religion to Christianity (Appendix B).

Eleventh, the research furthermore indicated that 18% of the respondents did not perceive themselves (individual selves) to be among the decision makers or decision-making groups capable of conversion to Christianity (Appendix N). This is because they view decision making for conversion or changing one's religion to Christianity to be the domain of the community leaders and elders, kin group elders, household heads, and/or significant others. The individual person is perceived not to have any decision-making power when it comes to conversion to Christianity.

Twelfth, the findings show that 10% of the 89 interviewees stated that they considered the community leaders and elders to be the principal decision makers who play the most important role in one's decision making for their conversion to Christianity. Other areas where community leaders and elders are the principal decision makers are as follows: religious change, 10%; religious observances, 20%;

building house or choosing residence, 1%; inheritance, 1%; education, 0%; medical treatment, 1%; career choice, 0%; and, marriage or divorce, 0%.

Thirteenth, the findings also included 30% of the respondents who articulated that the kin group elders are the principal decision makers and the most important group of people making decisions for their conversion to Christianity. Other areas where kin group elders who are active as principal decision makers are involved reveal the following: religious change, 30%; religious observances, 49%; building house or choosing residence, 11%; inheritance, 12%; education, 13%; medical treatment, 7%; career choice, 9%; and, marriage or divorce, 10%.

Fourteenth, 11% of the respondents said that the heads of their household serve as the principal decision makers who play the most important decision-making role for their conversion to Christianity. Other areas where the heads of the household serve as the principal decision maker in conversion to Christianity include: religious change, 11%; religious observances, 2%; building house or choosing residence, 48%; inheritance, 42%; education, 30%; medical treatment, 28%; career choice, 47%; marriage or divorce, 25%.

Fifteenth, the individual selves as the principal decision makers who play the most important decision-making role for conversion to Christianity account for 46% of the respondents. The individual selves who play the most important role in one's decision making for conversion to Christianity include religious change, also 46%; religious observances, 28%; building house or choosing residence, 35%; inheritance, 43%; education, 52%; medical treatment, 13%; career choice, 43%; and, marriage or divorce, 64%.

Finally, the significant others as principal decision makers who play the most important decision-making role for conversion to Christianity show 2% by the respondents. Similarly, 2% is shown for religious change; 0%, religious observances; 4%, building house or choosing residence; 2%, inheritance; 4%, education; 47%, medical treatment; 1%, career choice; and, 1%, marriage or divorce.

Summary Conclusions

In the statement of the goal of this study in the Introduction, the first part states that it is "to analyze the belief systems, the worldview values, and the social dynamics of the Isan people…." This has now been done in this chapter and the previous three chapters (Chapters 1, 2, and 3). Chapter 1 discussed the historical, cultural, and religious background including the influence from Animism, Buddhism, and Brahmanism. Chapter 2 considered each of the Isan's five belief systems, and Chapter 3 their worldview values, consisting mainly of the nine social values, the three Buddhist religious values, and the four traditional customary values.

These sixteen values, which were selected because they have significant influence on the Isan decision making process, together with the distinctives from the five belief systems provide a means to achieve the second half of the goal statement. This is "to understand how they [the Isan] make their religious decisions in order to adapt these insights for doing more effective evangelism, discipleship, and church planting among the Isan of Northeast Thailand." This chapter (Chapter 4) in a sense is the conclusion of the decision-making process itself, not only for making decisions in general, but, also more specifically on how decisions are made when changing to another religion (and especially to Christianity).

The actual decision making is carried out within a proper framework of authority at different levels and by using different approaches. Three important structural and cultural factors mitigate against an individual or a group in Isan converting to Christianity. They are the following: (1) the dominance of the male and positional leadership; (2) the five-level decision-making process itself which must approve the individual's decision at each level; and, (3) the three approaches used in decision making.

Verification of these theoretical points of decision-making procedure is given in many of the Isan (Thai-Lao) life experiences of those interviewed by the author in two major Interview Research Projects. These two projects involved more than a hundred believers and nonbelievers in various districts of Ubonratchatani province as detailed in the latter part of Chapter 4 and in the appendices (Appendix A through R).

The application of "these insights for doing more effective evangelism, discipleship, and church planting among the Isan of Northeast Thailand" is then given in the five important summary conclusions below (a more detailed summary is given given in Appendix AK through AN whch include simplified ideas from the long narrative text). It is also elaborated in the following chapter (Chapter 5) detailing eight Major Conclusions of the Study which hinder religious change and concluding with twelve Key Missiological Implications of the Study.

Five significant conclusions or points concerning the decision-making process for those Isan desiring to change their religion to Christianity are the following:

The first point considers the proper framework of authority by which a religious decision to convert to Christianity is carried out. The decision-making authority is typically invested in the male positional leadership such as the village community elders and leaders, the kin group elders, the heads of household, and the significant others. Consequently, the Isan's individual decision-making power has been conditioned and limited because those who hold a positional leadership normally act according to their Isan's value system (consisting of the social values, the Buddhist religious values, and the traditional customary values). Subsequently, this places conditions upon the individual's decision-making ability to convert to Christianity.

The second point describes the five-level decision-making process. In all levels of decision making (the village community, the kin group, the household, the individual self, and the significant other), individuals are expected either to have their decisions made for them by those in authority over each level, or, at least to consult those invested with decision-making authority over each of the levels prior to making any religious decision. In almost every case, those in authority would either make the decision for the individuals to act in conformity to their belief and value systems or at least advise them. It is expected that the individual stay under the guidance of those in authority so as to gain its protection and support. The Isan's decision-making process allows little room for converting to Christianity.

The third point explains the Isan's approaches to decision making and includes the three significant factors involved in their decision-making approaches. One, the Isan usually defer decisions to convert to Christianity to others with whom they respect, owe *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)*, or have reciprocal relationships. The approach also stems from their belief and value systems, which are based on the social values, the Buddhist religious values, and the traditional customary (*prapaynee-*ประเพณี) values. Two, the Isan often practice a consensus approach when making a group decision.

The Isan believe that a decision in a group meeting is enforced when consensus is reached. Subsequently, everyone in the group is expected to comply. Three, the Isan frequently employ the piecemeal approach to decision making when it comes to converting to Christianity. This approach denotes that decisions be made based on a response to an urgency or crisis in one's life. As a result of the Isan's predominant use of the deference and consensus approaches to decision making, Christianity stands an extremely small chance of being considered. A piecemeal approach would likely to be the most successful of all the approaches for converting the Isan to Christianity.

The fourth point examines the Isan's reasons for rejecting Christianity. The Interview Research Projects indicate that one of the strongest reasons for the Isan's decision to reject Christianity is out of a respect for the religious beliefs of their ancestors. 98% of the Isan people responded that they must take part in observing and preserving the religious faith of their predecessors. As a result, it is probable that Christianity will continue to face barriers to the gospel being received.

The final point elaborates on reasons for the acceptance of Christianity by some of the Isan people. The receptivity of the Isan to Christian conversion is furthered by the tangible and intangible help which they have received from believers. This assistance has resulted in giving them some measure of security as well as building the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships between the Isan and the believers. The author's research findings indicate that those who heard the gospel from those in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships such as parents, relative, or teachers were more likely to convert to Christianity. Also, the Christians who are patrons or superiors in a *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship with the Isan people or who head up an entourage have the advantage of influencing them to make a decision to convert to Christianity. This is because of the sense of obligation felt by the Isan to respond in favor to the suggestions or feelings of the patron or superior in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships. However, if the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships of the Isan are primarily from the Buddhists, then they will likely remain as Buddhists. Thus, one of the key ways to evangelize and plant churches among the Isan Buddhists is to establish a *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship with them.

CHAPTER 5

STUDY CONCLUSIONS AND MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

After much investigation and detailed assessment of the Isan's belief systems and the decision-making process, especially for conversion to Christianity, the conclusions for the study are now being made, and a number of missiological implications relevant for working with the Isan people of Northeast Thailand are now being recommended. Other groups whose social and cultural traits are similar to those of the Isan people should find these missiological implications pertinent and helpful in their ministries. The study conclusions and implications will now be discussed.

Eight Major Conclusions of the Study

The general non-responsiveness of the Isan people as a whole, and the inconsistency among those who became followers of the Christian faith to persist in their faith, has led the author to undertake this academic research in order to reach a fuller understanding of these behaviors. The author focuses his study on the belief systems, the core values, and the decision-making processes of the Isan people in order to discover whether or not these factors affect their ability and willingness to begin and sustain life as followers of Christ.

The study indicates that there are significant factors which cause this non-responsiveness arising from the Isan social network which shapes their decision-making process. The author has identified eight major characteristics in Isan society which present obstacles or barriers to the decision-making process and which hinder the successful penetration of the gospel message.

The Desire to Preserve the Ancestral Traditional Customs (Chareet Prapaynee)

The first characteristic of the Isan culture which is inherited from the past and an obstacle to Christianity is the desire to preserve the ancestral traditional customs (*chareet prapaynee*-จารีตประเพณี). The overwhelming majority of Isan inherited their Buddhist faith from their parents and ancestors according to the *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*. They are required to maintain the Buddhist religion and the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* so that the traditional customs of their ancestors will not disappear. According to the Rev. Rotchana, head of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT) of Zone 045 in 2006 whose jurisdiction covers EFT member churches and organizations in the provinces of Ubonratchatani, Sisaket, Mukdahon, Yasothon, and Amnatcharoen, the strongest barrier to converting Isan people to Christianity is their *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)*. As opposed to strict followers of Buddhism, these *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* Buddhists carry on the Buddhist rituals and merit-making

activities in order to continue the ancestral traditional customs that they have inherited from their parents, great grandparents, and forbearers.

Additionally, since the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* gives the Isan people their distinctive cultural identity as the people of Northeast Thailand, it is unlikely that they will replace the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* with another religion without feeling that they have destroyed their own identity. As a result, the need to maintain the ancestral traditional customs (*chareet prapaynee*) will continue to constitute a powerful barrier to gospel penetration and contribute to the unresponsive stance of the Isan people to Christian conversion.

Bunkhun/Reciprocal and Patron-Client Relationships

The second cultural characteristic of Isan society which makes conversion to Christianity difficult is the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)*/reciprocal and patron-client relationships. The Isan people remain in a number of *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* and patron-client relationships with their parents, elders and leaders, friends and significant others. These relationships demand varying measures of reciprocal actions on their part. An example of one of these obligated, reciprocal actions is a life-time involvement in Buddhist merit making for one's deceased parents. Another example is the responsibility of the children, even after they are married, to publicly recognize their parents and gain social acceptance for them within the community. This is almost impossible to achieve for Christians living in a predominantly Buddhist community in Northeast Thailand. Moreover, it is impractical to continue as a Christian in a relationship with a non-Christian patron or to belong to a non-Christian entourage that requires reciprocal actions as this would not allow any time for regular practice of the Christian faith. A disruption in one's relationship with a patron would greatly affect one's economic position.

Thus, the obligations imposed within the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)*/reciprocal and patron-client relationships can not be maintained if the Isan converts to the Christian faith. Since these relationships form the entire network of all relationships within the Isan communities, they present another significant barrier which contributes to the unresponsiveness of the Isan to Christian conversion and calls for much prayer and new creative strategies.

The Attitude of Respect, Deference, Krengchai and Approval

The third cultural characteristic and hindrance to religious change is the attitude of respect, deference, *krengchai (เกรงใจ)*, and approval of one's parents, elders and authorities. The obligation to show respect and deference to one's parents, elders and authorities dominates the mindset of the Isan people. Also included are the consciousness of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* toward and the need for approval from one's parents, elders and authorities. Because of his *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* and respect toward his authorities or counterparts in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* or patron-client relationships, the Isan will likely defer his major decisions to them. These conclusions are supported by the second group of interviews conducted by the author from 89 respondents in Ubonratchatani province. They indicated that 72% of the respondents felt that they must seek the approval of their village community elders or leaders, their kin group

elders, their household heads, or significant others *before* they could make their final decision to convert to Christianity. Therefore, these inclinations and attitudes toward authority figures, especially the king of Thailand, restrict the individual's autonomy with regard to conversion to Christianity. Therefore, since most efforts to expand Christianity in Northeast Thailand will probably continue to face unresponsiveness from the Isan authority figures, new ways and approaches need to be considered in reaching them, including intercessory prayers, power encounter, and other spirit-led strategies.

The Value of Group Solidarity and Social Harmony

The fourth cultural characteristic of Isan society and an obstacle to conversion is the propensity for group solidarity and social harmony. Cooperation and participation in the traditional customs of *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* and other merit-making rituals and activities demonstrate community (group) solidarity and a desire for social harmony. By complying with the expectations of their kin group, the Isan know that they will continue to enjoy protection, economic support and other benefits of kinship relationships. Conformity to the solidarity and harmony of the household will result in the gaining of inheritance (land, rice fields, and residence) and protection from the head of his household upon which he necessarily depends for social and economic support for the survival and continuation of his household and himself.

In the Isan village setting, the support and protection of the group is a matter of life and death. One's adherence to the solidarity of the group has great implications for his survival and safety. As a result, group solidarity and group agendas will continue to take priority over one's individual decisions. In view of this reality, groups (village communities) in the Northeast of Thailand that are predominately Buddhists and followers of *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* are less likely to convert to Christianity. Individual converts in these village communities will not be welcomed or accepted by the group. Thus, the sense of group solidarity and harmony further restricts the Isan from making the decision to convert to Christianity. In such cases new approaches should be considered after much prayer and mission history research, including various types of household and group movements and the use of technology in evangelism.

Matters of Survival, Security, Stability and Protection

The fifth cultural characteristic and hindrance to religious change relates to matters of survival, security, stability and protection. The Isan people place high value on the psychological well-being and security of the individual. The issues of survival and stability continue to occupy the minds of the Isan of Northeast Thailand. The long history of the Isan people reveals their confrontations and struggles with various human, natural and supernatural powers. They have to appease and also destroy these powers in order to ensure their own protection and survival. Thus, the Isan are assured that their ancient *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)*, consisting primarily of Buddhism and animistic beliefs in spirit cults, will continue to provide them with a secure, protected, stable community. Buddhism's appeal is its concept of merit and

its merit-making activities. Through merit, the Isan believes that his present and future life can be secured, guaranteed and made prosperous.

However, for some of the people of the Northeast such as the slaves, the minor wives, the impoverished, the Vietnamese and mountainous ethnic minorities, and the outcasts (whom the Roman Catholic converted by the thousands), the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* and the Buddhist beliefs could not satisfy their concerns for survival, security, stability and protection. When Roman Catholicism entered the Isan region of the Northeast, those whose circumstances lacked security and protection turned to the Catholic priests to find security and stability under the protection of Roman Catholic communities.

Therefore, as a consequence of the Isan's quest for survival, security, stability and protection, any religious system which can address these issues of concern to the Isan people will likely have a chance of being considered for adoption. However, Christianity has not offered the Isan assurance that it can provide protection and the necessities for a secure and stable life in the context of the Isan village community, kinship relationships, and household solidarity. Unless changes are made in mission strategies, it is unlikely that the gospel message will be met with any significant response from the Isan people. Therefore, more attention needs to be given to prayer and research on how to meet the Isan's felt needs in both the spiritual and the social/physical realms.

The Avoidance of Confrontation, Conflict and Misfortune

The sixth cultural characteristic and obstacle to conversion to another religion is the desire to avoid confrontation, conflict and misfortune. The belief systems of the Isan demand that they go to any effort to appease and manipulate spirits and powers. By so doing they avoid any confrontation and conflict with any natural or supernatural forces and sidestep possible misfortune from occurring in their community, kin group or family.

Conflict with the spirits (*phi-ผี*) occurs when a person no longer observes the mores and rituals prescribed in the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)*. Consequently, misfortune is believed to befall a wrongdoer in the form of sickness, an accident, or death. Misfortune can also come upon the wrongdoer's village community, kin group, or household.

Not only is the possibility of confrontation and conflict with the spirits (*phi-ผี*) a deterrent for responding to the gospel message, but the notion of possible confrontation and conflict with one's village community, kin group, household, or significant others such as one's patrons/superiors has prevented the Isan from giving the gospel message a chance in their lives. The Isan would rather avoid any displeasure by compromising and negotiating with powers of equal or greater strength. These powers include those of human origin in the nation, the village community, the kin group and the household as well as the supernatural powers.

Perhaps, the Isan continue to be unresponsive to the gospel message of Christianity because they have not been confronted with the supernatural power of the Christian's God. Therefore, Christian believers need to demonstrate (perhaps through some form of power encounter) that the Holy Spirit that lives in every believer is greater than the most powerful *phi* (spirit) or other supernatural being or power in this world.

The Male Positional Leadership Authority for Decision Making

The seventh cultural characteristic and obstacle is related to the decision-making authority of the male positional leadership. Although the daily responsibilities of carrying out the religious duties of the Isan community rest primarily on the female population, the males remain the dominant decision makers when it comes to any change in religion. As a result, any decision making outside of the household involves only the male members. This explains the reason that, when women convert, it is met with minimal sanctions; conversely, when a male figure turns to Christianity, it is a serious statement to the community, his kin group, and his household that he intentionally made the decision to convert. However, the female's decision to convert could be interpreted as ignorance of her decision-making rights, and as temporary and provisional. Consequently, the female's decision to convert may be met with minor criticism.

Not only is the decision to convert to Christianity based on the approval of the male in order to be formally recognized and upheld, the decisions are expected to be made with the involvement of those in positional leadership authority such as the head of the household, the elders of kin groups, and the elders and leaders of the village community. Any decision to convert to Christianity without the approval of those in positional leadership authority will certainly be met with varied degrees of negative sanctions, which usually means the loss of the support, protection, and resources needed for the survival of the decision-maker.

Because their authority normally holds sway and goes unchallenged, those in positional leadership authority must be taken into consideration when making the decision to convert to any other religion than the one held by the village community, kin group, and household. The individuals who are considering conversion to Christianity almost always weigh tradeoffs. The question in the minds of the interested Isan villagers is, "What can Christianity offer in terms of survival, security, stability and protection that Buddhism has not already provided? Can Christianity replace the loss and much more?" The dominance of the male positional leadership authority pattern has worked especially against male, family, and kinship conversion in Isan in the past, and there has been meager fruit. Therefore, more attention, prayer, and research need to be focused on this problem.

Provisional/Probationary Decision Making

The final cultural characteristic of Isan society which hinders religious change is the provisional and conditional nature of the Isan's decision-making process. The overwhelming majority of Isan people who initially profess conversion to Christianity typically make only a provisional/probationary decision to convert. Then the decision is evaluated; and, if it is found to be positive and beneficial with minimal or no negative repercussions, the provisional/probationary decision will then be followed by a permanent, sustained commitment. On the other hand, if the provisional/probationary decision is met with negative reactions from one's parents, elders, leaders, or others in one's network of relationships, then the provisional decision is typically abandoned.

In this provisional/probationary decision phase, the Isan convert typically holds to his former religious beliefs until a permanent decision to convert has been made. Due to the pressures from the convert's village community, kin group, household, and significant others, the convert has little chance of sustaining his

conversion decision unless a new network of relationships from the Christian community can hastily replace the former ones and provide support for him. In addition, if the convert reverts to his former religion, he becomes a stumbling block for other potential converts. Therefore, as a consequence of this provisional decision-making mode of conversion in the Isan region, much more attention needs to be placed on following up and discipling every new convert, and, whever possible, get him into a Christian supporting group.

Although the eight study conclusions are obstacles, hindrances and tremendous barriers for the communication and penetration of the gospel into the innermost recesses of the Isan heart and psyche, the expansion of the kingdom of God continues through His church and urgently demands that we pray, plan, do research, and seek to demolish spiritual strongholds (2 Cor. 10:3-5 KJV) and penetrate every society with the gospel and build His Church. Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not overcome it" (Matt 16:18 NAS). The spread of the gospel through the planting of His churches perceives no real barriers and nothing shall be able to stop it. The best laid plans of Satan and humanity to prevent the penetration of the kingdom of God will not succeed. His church will triumph unhindered.

Twelve Key Missiological Implications of the Study

As a result of the author's study on the belief systems and decision making of the Isan people of Northeast Thailand, he has selected 12 key missiological implications. These implications are suggestions or recommendations which are made particularly for those working with the Isan people of Northeast Thailand and other people groups with a similar culture and way of life. These important missiological considerations will now be discussed.

The Development of Bunkhun/Reciprocal Relationships As a Starting Point for Evangelism

The first missiological implication is to develop *bunkhun*/reciprocal relationships as a starting point for evangelism to the Isan people of Northeast Thailand. The most intimate and lasting of all relationships is that between the child and his mother. The *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ-a return merit for the favor) relationship which the child owes the mother could be seen as an eternal obligation which must be reciprocated by good deeds. Next in this hierarchy is the *khun* (grace or favor) which is the unconditional and unselfish favor shown by the teacher, benevolent ruler (king), or any other person usually generates a *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) in the heart of the receiver. Consequently, a lifelong or eternal relationship is started between the giver and the receiver of *khun*. The receiver is obliged to reciprocate the *khun* (คุณ) with a *bunkhun* to the giver. The size and quality of the return favor typically is commensurate to the *khun* (คุณ) one has received. The *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* could be any tangible (material objects) or intangible (his own life, lifelong service, loyalty, advice, support, submission, or bringing a good name to the giver) offering, but it must be given from a heart full of sincerity and submission.

Since the medium of *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships in the Isan culture and society already exists through which the communication of the gospel message can

flow, it would be advisable for any gospel messenger to develop an evangelistic strategy centering on the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship. Immediately after a *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship is established with a counterpart, a channel for communication has been opened, and chances are the recipient in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship will reciprocate the *khun* shown by the giver or, ultimately, the Giver of Life (Jesus) whose surrendered life displays the highest level of *khun*. Thus, the evangelist should be mindful of building *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships with unsaved Isan people whom he would like to receive salvation. However, if an Isan converts to Christ as a return for the *khun (คุณ)* he has received from the evangelist, the new convert should immediately be discipled toward maturity. As a result, he will also develop a *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship with the Giver of Life with whom he is eternally obligated for the *khun (คุณ)* which has been shown to him. At this point, the process for decision making for conversion has reached its completion.

Focusing on Evangelism Through Networks of Kinship and Church Planting By Enlarging the Entourage

The second missiological implication is to focus on evangelism through working within their network of kinship relationships and to concentrate on church planting by enlarging each of their entourages. In terms of economy, survival, security, stability and protection, the most reliable relationships are kinship relationships. Although the community elders and leaders' support and blessing are sought before a final decision for conversion is made, the decision to change religion, such as conversion to Christianity, rests predominantly within the decision-making power of the kinship. Once one or more of the members or households in a kin group have decided to embrace Christianity, the barrier for other kinsmen from the same kin group to embrace the gospel message is lowered.

Apart from the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships (which normally can also be developed with a non-kinsman), the kinship relationships provide the best natural avenue for the gospel message to disseminate and thrive in Northeast Thailand. The Isan villagers will likely convert to Christianity if the gospel message is introduced to them by or through one of his/her kinsmen. Conversion to Christianity with the kinsmen's support allows the converts to thrive without the loss of economic and social support, security and protection, which are usually provided by the kin group.

While a decision made to convert to Christianity is likely to be permanent and sustainable through the network of the kin group, the church planting movement is tenable by enlarging the entourage in which the convert serves as the patron. The larger the relationships within the entourage, the greater the chance that the church plant will gain support and became sustainable. In place of disseminating the gospel message to strangers or those outside of the network of relationships, the evangelist and church planter will increase their probability of success by encouraging the converts to influence those relationships within their entourage.

This in return will bring salvation to those in the relationships and, thus, the church-planting movement grows because of the enlargement of each of the entourages. Providing that the entourage already provides economic and social support through the existing relationships, the new converts do not have to experience the loss of support and protection and begin new relationships. As a result, the church planting movement grows naturally in the context of an entourage.

Continued Awareness of the Felt Need for Survival, Security, Stability and Protection
As the Basis for Evangelism, Discipleship and Church Planting

The third missiological implication is for the missionaries and evangelists to remain aware of the felt need of the Isan people for survival, security, stability and protection as the basis for their efforts in evangelism, discipleship and church planting. The basic instinct of the Isan people of Northeast Thailand is to survive and to find a secure and stability community where they will find protection from evil powers and influences and from disasters and misfortunes. These felt needs continue to form the basic motivation for their behaviors and decision making. Much of the ancestral traditional beliefs and customs in combination with the Buddhist teachings of karma, merit and reincarnation seem to satisfy these felt needs.

However, because modernization and globalization have brought changes and challenges that have resulted in instability and insecurity, the Isan village communities are re-addressing these felt needs. Although the Isan villagers have been dependent on their *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี), and the religion of Buddhism to provide for these felt needs, these new situations have forced the modern Isan of Northeast Thailand to face new challenges for survival, security, stability and protection. A fraction of the population are ready to try Christianity with the prospect that their future will be better, while the overwhelming majority still find security and protection in the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี) of their ancient past. Nevertheless, the matter of survival, security, stability and protection will continue to be of utmost concern and will form an important motivation for decision making for the Isan people. Whoever and whatever religious system that responds well to these felt needs will probably have the attention and, eventually, the heart of the people.

In light of these considerations, the missionaries, evangelists, or church planters who keep the Isan's felt needs as their primary concern and as the basis for their evangelism, discipleship and church planting works will have a better chance of sustainable ministry among them than those who ignore these felt needs. It is only when these felt needs are met that the Isan will be able to withstand the sanctions of various forms that will be imposed on them as soon as they convert to the Christian faith. However, if these felt needs are not properly addressed, it is unlikely that the Isan people will consider any other way of life except that which they have inherited from the ancient past in the form of the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี).

Directing Efforts on Ministering to the Children, Young People and College Students

The fourth missiological implication is to primarily direct efforts on ministering to the children, young people and college students. The children, young people and college students are not regarded as full members of the village society. These people are living under the responsibility of the full adult members of the village community. Their full rights and privileges are not recognized until they are married and have substantial economic holdings. In addition, much of the Buddhist beliefs and values according to the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี) are learned from the time these people were small children. The school system, the household, the kin group, and the community play the primary role in training these people from the time they are toddlers. When they reach the status of full members of the society, they are well established in the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี) and Buddhist beliefs and practices. Thus, being ingrained in these beliefs and values, the adult members of the

Isan society are expected to continue in the way of the ancestors. To forsake ancestral traditional beliefs and customs is believed to incur misfortune and disaster from the supernatural powers and also from the community, kin group, and household.

Christian missionaries, evangelists and church planters should focus much of their efforts and time on the Isan's children, young people, and college students because the societal expectation for them to perform the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีต ประเพณี) and observe Buddhism is minimal. Enlarging their worldview to include the concepts of God, Christ, sin, salvation, and a Christian view of the universe (including the earth, heaven, and hell) will help prepare their hearts to receive the gospel message. In light of these factors, the investment of time and effort in ministering to children, young people, and college students will be of greater advantage for the expansion of Christianity throughout the Isan region. Many of the young people are open to the Christian faith at this younger age; however, they will still be pressured to revert to Buddhism at the point of adulthood. Therefore, it is likely that a large majority of them will not remain in their Christian faith unless a proper support mechanism from the Christian community is maintained and a network of relationships with other believers is strong. In addition, while they are still young and are not considered full members of society, the young people should be discipled and prepared in their Christian faith to face the awaiting pressures of conforming to societal norms.

Maturing the Patron-Client Relationships with Converts Through Life-Long Discipleship

The fifth missiological implication is to mature the patron-client relationships with Isan converts through a lifelong discipleship process. Inside the boundary of a village setting, the Isan heavily depend on their network of kinship relationships to provide for their stability and security. However, beyond the village boundary, they rely heavily on the patron-client/superior-inferior relationships for survival, security, stability and protection. Apart from these relationships, it would be hard to imagine that they will survive in the modern world. Some of the kinship relationships still exist outside of the village community when an Isan follows one of his experienced kinsmen to Bangkok or another urban center to find work and then clings to him for support and protection. However, most of the relationships beyond the village's confinement are based on the pattern of patron-client/superior-inferior relationships. The young urbanite is typically a client to some powerful patron, and belongs to his entourage.

In the same way, many of the conversions in the Isan region take the form of a patron-client relationship. When the Roman Catholic priests/missionaries arrived in the Isan region and began their mission work in Ubonratchatani, they converted thousands of followers from among the slaves, the minor wives of the provincial governing authorities, the impoverished, the Vietnamese and mountainous minorities, the outcasts, and those who were enslaved to evil spirits. The Roman Catholic priests/missionaries were viewed as patrons to thousands of people who were not their clients. The patron-client relationships resulted in the benefits of support and protection for the clients, and loyalty, submission, and power for the patrons. The conversion pattern of patron-client/superior-inferior relationships is still prevalent in the Isan region today. Apart from those who are born into a Christian family, those who are converted to Christianity initially perceive conversion in term of being a

client to a missionary, evangelist, pastor or an influential Christian. In return for this conversion decision, he is expecting or has already received something tangible or intangible from the one whom he has come to accept as his patron. The tangible or intangible returns for his conversion are mainly related to meeting his felt needs.

Because the majority of the conversion decisions in the Isan region developed along the lines of the patron-client relationship, the sustainability of the Christian faith will heavily depend on the work of lifelong discipleship by the missionaries, evangelists, or pastors who function in the role of patron for these converts. Since the patron-client relationships lack the basics of a secure and stable relationship, a convert's maturing beyond the patron-client relationship is imperative for the converts to have a sustainable Christian life. If the patron-client relationship can be developed through a lifelong discipleship into a *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationship whereby Christ is also seen as the counterpart in that *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ) relationship, the prospect of having a sustainable Christian faith is positive. Therefore, a serious lifelong discipleship plan should be a part of the strategy for post conversion experience.

Following-Up and Converting Provisional/Probationary Decisions to Permanent Decisions

The sixth missiological implication is to conduct follow-up with the new believers in order to convert their provisional/probationary decision into a permanent one. The Isan view the initial conversion decision as provisional/probationary. Only after a period of evaluation has passed with little or no negative reactions from others will a permanent decision be made. If the provisional/probationary decision is met with strong opposition that would jeopardize one's state of survival, security, stability and protection, the provisional/probationary decision will probably be discarded. This explains the high percentage of Isan converts who are no longer practicing Christians after they have made an initial decision to become believers.

In view of the provisional/probationary nature of the initial conversion decision, the gospel messenger (missionary, evangelist, and church planter) should immediately follow up the new convert who has made an initial decision. The provisional/probationary period is an extremely critical stage prior to the final, permanent conversion decision. This is when the missionary, evangelist, or church planter who is close to the convert must provide a support system by which the new convert feels the security, stability and protection of the new relationship with Christianity. In the context of a dominant Buddhist environment where followers strongly adhere to the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี), the new convert will unequivocally face extreme pressures and opposition during the provisional/probationary period. This resistance will come from his village community, his kin group, the household and significant others. The new converts will likely be pressured to continue to carry out the expected merit-making activities and rituals which are required of every adult member by the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีต ประเพณี).

Therefore, the goal of the missionary, evangelist, or church planter is to help the new convert pass the provisional/probationary phase and make the final, permanent decision. Only when the provisional/probationary decision is converted to a permanent decision can the Christian life have a chance to mature. Although the

follow-up may take time, energy and resources which may restrict the rate and quantity of conversion growth for the missionary, evangelist, or church planter, the long-term effect of improper follow-up may lead to disappointing results in the long run.

Building a Sense of Christian Family and Community Solidarity among Believers

The seventh missiological implication is to build a sense of Christian family and community solidarity among believers. The Isan people have a strong sense of community where trust relationships and security are found. Any relationships outside of the community are characterized by superficiality and shallowness. In the village community, the Isan finds that stability continues the traditional ways of their ancestors and aids to resolve conflicts or crises in their families and kin groups. The Isan's belief and value systems have the primary goal of establishing a strong community life where solidarity and harmony are maintained. The traditional customs, rituals, ceremonies and festivals are designed to promote community solidarity. The Buddhist merit-making activities, the *hiit-sipsong* (ฮีตสิบ สอง) rites, the life-cycle rituals, and the occasional rituals are all communal affairs and are designed to foster a sense of community among the Isan people. In the community the Isan people learn about roles, rights and obligations, and their behaviors and conduct are regulated.

The majority of the Isan people only knows and lives the community life where eating, drinking and celebrating together strengthen the unity and stability of the community. Apart from the ones who have been living and working in Bangkok and other urban centers, most of the Isan people recognize no other kind of life than life in the context of a village community where conformity, obligations and reciprocal relationships dominate. Also, in the community life, the interest of the group always takes priority over the interest of the individual. In addition, the Isan people place a strong value on family solidarity. Happiness and loving relationships within the household are primary life goals, although most of them will never attain such familial peace. However, it does not stop them from trying. A secure and stable home in the protection of a village community is the desire of all of the Isan people.

In view of the strong sense of family and communal life among the Isan, the missionaries, evangelists and church planters would do well to consider the continuity of family and community solidarity for the converts. One of the reasons that Roman Catholicism found success in large numbers of conversions in the early part of their mission work in the Isan region was due largely to their strategy of building Catholic communities. Although the concept of a Catholic community had an inherent weakness in that it uprooted people from their natural surroundings and natural community, the starting of the Catholic communities, was primarily responsible for the spread of Roman Catholicism during the pioneer period of their Isan work.

Because of their background as a community people, the Isan converts respond like a fish out of water if they are asked to make individual decisions without the support and blessing of older and more mature Christians. A sense of Christian family and community solidarity with other believers provides a place of belonging and feelings of security, stability and protection within a group. One of the worst fears of an Isan individual is that he will be without a community of people where he is recognized and accepted. Nothing is worse than the thought of dying alone or with

just a small number of people coming and participating in one's burial. Thus, a continual emphasis on family and community solidarity will be helpful to foster the expansion and growth of Christianity throughout the Isan region.

The family and community solidarity which the author proposes is an atmosphere where Isan converts, regardless of whether they are related by blood or marriage, from the same kin group or village, have a sense that they are *yatphinong (ญาติพี่น้อง-kinsmen)*. A natural village community is established around those who are kinsmen by blood or marriage, and community life is usually lived by interacting with those kinsmen. However, a fictive Christian community is where believers regard each other as kinsmen and interact with each other with the duties of a kinsman. A Christian *yatphinong* atmosphere will continue to satisfy the felt need of the Isan converts for survival, security, stability and protection. Furthermore, the sense of family and community solidarity among Isan believers will respond well to the Isan's value system which stresses group (community) solidarity, social harmony, psychological stability and security, and reciprocity and obligations. As a result, the spread of Christianity will likely experience some success and fewer barriers as it follows the social flow of Isan's society.

Remaining Connected to the Community, Kin Group and Household

The eighth missiological implication is to encourage the Isan converts to remain connected to their village community, kin group, household and other significant relationships. Many of the pioneer attempts of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians to expand in Northeast Thailand included uprooting the Isan coverts from their natural surrounding and placing them in a foreign or *farang (ฝรั่ง)* environment. The relocation of coverts to the Catholic communities or other similar settings was intended to shelter them from persecution and ostracism by their own kinsmen and the authorities as well as to foster an environment conducive to the teaching of the new Christian religion and way of life.

Consequently, the converts became estranged to members of their own household, kin group, and village community. Socially and culturally the new converts are disconnected from their network of trust relationships, perceived as traitors. They are also held in contempt of the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)*, and displaced from group (community) solidarity and social harmony. Thus, the new converts lose the chance of maintaining the vital relationship bridge for reaching the family, kinsmen and community. In addition, they probably would not be welcomed back to the village community unless they were willing to participate in the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)*, along with its religious rituals, ceremonies and festivals, which is required of every good member of the village community.

In view of these facts, the missionaries, evangelists and church planters should encourage the converts to remain connected to their network of relationships, members of their household, kin group and village community. As difficult as it may be, the convert's presence in his household, kin group and community will build an essential bridge on which the gospel can flow. Also, it will remove the perception that Christianity is a destroyer of relationships and family, household, and community solidarity. However, as the converts remain connected to former surroundings, it is critical that the missionaries, evangelists or church planters provide the needed social and spiritual support for their new found faith to be established. This is important so as to avoid the possibility of them reverting to their former religion and way of life

under social pressure. Once the conversion growth has reached a justifiable number, a small Bible group, cell group, or a church should be started in the converts' location to provide the needed support for the sustainability of the Christian faith. As a result, a church planting movement may have a better chance to grow and thrive under these conditions.

Maintaining Respect and Deference for Parents, Elders, Rulers and Seniorities

The ninth missiological implication is to facilitate the Isan converts in maintaining respect and deference for their parents, elders, rulers and seniorities. Public displays of respect and regard for those in authority, such as one's parents, elders, ruler, or seniorities, are highly esteemed in the Isan's society. The society is extremely sensitive as to how these attitudes of respect are to be hierarchically and vertically shown. The proof of one's respect to one's parents, elders, rulers and seniorities normally is displayed by one's obedience and deference to those authority figures.

When Christianity entered the Isan region, it seemed to ignore the highly regarded Isan value to publicly showing respect and deference. The Roman Catholic priests/missionaries disrespected the Sakon Nakon's governor by slapping the face and kicking the foot of one of the officials sent by the Sakon Nakon governor. Also, the Protestant missionaries have shown disrespect to the king and his religion in a number of incidents. For example, the young men who had converted to Protestant Christianity under the Protestant (C&MA) missionaries had come to regard the elders (*awooso*-อาๆโส) as ignorant, uneducated and incompetent. Therefore, they were not allowed to receive Bible training. Instead, the young men were the ones who received Bible training and, afterward, tried to wield their power and leadership position over the elderly men. The Isan's society and community have always accepted, appointed and recognized the elderly men (*awooso*-อาๆโส) for the position of leadership. By contrast, the Western missionaries working in the Isan area have concentrated on the young educated men who are competent and full of zeal and energy for the position of leadership. The Isan respect experience and old age, while the Western missionaries value achievement and strength. The Isan society highly esteems hierarchy and power (with the Thai king being at the top of the social hierarchy), whereas the Western missionaries place importance on equality and humility. As a result, the Isan society views Christianity as a Western lifestyle which disrespects the authority figures publicly accepted and recognized by the people.

In light of these highly regarded Isan values, the missionaries, evangelists and church planters should as much as possible maintain an attitude of respect for the publicly recognized authority figures and encourage the converts to do the same. Much of the ways and means by which the Isan society culturally displays respect and deference should continue to be observed as long as they do not conflict with the core beliefs of the Christian faith. The missionaries, evangelists and church planters should carefully make distinctions between those parts or elements of the Isan's customs and practices that belong to the realm of culture and those that belong to the domain of Buddhist/animistic religion. Although these two areas contain a lot of overlapping, this distinction should, nevertheless, be distinguished so that proper forms and expressions can still be maintained in order to demonstrate that Christianity did not come to destroy the beauty of the Isan's culture. With the proper attitude of respect and deference to those recognized in authority positions, Christianity may

have more of a chance of being understood and accepted. As a result, the social barriers for the spread of Christianity may also be fewer.

Guiding the Isan Churches to Achieve Indigenization for Their Region

The tenth missiological implication is to guide the Isan churches to achieve indigenization of Christianity for their region of the world. The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines indigenous as: "Naturally existing in a place or country rather than arriving from another place."[460] Since Christianity is not indigenous to Thailand, as well as in most places in the world, missionaries, evangelists and church planters need to spread the gospel so that it can then work toward the process of indigenization.

In order to effectively work through the process of achieving the goal of indigenization, it is important for the missionaries, evangelists and church planters to grasp the anthropological concept of "the outside advocate and the inside innovator." The outside advocate is the gospel messenger who brings the message. The French Catholic missionaries and also the American C&MA missionaries who preached in Isan were both "outside advocates." When some Isan accepted the message and became Christians, they then had the potential of becoming "inside innovators." If these believers blindly follow the foreignness of the "outside advocate" and do not become "inside innovators" by contextualizing and indigenizing the message, it will probably remain foreign to them, and they will also likely remain unresponsive. If a people group is not provided with a proper example and if they are not taught in the beginning that the goal of both Christians and churches is to become indigenous, they will likely become self-satisfied and complacent and not work toward the goal of indigenization.

Considerable resistance and unresponsiveness to the propagation of the gospel message has come from the foreignness of the gospel as well as the foreignness of the gospel messengers' approaches and methodologies reflected predominately by Western origin, mentality and orientation. Unnaturally placed in the Isan region through political means by the foreign French Roman Catholic priests/missionaries, Christianity has been perceived as anything but indigenous. Furthermore, its subsequent forms and expressions continue to reflect its foreignness until the present. As result, Christianity dons the image of an imported foreign religion and thus an outsider to the culture and people. Therefore, it is to be treated with suspicion and mistrust as any other outside influence. This helps explain the reason why Christianity was not embraced and widely accepted by the people of Northeast Thailand.

In view of Christianity's image in the Isan region, it would be advisable for the missionaries, evangelists and church planters to take seriously the process of indigenization of Christianity for this region of the world. Although the standard criteria for indigenization (or indigeneity) has usually been measured by the attainment of self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting churches (sometimes referred to as the three-self movement), one must realize that the attainment of the three-self goal does not mean that one has completed the process of indigenization or has achieved the goal of indigeneity. The mark of true indigeneity

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[460]"Indigenous," in *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

is its "naturalness" or "spontaneity" in the area as perceived and accepted by the local people. As long as Christianity is viewed by the Isan people as a foreign religion and not part of its culture, it has neither achieved the goal of indigeneity nor has it completed the process of indigenization, even though the three-self goal has been met at least to a degree.

The beginning of the church indigenization process (for the church in a given area in which Christianity is not indigenous) will probably always require outside help, support and assistance for a limited time in both the areas of finances and personnel. This is especially true of funding for church structures, training facilities and teaching personnel. However, after a sizable group has been converted in a location and a church structure has been built and a pastor's salary paid in part or in full from outside sources, that congregation should be working through the process of indigenization. The Mekong Church Khemarat (in the Mercy Church Association and Mekong Evangelical Mission) in Khemarat district of Ubonratchatani is an example of a church that is working through the process of indigenization. They have taken important steps toward achieving the three selfs. They have built a church building, which includes a facility for a pre-school, and have enrolled pre-schoolers from the Khemarat area. The proceeds of the pre-school are almost enough to meet the expenses of the church. In addition, the church has a special mushroom project as well as other self-help projects to generate income so that the church can become self-supporting. This church seems to be proceeding in the process of indigenization.

With its distinct culture and language, the Isan people need Christianity to naturally flow within its social and cultural structure. At this juncture the indigenization process is crucial to the ongoing growth of Christianity. The role and function of the Isan churches as insiders to the culture is critical and essential. For Christianity to become naturalized to the Isan region, the Isan churches must bring about the change. Unless the Isan churches themselves take the lead to initiate and complete the process of indigenization, Christianity will continue to be viewed as a foreign commodity. It is indispensable for the indigenization process that the Isan churches' claim to Christianity be demonstrated through their own dedication and sacrifice. However, for the indigenization of Christianity to complete its process, it will require the Isan churches (as insider innovators) to support the change with their own resources of finances, sons and daughters, and, maybe even their own blood.

Working Toward Church Planting Movements as the Final Goal of an
Indigenous Church

The eleventh missiological implication is to work toward church planting movements as the final goal of an indigenous church. David Garrison, who has served as the Southern Baptist International Mission Board's Associate Vice President for Global Strategy in assisting the International Mission Board's 5,000 missionaries ministering in 150 countries and also a recognized authority on church-planting movements, gives his definition on church planting movements: "A Church Planting Movement is a rapid and exponential increase of indigenous church planting churches within a given people group or population segment."[461] Furthermore, Garrison presented 10 universal elements and also 10 frequently, though not universal,

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[461]David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Richmond, Va.: International Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 2000), 8.

characteristics or common factors found in church planting movements around the world. The 10 elements are extraordinary prayer, abundant evangelism, intentional planting of reproducing churches, authority of God's word, local leadership, lay leadership, house churches, church planting churches, rapid reproduction, and healthy churches.[462] The 10 characteristics or common factors include a climate of uncertainty in society, insulation from outsiders, a high cost for following Christ, bold fearless faith, family-based conversion patterns, rapid incorporation of new believers, worship in the heart language, divine signs and wonders, on-the-job leadership training, and missionaries suffering.[463]

In order to utilize knowledge gained from studying the eight societal obstacles, hindrances or barriers and use it for the communication of the gospel in Isan and for the development of the indigenous church, which, eventually might lead to a church planting movement in Isan, one must be insightful and discerning so as to turn these hurdles into helps. First of all, concerning the Isan's desire to preserve the ancestral customs inherited from the past in order to maintain the distinctive identity of the Isan, the missionaries, the evangelists or church planters would be wise to identity the local cultural traits which do not compromise scripture and that can be adopted and used so that the gospel message can be communicated along cultural lines.

Second, concerning the *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ)/reciprocal and patron-client relationships, one should be mindful to develop a *bunkhun* (บุญคุณ)/reciprocal relationship as well as a patron-client relationship with those whom one is seeking to communicate the gospel. Furthermore, only a church which understands and is capable of maintaining such relationships within its body can truly reflect the Isan's indigeneity.

Third, concerning the attitude of respect, deference, *krengchai* (เกรงใจ) and approval from one's parents, elders and authorities, the missionaries, evangelists or church planters should relate to others with respect, deference, and *krengchai* (เกรงใจ) in a culturally appropriate way so that their communication of the gospel message will not be hindered, but, rather, enhanced the development of the process of indigenization.

Fourth, concerning the value of group solidarity and social harmony, the missionaries, evangelists or church planters working in Isan should avoid any action which might break the solidarity and harmony in a household, kin group, or village community. Those converted to Christianity should be taught early in their conversion experience to remain loving and supportive of their family, kin group and household, instead of suspending all activities for fear that those activities might violate their new found faith in Christianity. Moreover, the missionaries, evangelists or church planters should quickly develop good relationships with the relatives and friends of the new converts to ensure that the new faith (Christianity) does not appear to create disharmony or disunity, but rather love and peace within the family. However, there are some cases where it will not be possible for the new converts to stay in harmony and solidarity without denouncing their new found faith. However, even this kind of situation creates an opportunity to communicate the gospel message and for Christianity to be received and become indigenous to the people.

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[462]Ibid., 33-38.

[463]Ibid., 38-40.

Fifth, concerning the matters of survival, security, stability and protection, Christian workers should keep in mind that the Isan's utmost concern is for their survival, security, stability and protection. The communication of the gospel should be done so that it can provide for these felt needs.

Sixth, concerning the avoidance of confrontation, conflict and misfortune, the missionaries, evangelists or church planters should try to avoid any confrontation or conflict which can cause a loss of face, thus bringing about a break in relationships beyond repair. As a result, opportunity for the ongoing communication of the gospel is broken and the possibility of developing an indigenous church is lost.

Seventh, concerning the male and positional leadership authority for decision making, it is important that the missionaries, evangelists and church planters maintain good relationships with these leaders, although they themselves might not convert to Christianity. They might, however, allow those under their authority the possibility of converting to Christianity if they receive good impressions from Christian people or if they have good relationships with Christians. Even if Christianity does not have the support of these male, positional leaders, Christianity can still possibly influence and convert people under these leaders' influence if they are not fiercely and expressively opposing Christianity. Also, if a sizable number of male positional leaders become Christians, then it may be possible that a group or people movement to the gospel could take place, thus speeding up the process of indigenization and church planting movements.

Eighth, in reference to the tendency of the Isan people for provisional/probationary decision making, it is important for the missionaries, evangelists and church planters to quickly provide discipleship and a network of support for a new convert so that a sustainable Christian life can be encouraged, thus enhancing the process of indigenization.

Once the process of indigenization for a people group or a region has been completed, a valid church planting movement is possible. Without a vibrant indigenous church to build on, it would hardly be possible to have a church planting movement. The churches in the Mercy Church Association (MCA) and Mekong Evangelical Mission (MEM) are at different phases in dealing with the eight societal obstacles, hindrances, or barriers to the communication of the gospel and in the development of an indigenous church moving toward a church planting movement. Although not all of the 10 elements or the 10 characteristics (common factors) of the church planting movements are currently found in the MCA and MEM, the majority of them, however, are evident in churches under the MCA and MEM.

Prayerfully Depending on the Holy Spirit While Working with Boldness and Patience

The final missiological implication is to proceed on the work of evangelism, discipleship and church planting with prayer and dependency on the Holy Spirit while working with boldness and patience. Although contextualized methodologies and well thought out strategies are important to the success of any work of effective evangelism, discipleship and church-planting work in the Isan region, the missionaries, evangelists and church planters must be aware of the spiritual cause of the unresponsiveness of the Isan of Northeast Thailand and particularly, the whole of Thailand generally. The Apostle Paul unveiled the root of unresponsiveness to the gospel message when he stated: "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has

blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:3-4 NAS). In applying Paul's words, there seem to be two major obstacles in the way of successful conversion of the Isan people: (1) their belief and value systems based on the social norms, Buddhistic/animistic religion and the *chareet prapaynee*; and (2) Satan's persistant work in keeping the Isan in spiritual blindness, unbelief and disobedience.

While the focus of this paper has been the analysis of the social network of the Isan people, including the beliefs, values and religious decision-making process, the results of the study can be used in the forming of strategy for reaching the Isan for Christ. One must not proceed in ignorance. The work of evangelism, discipleship and church planting among the Isan people can be satisfactorily achieved only through means and methods which are contextualized to the social network of Northeast Thailand. On the one hand, the nonresponsiveness of the Isan people to the gospel message can be attributed to the social structure and networks in Isan society. Yet on the other hand, the lack of response to the gospel message has a real spiritual root cause—that is, the god of this world (Satan) has created spiritual blindness in the minds and hearts which greatly affect the decision-making process to follow Christ. Consequently, effective missionaries, evangelists and church planters should not approach the strategy for evangelism, discipleship and church planting of the Isan people by focusing only on their belief and value systems and their religious decision-making process, but they should also apply the theology of power encounter to their strategy.[464] A proper understanding of power encounter provides a better understanding of the confrontation with the ungodly spiritual powers that restrict the Isan from making decisions for Christ and keeping them in darkness.

By the very nature of the work of the missionaries, evangelists and church planters, they are called to enter enemy territory and engage in spiritual warfare. In addition, because of their animistic tendencies, the Isan people have a spirit-focused worldview, which influences them to explain experiences and events in relation to the spirits or spiritual powers. Thus, in the work of evangelism, discipleship and church planting among the Isan people of Northeast Thailand, the missionaries, evangelists and church planters should:

(1) Recognize the reality and action of the spirit world under the control of Satan, who works to influence and control as well as to take possession of the minds and hearts of the Isan people, and the dark spiritual forces which have enormous power over households, entire kin groups, village communities, and even over nations (Daniel 10:11-13 KJV). The dark spiritual forces of Satan and his demons inherent in the social structure and network of the Isan society manifest themselves at the village community, kin group and household levels and stand opposed to the penetration of the gospel and the spreading of God's kingdom in Northeast Thailand. Concerning the reality of spiritual powers and authorities, the Apostle Paul writes: "For we

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[464]The treatment of spiritual warfare and power encounter was necessary in order to understand the whole scope of the Isan's resistence to conversion. The author feels that the Isan's nonresponsiveness to conversion should not be viewed only in connection to its social structure and networks but also to the spiritual causes which underline its idolatry worship. Since the goal and objectives of the dissertation are primarily designed to deal with the social, cultural and religious factors of the Isan's decision making, the author chooses to give some attention to the spiritual factors (power encounter/spiritual warfare) in this section.

wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12 KJV).

(2) Engage in spiritual warfare by resisting the spirit world and Satan and standing firm in the Christian beliefs. Missionaries, evangelists and church planters should come alongside the Isan people in their spiritual confrontation and warfare with the spirit world and spiritual powers which render them powerless and hold them in bondage and slavery. The reality and the necessity of engaging in spiritual warfare by the missionaries, evangelists and church planters is seen in the words of the Apostle Paul who says, "Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11 KJV). He further states, "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds" (2 Corinthians 10:4 KJV). Concerning the necessity of engaging in spiritual warfare, Howard Brant of the Society of International Ministries (SIM) states:

> We are challenged to get into the battle to take up God's full armor against a naked and defenseless foe and wield the offensive weapons of praise, the sword of the Spirit, and intercessory prayer. Through faith, mighty faith, and by prevailing prayer, we shall be numbered among the overcomers.[465]

The missionaries, evangelists and church planters should help the Isan people in their confrontation with the spiritual powers by standing strong in faith, the word of God and prayer. Paul writes, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world" (2 Peter 5:8-9 KJV).

In addition, the missionaries, evangelists and church planters should realize their position in Christ and His authority over the principalities and powers in their engagement in spiritual warfare to defeat the spiritual powers and principalities and to gain deliverance in the lives of the Isan people from Satan's control (Ephesians 1:19-21; 2:4-6 KJV). Only after the defeat of and the deliverance from the grip of the power of the spirits and Satan will the Isan experience empowerment to make conversion decisions and be prepared to face the resulting negative sanctions from their conversion. The 10 mighty plagues by which Jehovah defeated the gods of the Egyptians and delivered the Israelites from darkness testify to this reality (Exodus 12:12 KJV). Deliverance only came after the spiritual powers of the gods had been defeated. Thus, it is only through prayerful dependence upon the power of the Holy Spirit that the missionaries, evangelists and church planters see the unresponsive Isan come to permanent and sustaining decisions to follow Christ. Howard Brant shares his thoughts on this point: "It is as we learn to take up the weapons of our warfare and attack these strongholds of wickedness that God's Spirit will be released to turn men and women to himself, bring salvation to the lost, and revive His church."[466]

(3) Allow the supernatural display of God's power over spiritual powers and over the natural elements of our fallen world to serve as a witness of His sovereignty

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[465]Howard Brant, "Power Encounter: Toward an SIM Position," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 10, no. 4 (1993):187.

[466]Ibid., 186.

and superiority over the spiritual powers, so that many will come to know and receive Him. The 10 mighty plagues in the days Moses demonstrated God's sovereignty over spiritual principalities and powers. God's display of Himself by fire on Mount Carmel in the days of Elijah was to establish His superiority over all of the prophets of Baal and their pagan gods and spirits (1 King 18). As a result of God's display of His sovereignty and superiority, the defeat of spiritual powers was seen, a deliverance from spiritual powers was experienced, fear came upon all, and God was acknowledged and worshipped properly. The display of God's sovereignty and superiority over the powers of human authorities and of the spirits was instrumental in the conversion of many of the Isan villagers in Surin province of Northeast Thailand and Lao villagers in a Lao province.

In 1987, the Full Gospel Church of Thailand began their work in the district of Charmpra in Surin province in Northeast Thailand. Although Charmpra district had been among the first exposed to Christianity around 1982 when two Finnish Free Foreign Mission's missionaries, Ari and Karrene Parvianen, worked in Surin province, the work in that Charmpra district did not show any converts. It was not until 1987 when a Finnish Free missionary, Moilanen, and a Thai co-worker, Khammoon, began the work by distributing gospel tracts and evangelizing the children in Charmpra district that interest in the gospel was aroused. As a result of the work with the children, a neighbor of Moilanen and Khammoon requested that a ministry with adults also take place. Thus, they began holding weekly church services in their home. Not long after that period, Sanee Srisa-ad and Wina, an Isan couple from the Full Gospel Church of Thailand, joined the work and furthered the evangelistic effort in villages and schools in Charmpra district.[467]

Because Christianity was new to the district and a large number of people became interested, suspicion and opposition to Christianity arose. The opposition to Christianity in Charmpra district came in the form of a threat to those attending the services. This threat provoked the villagers to oppose Christianity and disturb the services. However, the two people who made the initial threats died by sickness or accident.[468] As result, fear came upon the unbelievers because they believed that the God of the Christians was superior to any human powers. Subsequently, the threats and opposition to Christianity ceased and the Isan church in Champra district experienced growth in conversions and membership. Among them were the conversions of a school teacher named Chuan Ngamlert and his family members. Not long after that, 10 other villagers in Ngamlert's village were converted. By 1995, Chaiyapon Charmpra Church had 47 members, a church building, and its own fully supported pastor.

In one of the villages in a Lao province, which is adjacent to Nakon Panom province in Northeast Thailand, a large number of villagers became converted through the gospel witness of a national evangelist. In this Lao village, it is customary to practice the oath of innocence when a theft has taken place in the village

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[467]Kettunen, *Toonluangthong: Finnish free foreign mission le kana pra kittikoon somboon nai pratet tai*, 226

[468]Hannu Kettunen, *Toonluangthong: Finnish free foreign mission le kana pra kittikoon somboon nai pratet tai* (Golden Field: Finnish Free Foreign Mission and the Full gospel Church in Thailand 1946-1996-ทุ่งรวงทอง: ฟินนิช ฟรี ฟอเรน มิชชั่น และคณะพระ กิตติคุณสมบูรณ์ในประเทศไทย) (in Thai), trans. Prapun Noratch (Chiangmai, Thailand: Srithong Printing Books, 1996), 185-86.

in order to find the guilty person(s) from among the villagers. The ceremony of the oath of innocence is performed by a spirit medium who requires every villager to be submersed under water for a brief period of time. While they are submerged, the spirit medium casts the spirits into the water and it is believed that the spirits would discern the guilty person and cause death to come upon him or her while being submerged. The person(s) who drowns is considered the guilty person(s). Since the oath of innocence serves as a customary law to govern the village life, every villager is required to abide by this custom. However, the villagers who had converted to Christ felt that they no longer were under the power of the spirits but under the power of God. Yet, their refusal to participate in the ceremony of the oath of innocence was not accepted by the village authorities. Either they submit to the rule of the village by participating in the ceremony or they would be charged with theft. Their refusal to participate in the ceremony to prove their innocence would be taken as an admission of guilt.

After much consideration, the believers finally agreed to participate in the ceremony but also made known to the village community that they were Christians and no longer recognized the power of the spirits. They only agreed to participate in the performance of the oath of innocence because it was required by the village customary law. Thus, the Christians concurred and submerged themselves under water and the spirit medium began to perform the ceremony by casting the spirits into the water while the believers were submerged so that the guilty person(s) could be discerned by the spirits. However, the spirit medium testified that the spirits refused his order to get into the water because the power residing in the water where the believers were submerged was superior to that of the spirits. After a brief period of time, all of the believers who were submerged floated to the surfaced and none drowned. Thus, their innocence was proven. As a result, fear came upon all of the villagers concerning the superior power of God who resides within the believers and more people became converted.[469]

(4) Acknowledge the sovereignty of God at work and by prayerfully depending upon the Holy Spirit in presenting the truth of the gospel. Although power encounter is a crucial part in the evangelism phase of bringing the Isan to the point of conversion to Christianity, the work of conversion, discipleship and church planting can not be complete without a truth encounter with the gospel and the word of God. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe (Romans 1:16 KJV). When the gospel is presented in the power of the Holy Spirit and prayer in the context of power encounters, the spirit powers of Satan and his demons, who hold the Isan in darkness, will be defeated and deliverance as well as salvation will be experienced. Thus, missionaries, evangelists and church planters should proceed with the work of evangelizing, discipling and planting churches among the Isan peope of Northeast Thailand by recognizing the sovereignty of God at work and by prayerfully depending upon the Holy Spirit for any spiritual fruit so that they will not become discouraged.

J. I. Packer, one of the most important evangelical theologians in the 20th century, pointed out an extremely significant foundation for evangelism: "The

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[469]Keonouphan Prasawat, National Missionary, interview by author, 10 October 2007, 58 Moo 12, Palan sub-district, Nathan minor-district, Ubonratchatani province, Ubonratchatani province, Northeast Thailand.

sovereignty of God in grace gives us our only hope for success in evangelism."[470] The sovereignty of God in grace presents the assurance and certainty that evangelism will result in conversion decisions. Nevertheless, the missionaries, evangelists and church planters must be bold, patient and prayerful. A prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit of God should be the attitude of Christian worker working among the Isan of Northeast Thailand. Packer elaborates on prayer: "Prayer…is a confessing of impotence and need, an acknowledging of helplessness and dependence, and an invoking of the mighty power of God to do for us what we can not do for ourselves."[471] Work and prayer go together hand-in-hand. Only as missionaries, evangelists and church planters continue boldly and patiently in facing the tremendous obstacles and hindrances to the gospel derived from the belief and value systems of the Isan people and acknowledge their inadequacy and dependency on the Holy Spirit through prayer will they see the Isan's hearts penetrated with the gospel, souls converted, indigenous churches planted, and church planting movements initiated.

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[470]James Innell Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 106.

[471]Ibid., 122.

PRINCIPAL DECSION MAKERS
IN THE ISAN'S DECSION-MAKING PROCESS

Principal Decision Makers In All Nine Areas of Decision Making

	Community	Kin Group	Household	Individual Self	Significant Others
Conversion to Christianity	10%	30%	11%	46%	2%
Religious Change	10%	30%	11%	46%	2%
Religious Observances	20%	49%	2%	28%	0%
Building House or Choosing Residence	1%	11%	48%	35%	4%
Inheritance	1%	12%	42%	43%	2%
Education Choice	0%	13%	30%	52%	4%
Medical Treatment	1%	7%	28%	13%	47%
Career Choice	0%	9%	47%	43%	1%
Marriage or Divorce	0%	10%	25%	64%	1%

Percentage of People

Principal Decision Makers

Legend:
- Conversion to Christianity
- Religious Change
- Religious Observances
- Building House or Choosing Residence
- Inheritance
- Education Choice
- Medical Treatment
- Career Choice
- Marriage or Divorce

FIVE GROUPS INVOLVED IN DECISION MAKING: COMMUNITY, KIN GROUP, HOUSEHOLD, INDIVIDUAL SELF AND SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Involvement of Five Decision Makers In All Nine Areas of Decision Making

	1	2	3	4	5
Conversion to Christianity	40%	58%	38%	82%	28%
Religious Change	65%	76%	61%	98%	36%
Religious Observances	87%	92%	64%	98%	24%
Building House or Choosing Residence	34%	82%	63%	99%	56%
Inheritance	26%	80%	64%	99%	47%
Education Choice	21%	89%	76%	99%	29%
Medical Treatment	26%	85%	65%	97%	88%
Career Choice	27%	90%	72%	100%	38%
Marriage or Divorce	42%	93%	78%	100%	24%

Five Groups of Decision Makers
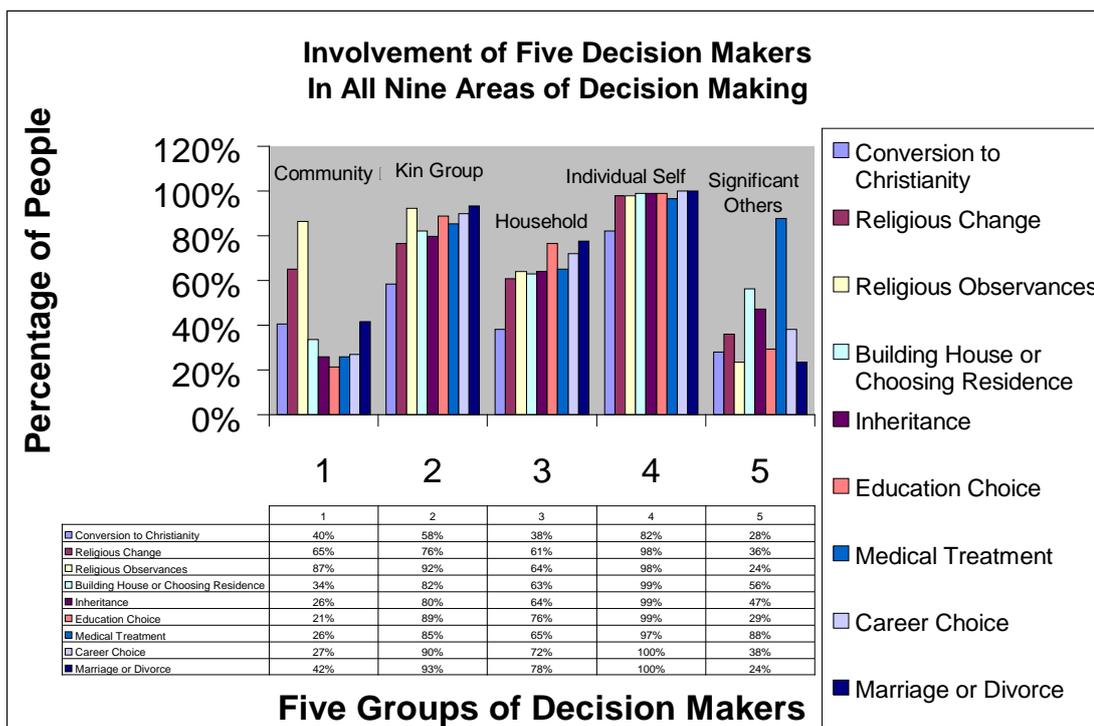
APPENDIX C

DECISION MAKING FOR CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY, CHANGING TO ANOTHER RELIGION AND OBSERVING ONE'S RELIGION

CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

	Community	Kin Group	Household	Self	Sig. Others
Number interviewees	**89**	**89**	**89**	**89**	**89**
Number which selected this category	**36**	**52**	**34**	**73**	**25**
Number which did not check this category	**53**	**37**	**55**	**16**	**64**
Most important (1)	9	27	10	41	2
Second important (2)	8	15	17	13	8
Third important (3)	12	8	6	14	1
Fourth important (4)	7	2	1	5	4
Fifth important (5)	0	0	0	0	10

CHANGING TO ANOTHER RELIGION

	Community	Kin Group	Household	Ind. Self	Sig. Others
Number of Interviews	89	89	89	89	89
Number of Responses	58	68	54	87	32
Number of No Responses	31	21	35	2	57
Most Important Decision Maker (1)	14	22	13	39	1
Second Most Important Decision Maker (2)	15	23	24	12	5
Third Most Important Decision Maker (3)	13	17	13	22	6
Fourth Most Important Decision Maker (4)	16	5	3	14	6
Fifth Most Important Decision Maker (5)	0	1	1	0	13

OBSERVING ONE'S RELIGION

	Community	Kin Group	Household	Ind. Self	Sig. Others
Number of Interviews	89	89	89	89	89
Number of Responses	77	82	57	87	21
Number of No Responses	12	7	32	2	68
Most Important Decision Maker (1)	18	44	2	25	0
Second Most Important Decision Maker (2)	27	20	26	15	1
Third Most Important Decision Maker (3)	18	14	24	30	1
Fourth Most Important Decision Maker (4)	12	4	5	17	6
Fifth Most Important Decision Maker (5)	2	0	0	0	13

APPENDIX D

DECISION MAKING FOR BUILDING A HOUSE OR CHOOSING A RESIDENCE, EDUCATIONAL CHOICE AND MEDICAL TREATMENT

BUILDING A HOUSE OR CHOOSING A RESIDENCE

	Community	Kin Group	Household	Self	Sig. Others
Number of Interviews	89	89	89	89	89
Number of Responses	30	73	56	88	50
Number of No Responses	59	16	33	1	39
Most Important Decision Maker (1)	1	10	43	31	4
Second Most Important Decision Maker (2)	3	16	9	41	16
Third Most Important Decision Maker (3)	3	41	2	14	13
Fourth Most Important Decision Maker (4)	18	6	2	2	4
Fifth Most Important Decision Maker (5)	5	0	0	0	13

EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

	Community	Kin Group	Household	Ind. Self	Sig. Others
Number of Interviews	89	89	89	89	89
Number of Responses	19	79	68	88	26
Number of No Responses	70	10	21	1	63
Most Important Decision Maker (1)	0	12	27	46	4
Second Most Important Decision Maker (2)	2	12	35	31	6
Third Most Important Decision Maker (3)	1	52	6	6	4
Fourth Most Important Decision Maker (4)	13	3	0	4	1
Fifth Most Important Decision Maker (5)	3	0	0	1	11

MEDICAL TREATMENT

	Community	Kin Group	Household	Self	Sig. Others
Number of Interviews	89	89	89	89	89
Number of Responses	23	76	58	86	78
Number of No Responses	66	13	31	3	11
Most Important Decision Maker (1)	1	6	25	12	42
Second Most Important Decision Maker (2)	1	25	25	26	11
Third Most Important Decision Maker (3)	6	26	7	38	6
Fourth Most Important Decision Maker (4)	8	19	1	10	5
Fifth Most Important Decision Maker (5)	7	0	0	0	14

APPENDIX E

DECISION MAKING FOR CAREER CHOICE AND MARRIAGE & DIVORCE

CAREER CHOICE

	Community	Kin Group	Household	Self	Sig. Others
Number of Interviews	89	89	89	89	89
Number of Responses	24	80	64	89	34
Number of No Responses	65	9	25	0	55
Most Important Decision Maker (1)	0	8	42	38	1
Second Most Important Decision Maker (2)	0	17	21	39	8
Third Most Important Decision Maker (3)	1	53	1	12	6
Fourth Most Important Decision Maker (4)	21	2	0	0	5
Fifth Most Important Decision Maker (5)	2	0	0	0	14

MARRIAGE & DIVORCE

	Community	Kin Group	Household	Self	Sig. Others
Number of Interviews	89	89	89	89	89
Number of Responses	37	83	69	89	21
Number of No Responses	52	6	20	0	68
Most Important Decision Maker (1)	0	9	22	57	1
Second Most Important Decision Maker (2)	1	19	41	22	2
Third Most Important Decision Maker (3)	5	51	5	9	1
Fourth Most Important Decision Maker (4)	29	3	0	1	3
Fifth Most Important Decision Maker (5)	2	1	1	0	14

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEWEES' RESPONSES FOR DECISION MAKING İN MARRIAGE & DIVORCE

Interview Seq.	Community Leaders & Elders	Kin Group Elders	Household Heads	Individual Self	Significant Others
1	0	2	0	1	0
2	0	3	1	2	0
3	0	3	1	2	0
4	0	3	1	2	0
5	0	2	1	3	0
6	0	3	2	1	0
7	4	4	1	3	0
8	0	3	2	1	0
9	0	3	2	1	0
10	0	3	1	2	0
11	0	2	1	3	0
12	4	3	1	2	0
13	0	3	1	2	0
14	4	3	1	2	0
15	0	3	1	2	0
16	4	3	1	2	0
17	0	3	1	2	0
18	0	3	2	1	0
19	0	3	2	1	0
20	0	3	1	2	0
21	0	2	0	1	0
22	0	1	0	2	0
23	0	0	2	1	0
24	0	2	0	1	0
25	0	1	0	2	0
26	0	3	2	1	0
27	4	3	2	1	0
28	0	2	0	1	0
29	0	0	0	1	0
30	0	2	0	1	0
31	0	3	2	1	0
32	0	2	0	1	0
33	0	3	2	1	0
34	0	3	2	1	0
35	4	3	2	1	5
36	0	0	0	1	0
37	0	0	1	2	0
38	0	3	1	2	0
39	3	2	1	4	0
40	4	3	2	1	0
41	0	2	3	1	0

42	3	0	0	1	2
43	0	3	2	1	0
44	0	1	2	3	0
45	0	3	2	1	0
46	0	3	2	1	0
47	4	3	2	1	0
48	4	3	1	2	5
49	4	3	2	1	0
50	4	3	2	1	0
51	4	3	2	1	0
52	4	3	2	1	0
53	4	3	2	1	0
54	5	4	2	1	3
55	0	3	2	1	0
56	0	2	1	3	0
57	0	2	0	1	0
58	4	3	2	1	0
59	0	2	1	3	0
60	0	0	0	1	0
61	0	3	2	1	0
62	0	3	2	1	0
63	0	3	2	1	0
64	4	3	2	1	5
65	4	3	2	1	0
66	4	3	2	1	5
67	4	2	3	1	5
68	4	3	2	1	5
69	4	3	2	1	5
70	4	5	2	3	1
71	5	4	1	3	2
72	4	3	2	1	5
73	4	3	2	1	5
74	4	3	2	1	5
75	0	1	3	2	0
76	0	2	3	1	0
77	0	1	0	2	0
78	2	1	0	3	0
79	0	1	0	2	0
80	0	1	3	2	0
81	0	1	0	2	0
82	4	3	2	1	5
83	3	2	5	1	4
84	3	2	0	1	4
85	3	2	0	1	4
86	4	3	2	1	5
87	4	3	2	1	5
88	4	3	1	2	5
89	0	2	0	1	0

RESPONSES: 0 – no response; 1 – Most important (principal) decision maker; 2 – Second most important decision maker; 3 – Third most important decision maker; 4 – Fourth most important decision maker; 5 – Fifth most important decision maker

APPENDIX G

INTERVIEWEES' RESPONSES FOR DECISION MAKING IN CAREER CHOICES

Interview Seq.	Community Leaders & Elders	Kin Group Elders	Household Heads	Individual Self	Significant Others
1	0	2	0	1	0
2	0	3	1	2	0
3	0	3	1	2	0
4	0	3	1	2	0
5	0	2	1	3	0
6	0	3	1	2	0
7	0	0	1	2	3
8	0	2	1	3	0
9	0	3	1	2	0
10	0	3	1	2	0
11	0	3	1	2	0
12	0	3	1	2	0
13	0	3	1	2	0
14	0	3	1	2	0
15	0	2	1	3	0
16	0	3	1	2	0
17	0	3	1	2	0
18	0	2	1	3	0
19	0	2	1	3	0
20	0	3	1	2	0
21	0	2	0	1	3
22	0	1	3	2	0
23	0	1	2	3	0
24	0	1	2	3	0
25	0	1	2	3	0
26	0	3	1	2	0
27	0	4	1	3	2
28	0	2	0	1	0
29	0	1	0	2	0
30	0	2	0	1	0
31	0	0	0	1	0
32	0	2	0	1	0
33	0	3	1	2	4
34	0	0	0	1	0
35	0	3	2	1	0
36	0	0	0	1	0
37	0	3	1	2	0
38	0	3	2	1	0
39	0	3	1	2	0
40	0	3	1	2	0
41	0	3	1	2	0

42	0	0	0	1	2
43	0	0	1	2	3
44	0	3	0	1	2
45	0	2	1	3	0
46	4	3	1	2	0
47	4	3	1	2	5
48	0	0	0	1	2
49	4	3	2	1	0
50	0	2	0	1	3
51	0	3	1	2	0
52	4	3	2	1	0
53	4	3	1	2	0
54	0	3	2	1	0
55	0	3	2	1	0
56	0	3	2	1	0
57	0	0	0	1	2
58	4	3	1	2	0
59	0	3	1	2	0
60	0	3	0	1	2
61	0	0	0	1	2
62	0	2	0	1	3
63	0	3	0	1	4
64	4	3	2	1	5
65	4	3	1	2	0
66	4	3	1	2	5
67	4	3	2	1	5
68	5	3	2	1	4
69	4	3	1	2	5
70	4	3	1	2	5
71	5	3	1	2	4
72	4	3	2	1	5
73	4	3	2	1	5
74	4	3	1	2	5
75	0	4	1	3	2
76	0	2	1	3	0
77	0	1	0	2	0
78	0	1	0	2	0
79	0	3	0	2	1
80	0	3	2	1	0
81	0	1	0	2	0
82	4	3	2	1	5
83	4	3	2	1	5
84	3	2	0	1	4
85	4	2	0	1	3
86	4	3	2	1	5
87	4	3	2	1	5
88	4	3	2	1	5
89	0	2	0	1	0

RESPONSES: 0 – no response; 1 – Most important (principal) decision maker; 2 – Second most important decision maker; 3 – Third most important decision maker; 4 – Fourth most important decision maker; 5 – Fifth most important decision maker

APPENDIX H

INTERVIEWEES' RESPONSES FOR DECISION MAKING IN MEDICAL TREATMENT

Interview Seq.	Community Leaders & Elders	Kin Group Elders	Household Heads	Individual Self	Significant Others
1	0	2	0	1	0
2	0	4	2	3	5
3	0	0	2	1	3
4	0	4	2	3	1
5	0	2	0	3	1
6	0	3	0	2	1
7	0	4	2	3	1
8	0	3	0	2	1
9	0	3	0	1	2
10	0	4	3	1	2
11	0	4	2	3	1
12	0	4	1	3	2
13	0	4	2	3	1
14	0	3	1	2	0
15	0	2	1	4	3
16	0	2	0	3	1
17	0	3	1	4	2
18	0	0	2	3	1
19	0	0	2	3	1
20	0	2	0	3	1
21	0	0	0	2	1
22	0	0	3	2	1
23	0	3	0	2	1
24	0	2	1	3	0
25	0	3	2	4	1
26	0	4	3	2	1
27	0	4	1	3	2
28	0	3	2	0	1
29	0	3	1	2	0
30	0	0	0	2	1
31	0	1	2	3	0
32	0	0	1	2	3
33	0	0	0	2	1
34	0	1	2	3	0
35	0	4	2	3	1
36	0	3	1	2	4
37	0	0	1	3	2
38	0	3	0	1	2
39	0	2	1	3	4
40	0	3	1	0	2
41	0	2	0	3	1

42	0	0	1	2	3
43	0	3	2	4	5
44	0	0	3	2	1
45	0	3	1	4	2
46	0	3	2	4	5
47	5	4	1	2	3
48	4	2	0	3	1
49	0	2	1	3	4
50	0	2	0	3	1
51	4	2	0	3	1
52	0	2	1	3	4
53	5	4	2	3	1
54	0	2	0	3	1
55	0	3	2	4	1
56	0	2	0	3	1
57	0	3	0	2	1
58	5	4	3	2	1
59	0	2	0	3	1
60	0	3	0	2	1
61	0	1	0	3	2
62	0	3	0	2	1
63	0	3	0	1	2
64	1	4	3	2	5
65	0	0	1	2	0
66	5	3	4	2	1
67	3	2	1	4	5
68	4	2	1	3	5
69	5	4	3	2	1
70	5	4	2	3	1
71	5	4	2	3	1
72	3	1	2	4	5
73	4	3	1	2	5
74	3	2	1	4	5
75	0	3	2	0	1
76	0	2	1	3	0
77	0	2	0	3	1
78	2	1	0	3	0
79	0	2	0	3	1
80	0	1	2	3	0
81	0	0	0	1	0
82	3	4	2	1	5
83	4	3	2	1	5
84	3	2	0	1	4
85	4	2	0	1	3
86	4	3	2	1	5
87	3	4	1	2	5
88	4	3	1	2	5
89	0	2	0	3	1

RESPONSES: 0 – no response; 1 – Most important (principal) decision maker; 2 – Second most important decision maker; 3 – Third most important decision maker; 4 – Fourth most important decision maker; 5 – Fifth most important decision maker

APPENDIX I

INTERVIEWEES' RESPONSES FOR DECISION MAKING IN EDUCATIONAL CHOICES

Interview Seq.	Community Leaders & Elders	Kin Group Elders	Household Heads	Individual Self	Significant Others
1	0	1	0	2	0
2	0	3	2	1	0
3	0	3	1	2	0
4	0	3	1	2	0
5	0	0	2	1	3
6	0	3	2	1	0
7	0	3	2	1	0
8	0	3	1	2	0
9	0	0	2	3	1
10	0	3	2	1	0
11	0	3	1	2	0
12	0	3	2	1	0
13	0	3	2	1	0
14	0	3	2	1	0
15	0	3	2	1	0
16	0	0	1	3	2
17	0	3	1	2	0
18	0	3	2	1	0
19	0	3	2	1	0
20	0	3	1	2	0
21	0	0	0	1	2
22	0	1	0	2	0
23	0	1	3	2	0
24	0	1	0	2	0
25	0	1	0	2	0
26	0	3	1	2	0
27	0	1	2	0	0
28	0	2	0	1	0
29	0	1	0	2	0
30	0	2	0	1	0
31	0	3	1	2	0
32	0	2	3	1	0
33	0	0	0	1	0
34	0	3	1	2	0
35	0	3	2	1	0
36	0	0	1	2	0
37	0	0	1	2	0
38	0	3	1	2	0
39	2	3	1	4	0
40	0	0	0	1	0
41	0	3	1	2	0

42	0	0	0	1	0
43	0	0	2	1	3
44	0	3	2	1	0
45	0	3	2	1	0
46	0	3	2	1	0
47	0	3	2	1	0
48	0	3	2	1	0
49	0	3	2	1	0
50	0	3	2	1	0
51	0	3	2	1	0
52	0	3	2	1	0
53	0	3	1	2	0
54	0	3	1	2	0
55	0	3	2	4	1
56	0	3	1	4	2
57	0	2	0	1	3
58	4	3	1	2	0
59	0	2	1	3	0
60	0	3	1	2	0
61	0	3	2	1	0
62	0	3	2	1	0
63	0	3	0	1	2
64	4	3	2	1	5
65	0	3	2	1	0
66	4	3	2	1	5
67	4	2	3	1	5
68	4	3	2	1	5
69	4	3	1	2	5
70	5	4	3	2	1
71	5	4	1	3	2
72	3	2	1	4	5
73	4	3	1	2	5
74	4	2	3	1	5
75	0	3	2	1	0
76	0	1	2	3	0
77	0	2	0	1	0
78	0	2	0	3	1
79	0	1	0	2	0
80	0	1	0	2	0
81	0	1	0	2	0
82	4	3	1	5	2
83	5	2	3	1	4
84	2	4	0	1	3
85	4	2	0	1	3
86	4	3	1	2	5
87	4	3	2	1	5
88	4	3	2	1	5
89	0	1	0	2	0

RESPONSES: 0 – no response; 1 – Most important (principal) decision maker; 2 – Second most important decision maker; 3 – Third most important decision maker; 4 – Fourth most important decision maker; 5 – Fifth most important decision maker

APPENDIX J

INTERVIEWEES' RESPONSES FOR DECISION MAKING IN INHERITANCE

Interview Seq.	Community Leaders & Elders	Kin Group Elders	Household Heads	Individual Self	Significant Others
1	0	0	0	1	0
2	0	3	1	2	0
3	0	3	1	2	0
4	0	3	1	2	0
5	0	0	0	1	2
6	0	2	0	1	0
7	0	0	1	2	3
8	0	3	0	1	2
9	0	4	0	1	2
10	0	4	2	3	1
11	0	4	1	2	3
12	0	3	1	2	0
13	0	1	3	2	0
14	0	3	1	2	0
15	0	3	1	2	0
16	0	3	0	1	2
17	0	3	1	2	0
18	3	0	1	2	0
19	3	0	0	1	2
20	0	2	0	1	3
21	0	1	0	0	0
22	0	0	1	2	0
23	0	0	2	1	0
24	0	3	1	2	0
25	0	3	1	2	0
26	0	1	2	3	0
27	0	3	1	2	0
28	0	2	1	3	0
29	0	0	1	2	0
30	0	0	0	1	2
31	0	0	2	1	0
32	0	3	1	2	0
33	0	0	0	1	2
34	0	0	2	1	0
35	0	3	1	2	0
36	0	0	0	1	0
37	0	2	1	3	0
38	0	2	0	1	0
39	0	0	1	2	3
40	0	3	1	2	0
41	0	2	0	1	0
42	3	0	1	2	0

43	0	3	2	1	0
44	0	4	1	2	3
45	0	3	1	2	0
46	0	3	1	2	0
47	4	2	1	3	0
48	0	3	0	1	2
49	4	1	2	3	0
50	0	3	0	1	2
51	0	3	0	1	2
52	4	3	1	2	0
53	4	3	1	2	0
54	0	1	0	2	3
55	0	1	2	3	0
56	0	3	0	1	2
57	0	2	0	1	3
58	0	0	0	1	2
59	0	1	0	2	3
60	0	3	0	1	2
61	0	3	0	1	2
62	0	3	0	1	2
63	0	1	0	2	3
64	4	3	2	1	5
65	0	3	1	2	0
66	3	2	4	1	5
67	4	2	3	1	5
68	4	2	1	3	5
69	4	3	2	1	5
70	1	4	2	3	5
71	4	3	1	2	5
72	3	2	5	1	4
73	4	3	1	2	5
74	3	1	2	4	5
75	0	2	1	3	0
76	0	3	2	1	0
77	0	2	0	1	0
78	0	1	0	2	0
79	0	0	0	2	1
80	0	2	1	3	0
81	0	0	0	1	0
82	4	3	1	2	5
83	4	2	3	1	5
84	4	1	0	2	3
85	0	2	0	1	0
86	4	2	1	3	5
87	4	2	1	3	5
88	4	3	2	1	5
89	0	3	2	1	0

RESPONSES: 0 – no response; 1 – Most important (principal) decision maker; 2 – Second most important decision maker; 3 – Third most important decision maker; 4 – Fourth most important decision maker; 5 – Fifth most important decision maker

APPENDIX K

INTERVIEWEES' RESPONSES FOR DECISION MAKING IN BUILDING A HOUSE OR CHOOSING A RESIDENCE

Interview Seq.	Community Leaders & Elders	Kin Group Elders	Household Heads	Individual Self	Significant Others
1	0	0	0	1	0
2	0	3	1	2	0
3	0	3	1	2	0
4	0	3	1	2	0
5	0	0	0	1	2
6	0	2	0	1	0
7	0	0	1	2	3
8	0	1	0	2	3
9	0	0	0	1	2
10	0	2	1	3	0
11	0	3	1	2	0
12	0	3	1	2	0
13	3	2	0	1	0
14	0	1	2	3	0
15	0	3	1	2	0
16	0	3	0	1	2
17	0	3	0	2	1
18	0	0	1	2	3
19	0	0	0	1	2
20	0	3	0	2	1
21	0	2	0	1	3
22	0	0	1	2	0
23	0	1	0	0	0
24	0	3	1	2	0
25	4	3	1	2	0
26	0	3	1	2	0
27	0	3	1	2	0
28	0	1	2	3	0
29	0	3	1	2	0
30	0	0	0	1	2
31	0	0	2	1	0
32	0	3	1	2	0
33	0	0	0	1	2
34	0	0	0	1	0
35	0	3	1	2	0
36	0	0	1	2	3
37	0	2	1	3	0
38	0	3	0	1	2
39	0	3	1	2	0
40	0	3	1	2	0
41	0	3	1	2	0
42	0	0	1	2	3

43	0	4	1	2	3
44	0	1	3	2	4
45	4	3	1	2	0
46	4	3	1	2	0
47	4	3	1	2	0
48	1	2	0	3	4
49	5	4	1	2	3
50	0	3	0	1	2
51	4	3	0	1	2
52	5	4	1	2	3
53	5	4	1	2	3
54	4	3	0	1	2
55	0	0	1	2	3
56	0	4	1	2	3
57	0	3	0	1	2
58	0	0	0	1	2
59	0	1	0	2	0
60	0	3	0	1	2
61	0	3	0	1	2
62	0	3	0	1	2
63	0	3	0	1	2
64	2	4	3	1	5
65	4	2	1	3	0
66	4	3	2	1	5
67	4	3	1	2	5
68	4	3	2	1	5
69	2	1	4	3	5
70	5	1	2	3	4
71	5	2	1	4	3
72	3	1	4	2	5
73	4	1	2	3	5
74	4	2	1	3	5
75	0	2	1	3	0
76	0	3	2	1	0
77	0	2	0	1	0
78	0	3	0	2	1
79	4	3	0	2	1
80	0	2	1	3	0
81	0	0	0	1	0
82	4	3	1	2	5
83	4	3	2	1	5
84	2	3	0	1	4
85	0	2	0	1	0
86	4	2	1	3	5
87	4	2	1	3	5
88	4	3	1	2	5
89	3	2	1	4	0

RESPONSES: 0 – no response; 1 – Most important (principal) decision maker; 2 – Second most important decision maker; 3 – Third most important decision maker; 4 – Fourth most important decision maker; 5 – Fifth most important decision maker

APPENDIX L

INTERVIEWEES' RESPONSES FOR DECISION MAKING IN RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES

Interview Seq.	Community Leaders & Elders	Kin Group Elders	Household Heads	Individual Self	Significant Others
1	1	2	0	3	0
2	2	1	3	4	0
3	0	1	2	3	0
4	4	1	3	2	0
5	2	1	0	3	0
6	2	1	0	3	0
7	2	1	3	4	0
8	2	1	0	3	0
9	2	1	0	3	0
10	1	2	3	4	0
11	4	1	2	3	0
12	4	1	2	3	0
13	3	2	0	1	0
14	0	1	3	2	0
15	1	2	3	4	0
16	1	2	0	3	0
17	3	2	0	1	0
18	3	1	2	4	0
19	2	1	0	3	0
20	3	1	0	2	0
21	0	2	0	1	0
22	0	3	2	1	0
23	0	1	2	3	0
24	2	1	3	4	0
25	3	2	4	1	0
26	0	1	3	2	0
27	1	2	3	4	0
28	0	1	2	3	0
29	0	1	2	3	0
30	2	1	0	3	0
31	3	0	2	1	0
32	3	0	2	1	0
33	0	0	0	1	2
34	2	3	4	1	0
35	0	3	2	1	0
36	2	0	3	1	0
37	5	3	2	1	4
38	2	4	3	1	0
39	1	3	2	4	0
40	2	0	3	1	4
41	0	1	0	2	3
42	1	0	3	2	0

43	3	2	4	1	0
44	1	3	2	4	0
45	2	1	3	4	0
46	2	1	3	4	0
47	3	1	2	4	0
48	1	2	0	3	4
49	3	1	2	0	0
50	1	2	0	3	0
51	2	1	0	3	0
52	3	1	2	0	0
53	2	1	3	4	0
54	2	1	0	3	0
55	2	3	0	1	0
56	2	3	0	1	0
57	2	0	3	1	0
58	2	1	0	3	0
59	1	2	0	3	0
60	1	2	0	3	0
61	1	2	0	3	0
62	1	2	0	3	0
63	1	2	0	3	0
64	3	4	2	1	5
65	1	4	2	3	0
66	1	3	4	2	5
67	4	1	2	3	5
68	5	3	1	2	4
69	1	2	3	4	5
70	4	1	3	2	5
71	2	1	3	4	5
72	3	1	4	2	5
73	4	1	2	3	5
74	2	1	3	4	5
75	4	3	1	2	0
76	0	1	2	3	0
77	2	1	0	3	0
78	2	1	0	3	0
79	3	1	0	2	0
80	4	1	3	2	0
81	3	1	0	2	0
82	4	2	3	1	5
83	4	3	2	1	5
84	3	2	0	1	4
85	3	1	0	2	4
86	4	3	2	1	5
87	3	4	2	1	0
88	4	3	2	1	5
89	2	1	3	4	0

RESPONSES: 0 – no response; 1 – Most important (principal) decision maker; 2 – Second most important decision maker; 3 – Third most important decision maker; 4 – Fourth most important decision maker; 5 – Fifth most important decision maker

APPENDIX M

INTERVIEWEES' RESPONSES FOR DECISION MAKING IN CHANGING TO ANOTHER RELIGION

Interview Seq.	Community Leaders & Elders	Kin Group Elders	Household Heads	Individual Self	Significant Others
1	0	0	0	1	0
2	0	3	2	1	0
3	0	0	2	1	0
4	0	0	2	1	0
5	0	0	0	1	2
6	0	2	0	1	0
7	0	3	2	1	0
8	4	2	0	1	3
9	1	2	0	3	0
10	4	1	2	3	0
11	0	0	1	2	0
12	3	2	1	4	0
13	3	2	0	1	0
14	4	1	3	2	0
15	0	0	0	1	0
16	2	1	0	4	3
17	3	2	0	4	1
18	0	0	0	1	0
19	0	0	0	1	0
20	4	1	0	2	3
21	3	2	0	1	0
22	1	0	2	3	0
23	0	2	1	3	0
24	4	2	1	3	0
25	4	2	1	3	0
26	0	0	0	1	0
27	3	1	2	0	0
28	0	1	2	3	0
29	0	0	1	2	0
30	0	0	0	1	2
31	3	4	1	2	0
32	1	0	2	3	0
33	0	0	1	0	2
34	2	3	4	1	0
35	0	3	2	1	0
36	0	0	2	1	0
37	0	0	1	3	2
38	1	4	2	3	0
39	1	2	0	3	4
40	4	5	2	1	3
41	1	2	0	3	4
42	3	0	2	1	4

43	1	2	3	4	0
44	1	2	3	4	5
45	2	1	3	4	0
46	2	1	3	4	0
47	3	2	1	4	0
48	0	0	0	1	0
49	2	1	3	4	0
50	3	2	0	1	4
51	1	2	0	3	0
52	2	1	3	4	0
53	2	1	3	4	0
54	1	2	0	3	0
55	3	1	2	4	0
56	2	3	0	1	0
57	3	1	0	2	3
58	2	1	0	3	0
59	2	1	0	3	0
60	0	0	0	1	0
61	1	3	0	2	0
62	0	0	0	1	0
63	0	3	0	1	2
64	1	2	3	4	5
65	3	4	1	2	0
66	0	3	2	1	0
67	4	3	2	1	5
68	2	4	3	1	5
69	2	3	5	1	4
70	2	1	4	3	5
71	2	1	4	3	5
72	4	1	3	2	5
73	4	1	3	2	5
74	4	3	2	1	5
75	0	2	1	3	0
76	0	1	2	3	0
77	0	2	0	1	0
78	2	1	0	3	0
79	0	1	0	3	0
80	0	3	2	1	0
81	0	0	0	1	0
82	4	3	2	1	5
83	3	4	2	1	5
84	1	3	0	2	4
85	4	2	0	1	3
86	4	3	2	1	5
87	4	3	2	1	5
88	4	3	1	2	5
89	1	2	3	4	0

RESPONSES: 0 – no response; 1 – Most important (principal) decision maker; 2 – Second most important decision maker; 3 – Third most important decision maker; 4 – Fourth most important decision maker; 5 – Fifth most important decision maker

APPENDIX N

INTERVIEWEES' RESPONSES FOR DECISION MAKING IN CONVERTING TO CHRISTIANITY

Interview Seq.	Community Leaders & Elders	Kin Group Elders	Household Heads	Individual Self	Significant Others
1	0	0	0	1	0
2	0	0	0	1	0
3	0	0	0	1	0
4	0	0	0	1	0
5	0	0	0	1	2
6	0	0	0	1	0
7	0	0	0	1	0
8	0	0	0	1	2
9	0	0	0	1	0
10	0	1	2	0	0
11	0	0	0	1	0
12	0	2	1	0	0
13	0	0	0	1	0
14	0	1	2	3	0
15	0	0	0	1	0
16	0	1	0	0	2
17	3	2	0	0	1
18	0	0	0	1	0
19	0	0	0	1	0
20	0	1	0	2	3
21	0	0	0	1	0
22	0	0	1	0	0
23	0	0	0	1	0
24	0	2	1	0	0
25	0	2	0	1	0
26	0	0	0	1	0
27	3	1	2	0	0
28	0	1	2	3	0
29	0	0	1	0	0
30	0	0	0	1	0
31	4	2	3	1	0
32	2	0	1	3	0
33	0	0	0	1	2
34	3	2	0	1	0
35	3	4	1	2	0
36	0	0	0	1	0
37	0	0	1	3	2
38	1	2	0	3	0
39	1	2	0	3	4
40	2	0	3	1	4
41	4	2	0	3	1
42	3	0	2	1	0

43	0	0	0	1	0
44	1	2	3	0	0
45	2	1	0	0	0
46	2	1	0	0	0
47	3	1	2	0	0
48	0	0	0	1	0
49	0	1	0	3	2
50	0	0	0	1	0
51	1	2	0	3	0
52	0	1	0	2	0
53	0	1	2	3	0
54	1	0	0	2	0
55	0	1	2	3	0
56	0	0	0	1	0
57	0	1	0	2	0
58	0	1	0	2	0
59	0	1	0	3	2
60	0	0	0	1	0
61	1	0	0	2	0
62	0	0	0	1	0
63	0	1	0	0	2
64	0	0	0	1	0
65	2	3	1	0	0
66	0	0	0	1	0
67	4	3	2	1	5
68	3	1	2	4	5
69	1	3	4	2	5
70	3	1	0	2	0
71	0	1	3	2	0
72	2	1	3	4	0
73	3	1	2	4	5
74	3	1	2	4	5
75	0	2	1	0	0
76	0	1	2	3	0
77	0	2	0	1	0
78	2	1	0	3	0
79	2	1	0	0	0
80	0	1	0	2	0
81	0	0	0	1	0
82	4	3	2	1	5
83	3	4	2	1	5
84	1	3	0	2	4
85	3	2	0	1	4
86	4	3	2	1	5
87	4	3	2	1	5
88	4	3	1	2	5
89	1	2	3	4	0

RESPONSES: 0 – no response; 1 – Most important (principal) decision maker; 2 – Second most important decision maker; 3 – Third most important decision maker; 4 – Fourth most important decision maker; 5 – Fifth most important decision maker

APPENDIX O

FIRST INTERVIEW RESEARCH
FIRST GROUP
THOSE WHO HAVE HEARD THE
CHRISTIAN MESSAGE AND CONVERTED TO CHRISTIANITY

English Questionnaire

Question 1. Where did you first hear about the Christian faith? In what way?

Question 2. How did you feel or what did you think when you first heard of the Christian faith?

Question 3. Prior to converting Christianity, what was your religious faith and to what extent did you practice?

Question 4. Were any of your kinsmen or friends a Christian prior to your making a decision to convert to Christianity?

Question 5. When you became interested in the Christianity, did any one support or object to your decision making to become a believer? If so, in what way?

Question 6. What impression did you receive or hear from the one who shared with you about Christianity that caused you to become interested in God and Christianity?

Question 7. Prior to making a decision to convert to Christianity, did you attend a church service/activity? If so, how many times?

Question 8. Have you ever received any kind of assistance from Christians? If so, in what way?

Question 9. Prior to converting to Christianity, did you ever attend any of the special evangelistic services, such as Christmas or open-air meetings? If so, how many times?

Question 10. Who has played a key role in your decision making to convert to Christianity?

Question 11. What caused you to convert to Christianity?

Question 12. What was your expectation of becoming a Christian?

Thai Questionnaire

คำถามที่ 1: คุณเคยได้ยินเรื่องราวของความเชื่อคริสต์ศาสนาเป็นครั้งแรก จากที่ไหน อย่างไร

คำถามที่ 2: เมื่อคุณได้ยินเรื่องราวของความเชื่อคริสต์ศาสนาเป็นครั้งแรก คุณรู้สึก หรือคิดอย่างไร

คำถามที่ 3: ก่อนที่คุณมารับเชื่อ ในคริสต์ศาสนา คุณนับถือศาสนาอะไร และได้นับถืออย่างไร

คำถามที่ 4: ก่อนที่คุณมารับเชื่อ คุณมีญาติพี่น้องหรือเพื่อนๆ ของคุณเป็นผู้เชื่อในคริสต์ศาสนา หรือไม่

คำถามที่ 5: มีผู้คนที่สนับสนุน หรือคัดค้านในการมารับเชื่อของคุณ หรือไม่ อย่างไร

คำถามที่ 6: คุณมีความประทับใจอะไรบ้างเกี่ยวกับคริสต์ศาสนา ที่ทำให้คุณเกิดความสนใจและ ได้มารับเชื่อ

คำถามที่ 7: ก่อนคุณมารับเชื่อคุณเคยไปร่วมประชุม/กิจกรรมที่คริสตจักรหรือไม่ กี่ครั้ง

คำถามที่ 8: ก่อนคุณมารับเชื่อคุณเคยได้รับการช่วยเหลือจากคริสเตียนหรือไม่ อย่างไร

คำถามที่ 9: ก่อนคุณมารับเชื่อคุณเคยไปร่วมประชุมหรืองานของคริสเตียนหรือไม่ (เช่น งาน ประกาศ งานคริสตมาส ฯลฯ) กี่ครั้ง

คำถามที่ 10: ใครที่มีบทบาทในการที่คุณได้ตัดสินใจมารับเชื่อ

คำถามที่ 11: มีสาเหตุใดที่ทำให้คุณตัดสินใจมารับเชื่อ

คำถามที่ 12: คุณมีความคาดหวังอะไรจากการมารับเชื่อ

APPENDIX P

FIRST INTERVIEW RESEARCH
SECOND GROUP
THOSE WHO HAVE HEARD THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE
AND ARE CONSIDERATING THE CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

English Questionnaire

Question 1. Where did you first hear about the Christian faith? In what way?

Question 2. How did you feel or what did you think when you first heard of the Christian faith?

Question 3. What is your religious faith? To what extent do you practice it?

Question 4. Are any of your kinsmen or friends a Christian?

Question 5. When you became interested in Christianity, did any one support or object to your possible decision making to become a believer? If so, in what way?

Question 6. What impression did you receive or hear from the one who shared with you about Christianity that caused you to become interested in God and Christianity?

Question 7. Prior to your becoming interested in converting to Christianity, did you ever attend a church service/activity? If so, how many times?

Question 8. Have you ever received any kind of assistance from Christians? If so, in what way?

Question 9. Prior to your becoming interested in converting to Christianity, did you ever attend any of the special evangelistic services, such as Christmas or open-air meetings? If so, how many times?

Question 10. Who has played an important role in persuading or making you want to become a Christian?

Question 11. Why have you not yet made a decision to convert to Christianity?

Thai Questionnaire

คำถามที่ 1: คุณเคยได้ยินเรื่องราวของความเชื่อคริสต์ศาสนาเป็นครั้งแรก จากที่ไหน อย่างไร

คำถามที่ 2: เมื่อคุณได้ยินเรื่องราวของความเชื่อคริสต์ศาสนาเป็นครั้งแรก คุณรู้สึก หรือคิดอย่างไร

คำถามที่ 3: คุณนับถือศาสนาอะไร และได้นับถืออย่างไร

คำถามที่ 4: คุณมีญาติพี่น้องหรือเพื่อนๆ ของคุณ ที่ได้รับเชื่อในคริสต์ศาสนาหรือไม่

คำถามที่ 5: มีคนที่สนับสนุน หรือคัดค้านที่คุณสนใจมารับเชื่อหรือไม่ อย่างไร

คำถามที่ 6: คุณมีความประทับใจอะไรบ้างเกี่ยวกับคริสต์ศาสนา ที่ทำให้คุณเกิดความสนใจที่จะมา
รับเชื่อ

คำถามที่ 7: ก่อนคุณสนใจที่จะมารับเชื่อ คุณเคยไปร่วมประชุม/กิจกรรมที่คริสตจักรหรือไม่ กี่
ครั้ง

คำถามที่ 8: ก่อนคุณสนใจที่จะมารับเชื่อ คุณเคยได้รับการช่วยเหลือจากคริสเตียนหรือไม่ อย่างไร

คำถามที่ 9: ก่อนคุณสนใจที่จะมารับเชื่อ คุณเคยไปร่วมประชุมหรืองานของคริสเตียนหรือไม่
(เช่น งานประกาศ งานคริสตมาส ฯลฯ) กี่ครั้ง

คำถามที่ 10: ใครที่มีบทบาทสำคัญในการชักชวนคุณให้รับเชื่อ

คำถามที่ 11: สาเหตุใดที่คุณยังไม่ได้ตัดสินใจมารับเชื่อ

APPENDIX Q

FIRST INTERVIEW RESEARCH
THIRD GROUP
THOSE WHO WERE AGAINST THE DECISION
TO CONVERT TO CHRISTIANITY

English Questionnaire

Question 1. Where did you first hear about the Christian faith? In what way?

Question 2. How did you feel or what did you think when you first heard of the Christian faith?

Question 3. What is your religious faith? To what extent do you practice it?

Question 4. Why can you not accept the Christian faith?

Question 5. What do you think your village feels about the Christian faith?

Question 6. What do you think Christianity should do to be accepted by the villagers?

Question 7. Do you think that there will be a day that you will become interested in Christianity?

Question 8. Have you ever received any tangible or intangible assistance from Christians?

Thai Questionnaire

คำถามที่ 1: คุณเคยได้ยินเรื่องราวของความเชื่อคริสต์ศาสนาเป็นครั้งแรก จากที่ไหน อย่างไร

คำถามที่ 2: เมื่อคุณได้ยินเรื่องราวของความเชื่อคริสต์ศาสนาเป็นครั้งแรก คุณรู้สึก หรือคิดอย่างไร

คำถามที่ 3: คุณนับถือศาสนาอะไร และได้นับถืออย่างไร

คำถามที่ 4: สาเหตุใดที่คุณไม่สามารถรับความเชื่อคริสต์ศาสนา

คำถามที่ 5: คุณคิดว่าคริสต์ศาสนาต้องทำอย่างไรถึงจะเป็นที่ยอมรับจากชาวบ้านได้

คำถามที่ 6: คุณคิดว่าสักวันหนึ่ง คุณจะหันมาสนใจคริสต์ศาสนา หรือไม่

คำถามที่ 7: ก่อนคุณสนใจที่จะมารับเชื่อ คุณเคยไปร่วมประชุม/กิจกรรมที่คริสตจักรหรือไม่   กี่ครั้ง

คำถามที่ 8: คุณเคยได้รับการช่วยเหลือในด้านวัตถุ หรือ/และ ไม่ใช้วัตถุ จากคริสเตียนหรือไม่ อย่างไร

APPENDIX R

QUESTIONAIRES FOR INTERVIEW FOR
SECOND INTERVIEW RESEARCH

English Questionnaire

1. Name _____
2. Age_____ Sex_____Marital Status_____
3. Position/Status in the Community_____

4. Persons who have a principal role in your decisions relating to:	Community Leader & Elders	Kinship Elders	Household Heads	Individual Self	Significant Others
4.1 Marriage, divorce					
4.2 Career					
4.3 Medical treatment					
4.4 Schooling					
4.5 One's passing of inheritance					
4.6 Housing/residence					
One's religious observances					
Changing or adopting another religion					

5. Date _____
6. Place _____
   (rating—starting 1 being the highest)

Thai Questionnaire

ชื่อ - สกุล_____

อายุ_____ เพศ _____ สถานภาพการสมรส _____

ตำแหน่งหรือสถานภาพในชุมชน _____

บุคคลที่เรานับถือให้ เป็นผู้ตัดสินใจในเรื่อง:	คนเฒ่าคนแก่ และผู้นำชุมชน	ญาติผู้ใหญ่	ผู้นำครอบครัว	ตัวบุคคล	บุคคล อื่น ๆ
การแต่งงาน และการหย่าร้าง					
อาชีพ					
การรักษาพยาบาล					
การศึกษา					
การถ่ายทอดมรดก					
การปลูกบ้าน หรือการเลือกที่อยู่อาศัย					
การปฏิบัติศาสนาของตน					
การเปลี่ยน หรือนับถือศาสนา อื่น ๆ					
การเปลี่ยนศาสนาไปนับถือ ศาสนา คริสต์					

วันที่_____

สัมภาษณ์_____

สถานที่สัมภาษณ์_____

(เรียงลำดับความสำคัญ 1 ถึง 5)

APPENDIX S

THAILAND COUNTRY MAP

MAP OF NORTHEAST THAILAND (ISAN PROVINCES)
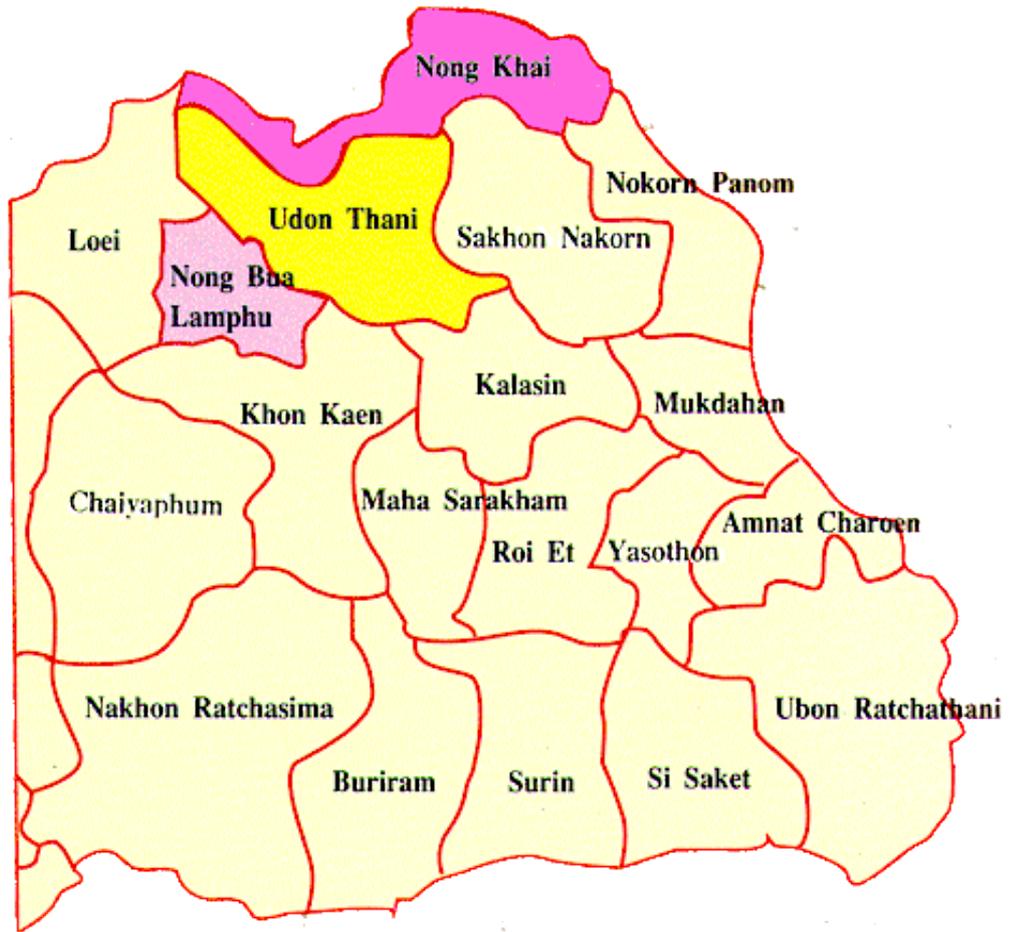
APPENDIX U

PROVINCIAL DATA FOR THE ISAN PROVINCES

Province	Region	Population	Report Ch	XN_POP	District w/ Ch	Total District	District w/o Ch	FT Thai Workers	Village	Sub-District
Nakhon Ratchasima	N. East	2,581,244	46	1,573	13	32	19	52	3,252	289
Buri Ram	N. East	1,545,779	43	1,484	17	23	6	58	2,327	189
Surin	N. East	1,399,377	23	809	8	17	9	46	2,010	159
Si Sa Ket	N. East	1,458,969	25	586	10	22	12	24	2,343	206
Ubon Ratchathani	N. East	1,792,774	41	1,822	16	25	9	44	2,414	219
Yasothon	N. East	553,864	22	529	6	9	3	5	826	79
Chaiyaphum*	N. East	1,136,508	31	815	7	16	9	11	1,398	124
Amnat Charoen	N. East	370,360	25	546	5	7	2	15	581	56
Nong Bua Lamphu	N. East	498,513	5	130	2	6	4	7	538	59
Khon Kaen	N. East	1,767,643	50	2,599	11	25	14	79	2,055	199
Udon Thani	N. East	1,535,471	99	4,081	15	20	5	49	1,570	156
Loei	N. East	635,587	21	877	8	14	6	15	2,243	193
Nong Khai	N. East	909,543	40	1,406	12	17	5	23	1,189	115
Maha Sarakham	N. East	942,909	26	824	7	13	6	27	1,856	133
Roi Et	N. East	1,322,864	63	1,183	15	20	5	34	2,243	193
Kalasin	N. East	990,212	7	340	2	18	16	15	1,415	135
Sakon Nakhon	N. East	1,101,608	7	236	2	18	16	9	1,302	205
Nakhon Phanom	N. East	721,540	24	604	6	12	6	15	988	99
Mukdahan	N. East	338,276	9	176	4	7	3	9	484	53

Used by permission from Thailand Evangelism Committee (2004 Survey)

APPENDIX AA

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS ON THE BELIEF SYSTEM
RELATING TO THE ISAN'S CONCEPT OF THE UNIVERSE

Seven conclusions can be drawn about Isan beliefs regarding the universe:

1. The Isan's concept of the universe helps us to comprehend how their beliefs in the universe, namely, earth, man, hell, heaven, and nirvana, have developed; and how they have influenced their existing beliefs regarding the past, present, and future life. Because of the influence of Lan Chang, the Isan appear to have believed in a creator, *phaya tan (พญาแถน)* or spirit of *tan (แถน)* who created both the earth and man. The origin of the earth and the human race and the animistic belief systems of the Isan can be traced to Muang Tan, founded by Khun Barom. However, the concepts of hell and heaven are evidently tied to Buddhism. While the animistic beliefs deal with their past origin, their future is only guaranteed by their adherence to the Buddhist practices. However, both their animistic and their Buddhistic beliefs address their present situation.

2. The Word-Creation View does seem to give credibility to the possibility that the original Isan predecessors might have grasped the truth of the Word as the Creator, but they probably could not connect the Word to Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as it appears in John 1.

3. It does appear significant that 100 percent of the people in an Isan village were aware of the Buddhist concept of hell when a survey was done in 1984 and also believed that the way to escape hell was to avoid sin and accumulate sufficient merit by observing Buddhist religious practices.

4. The Isan have the concept that the universe, including earth, heaven, and hell (except for nirvana) is still under the power of karma and its accompanying effect of reincarnation. This concept helps to give us a better understanding as to why the Isan tend to have fatalistic and indifferent attitudes toward any religion. Since heaven is not a secure place, Buddhism does not really address the final need of man for eternal security. The making of merit, therefore, is not so much to enter heaven as much as to avoid hell.

5. Although Buddhism does not ultimately address the issue of eternity for the Isan people, it nevertheless, does appear to the Isan people in a number of ways. One teaching that is attractive is that a person can work and gain merit toward heaven while at the same time avoiding hell. Also, Buddhism does offer a chance to stay in connectedness and continuity with the ancestors and dead loved ones while still maintaining those kinship relationships even after death. In addition, it provides a meaningful way to express gratitude to elders and other relatives that have passed away.

6. Another significant conclusion is the belief that a person can accumulate sufficient merit to become a Buddhist saint or a buddha so as to reach nirvana. This eliminates the possibility of a female who can not enter the monkhood in order to become a saint or a buddha. The best that the most meritorious woman can hope for is another reincarnation after her merit is used up in heaven. Thus, unless the evangelist addresses the eternity of heaven as a permanent secure place, Christianity's appeal for salvation from hell and a chance for heaven does not appeal to female individuals.

7. The significance of the account of the creation of Pu Sangkasa (ปู่สังกะสา) and Ya Sangkasee (ย่าสังกะสี) as the first man and woman to have been created is a good starting point to be used for witnessing to the Isan people.

APPENDIX AB

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS ON THE BELIEF SYSTEM
RELATING TO THE ISAN'S CONCEPT OF THE DIVINITIES (*THEVADA*) AND
THE SPIRITS (*PHI*)

A number of key conclusions pertinent to the overall study goal and
objectives can be drawn concerning the Isan's concept of the divinities (*thevada*) and
the spirits (*phi*). They are as follows:

1. The animistic belief systems provide the Isan people with consistent ways of
dealing with their present felt needs for survival, safety, security, and prosperity. In
addition, Buddhism reinforces these felt needs. Up until now, Christianity has
presented itself as an alternative religion, but, it has not clearly and effectively
addressed the people's felt need for survival, safety and security, and prosperity. The
intangible and tangible support and protection that Christianity has provided failed to
adequately address these felt needs. As a result, Christianity has been unable to
replace the functions which the Lan Chang's animistic belief systems and the
Indianized religion of Buddhism (and Brahmanism) have been able to play.

2. The historical tracing of Buddhism to the Indianized religion and the animistic
beliefs in the spirit cults to Lan Chang help us to understand how both Buddhism and
Animism work together to respond to the needs of the Isan people. It gives us a
clearer perception of how the Isan see the role and function of religion in their lives.
This perception is significant as Christianity is trying to find out if it can have an
important role or function in the Isan society.

3. The conclusion concerning how Animism and Buddhism address specific
needs can assist us in understanding the reasons why they still hold on to Buddhism
and Animism instead of choosing Christianity after they have heard a presentation of
the gospel. Since Christianity still vaguely and abstractly addresses the general needs
of love, forgiveness, and eternal life, the Isan still need to know how Christianity can
concretely address the specific needs of survival, safety and security, and prosperity.
Although the historical veracity of a religious faith is important, the Isan people take
less notice of the historical truthfulness of a religious faith and instead focus on its
effects, especially on one's present life. If Christianity is going to replace animistic
beliefs, it has to clearly, specifically, and effectively show its effects in responding to
the present-life situations of the Isan people.

4. The efficacy of the Isan's animistic beliefs regarding the *phi (ผี)* as the
controller and regulator of the people's behavior proves its usefulness for the Isan's
village communities. Thus, any faith which would replace the animistic beliefs in the
spirit cults must have the same proven effectiveness and do the same thing.

5. This conclusion concerns relationships to the *phi (ผี)* or the *thevada (เทวดา)*
(spiritual beings) that come through rituals and ceremonies and include benefits in

terms of protection and prosperity.   This conclusion is significant to Christianity as the Isan people relate to spiritual beings through rituals and ceremonies while Christianity normally relates in non-ritualistic and non-ceremonial ways. While Christianity focuses on the quality of relationships as its goal, the Isan focuses on the results of the relationships in terms of survival, protection, and prosperity. Such insights help Christians to understand how the Isan view relationships with spiritual beings or with God.

APPENDIX AC

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS ON THE BELIEF SYSTEM
RELATING TO THE RELEVANCY OF PRACTICAL BUDDHISM AND THE
CONCEPTS OF KARMA, MERIT, REINCARNATION AND SIN

A number of key conclusions have been drawn in relationship to the Isan's beliefs in the concepts of karma, merit, reincarnation and sin.

1. These doctrines constantly work in the minds of the Isan people and as a result have developed a value system which is merit-oriented and karma-conscious. Thus, in fear of bad karma, which can have an effect on their future life, the Isan people perpetually are making daily decisions and living their lives in consideration of the karma and its effect on their future reincarnations. Since they have been taught this from an early age and have lived with this mentality all their lives, Christianity is not usually viewed as an alternate way to deal with their future lives. The Isan are unsure if they decide to convert to Christianity that their lives can break out of the cycle of karma. The Christian evangelists have not dealt with the issues of karma and reincarnation in enough depth that the Isan feel free to make a decision for conversion. As a result, the Isan's inability to make decisive decisions to change his religious faith to Christianity is largely due to Christianity's lack of understanding and ability to convince them that Christianity provides the solution for karma and reincarnation apart from meritorious deeds.

2. One of the Isan's core values derived from their belief systems is related to the respect and the continuity they have with their predecessors, ancestral teaching and way of life. Because of their desire to show gratitude to their forbearers and to continue the traditions and teaching of their parents and grandparents, the Buddhist concept of merit making responds well to this need. It allows the Isan villagers to show gratitude and continuity in the way of their fathers and forefathers by conducting merit-making activities in the temple and transferring all the merit gained to their dead fathers and forefathers. Thereby, Christianity's lack of teaching to address the issues of gratitude and continuity with their fathers and forefathers does not work in favor of Christianity in terms of persuading the Isan to make a faith commitment to embrace Christianity.

3. The Isan's perception of sins differs from that of Christianity. The Isan understand sins in relation to one's actions, whereas Christianity views sins in relation to one's state or condition. Thus, Christianity's presentation of the gospel message as salvation from sins does not communicate well with the Isan people because their belief systems regarding sins mostly relate to the breaking of Buddhist precepts and violations of the traditional, ancestral teachings. As a result, one of the root causes of the Isan's general inability and unwillingness to initiate and/sustain life as a follower of the Christian faith can be attributed to Christianity's grace-based religious mentality compared to the Isan's merit-based religious mentality.

APPENDIX AD

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS ON THE BELIEF SYSTEM
RELATING TO THE MEANING AND PRACTICES CONCERNING
AUSPICIOUS TIME, EVIL OMENS, AMULETS AND MAGIC

Several key conclusions have been made concerning the Isan's beliefs relating to auspicious time, ill omens, amulets and magic. They are as follows:

1. The Isan believes in auspicious time, ill omens, amulets, and magic and primarily focuses on the matter of avoiding misfortune or calamity and of acquiring power, protection, and prosperity. It reveals the inclinations of the Isan people toward the supernatural powers and superstitions. The right timing, right rituals, right objects, and right formula are all indispensable to the source of power to harness or control the power which is believed to interact with humans and influence the outcome of one's daily situations. Consequently, the matter of power encounter or any teaching which centers on the power of Christ over other supernatural powers or beings will have a huge appeal amongst the Isan people.

2. Historically, Protestant Christianity as represented by the Christian & Missionary Alliance (C&MA) in the Isan area has focused on the "doctrinal" Christ instead of the "supernatural" Christ. Christianity has not been able to address the supernatural tendencies of the Isan people.

3. These insights have given an in-depth understanding into the Isan's belief systems concerning their felt needs for survival, protection, happiness, and prosperity. By rightly dealing with the supernatural powers, the Isan believe that it will result in meeting their felt needs.

APPENDIX AE

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS ON THE BELIEF SYSTEM
RELATING TO THE ISAN'S TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS (*HIIT-SIPSONG*) AS
EXPRESSED IN VARIOUS ISAN TERMS

The author has concluded that the Isan's *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)*, *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* and *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs are of great importance to their lives.

1. The *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี), *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*, *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs (which serve as customary law among the Isan) have the force of a norm or standard which regulates and controls behavior and decision making among the Isan. Therefore, it is unlikely that those who do not prescribe to these traditional customs will get away without incurring some measure of sanctions from the household, the kin group, or the village community. As a result, the beliefs according to the *chareet prapaynee* or *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* will act as a deterrent against any decision to convert to Christianity.

2. Also, because of its local origination and focus as well as its relevancy to respond to the felt needs of the people, the *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี), *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*, *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs have tremendous behavior and decision-making effects upon the Isan community.

3. The Thai government really does not regulate religious affairs in the Isan region because culturally the *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* or *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* of the Isan has already been regulating the behavior, conduct, and religious decision making of its people for hundreds of years.

4. The *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs still have relevancy to today's Isan society because it still addresses the matter of survival, safety and security, and prosperity.

5. The *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี), the *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*, or the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* traditional customs have as its basis the religion of Buddhism, the animistic beliefs of the spirit cults, and Brahmanism. They have been so intertwined together in order to respond to the Isan's spiritual felt needs and also to provide a stable force for them in precarioius times. Therefore, it is unlikely that any religious faith can replace the Isan *chareet prapaynee* (จารีตประเพณี), the *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*, or the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* unless it can take the place of the functions of all three religious beliefs combined.

6. Other religious faiths will not be able to challenge and significantly win over the Isan in the near future because of the ability of the Isan's *chareet prapaynee (จารีต*

ประเพณี), the *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*, or the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* to provide all-inclusive social, psychological, and religious needs.

APPENDIX AF

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS ON THE BELIEF SYSTEM
RELATING TO THE ISAN'S MONTHLY PRACTICES OF THE TWELVE *HIIT-
SIPSONG*

The author has drawn the following key conclusions regarding the monthly practices of the twelve *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites (or traditional customs):

1. The monthly practices of the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites provide systematic and rigid prescriptions related to the Isan's religious, psychological, and social life. Thus, these rites build the traditional value system for the Isan people so that they can continue following the ways of the ancestors, Brahmanism, and Buddhism.

2. Because of the social focus on community (group) solidarity and harmony, the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites --namely, the *kounlan (คูณลาน)*, *kaochee (ข้าวจี่)*, *songnam (สรงน้ำ)*, *bungfai (บั้งไฟ)*, *sumhah (ซำฮะ)*, *kaowatsa (เข้าวัสสา)*, *kaosahk (ข้าวสาก)*, *aukwatsa (ออกวัสสา)*, *katin (กฐิน) offering*, and *papa offering*--lend themselves to the force of conformity and compliance. As a result, the rites create the values of respect and obedience, instead of confrontation and conflict.

3. The *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites (namely, the *kaokam*, *songnam*, *sumhah*, *kaoprdupdin*, and *kaosahk*) build the attitudes of gratitude, reciprocity, or obligations toward the ancestors, parents, or elders. Therefore, the Isan continue to develop the values of gratefulness (*bunkhun* relationships), reciprocity, and obligation.

4. The Isan tend to develop a *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* attitude because of the respect for the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* or the *hiit-sipsong* (traditional customs-ฮีตสิบสอง) and the ancestors and their teaching coupled with the attitudes of gratefulness for the ancestors and the people who have granted them *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)*.

5. All of the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* monthly rites provide the opportunity for merit making and community involvement. Thus, the religious needs of the people are met in order to face their future and life after death. As a result, the value placed on merit making in the context of a communal affair is very high among the Isan people.

6. The practice of merit making seems to be motivated by the fear of being reborn into a lower status because one's merit may be less than one's bad karma. Merit making is also done to deliver one's loved ones and kinsmen from hell or from wandering on the earth waiting to be reborn, and conforming to the religion of the community.

7.   Wealth and status are of high value to the Isan people because the more significant activities of merit making or merit accumulation are noted primarily in terms of the merit maker's ability to sponsor these events, such as the *katin (กฐิน)* or the *papa (ผ้าป่า)* offerings.

8.   The inclusion of amusement and fun as part of the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบ สอง)* monthly rites serves to build community solidarity and an Isan value system which stresses fun-loving activities for pleasure-loving (*snuk-สนุก*) people. In addition, these times of amusement allow sanctions for any anti-social expressions which would not otherwise be allowed under normal village life.

9.   Much of the Brahmanistic rituals and ceremonies, particularly the *baisee sookwan (บายศรีสู่ขวัญ)*, tend to focus on the felt needs of survival, protection, good luck, happiness, or prosperity evident throughout the *hiit-sipsong* rites, such as *kounlan (คูณลาน)*, *songnam (สรงน้ำ)*, *sumhah (ซำฮะ)*, and *kaowatsa (เข้าวัสสา)*.

10. The animistic worship of the spirits seems to be motivated by a number of factors such as recognition, fear, avoidance, veneration, petition, and gratefulness. The Isan are aware of the existence of the spiritus or *phi* and their ability to commit malicious acts; they fear them and would like to avoid them but know this is impossible. They, therefore, venerate them and petition them for their continued protection and provision. They are grateful when this happens.

11. The practices of the monthly rites of the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* demonstrate the Isan's inclusive and syncretistic nature for religious and social experience. Thus, offense to any spirit, power, or being is avoided and psychological comfort and security is maintained.

APPENDIX AG

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ISAN'S BELIEF SYSTEMS AND THEIR
VALUE SYSTEM

The author has drawn a couple of key conclusions in regard to the relationship between the Isan's belief systems and their value system:

(1) The Isan's value system [which is formed by their belief systems related to the social and governing values, their concept of the universe, their concept of the spirits (*phi-ผี*) and divinities (*thevada-เทวดา*), their concept and teaching of Buddhism, their concepts of auspicious time, evil omens, amulets and magic, and their traditional customs and rituals (*hiit-sipsong* rites, life-cycle, and occasional customs)] determines their decision making or course of action.

(2) Because the Isan's value system serves as a guide and also justification for decision making, any course of action or decision contrary to, or not in compliance with their value system (which predominately comprises the Buddhist and animistic beliefs) will not likely to be chosen or taken. Therefore, the Isan's non-responsiveness to converting to Christianity can be seen as a result of the lack of justification from his value system. The Isan's decision to convert to Christianity would be seen as a behavior or conduct not supported or expected by their value system. As a result, because the Isan's value system primarily consisting of the syncretistic beliefs in Buddhism, Animism, and its social constraints (group solidarity, social harmony, respect for parents, elders, and superiors, and *bunkhun* relationships), Christianity in Thailand will continue to face tremendous religious and social challenges in the Isan region of Northeast Thailand.

APPENDIX AH

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS IN REGARD TO THE
ISAN'S SOCIAL VALUES

The author has concluded the following concerning the Isan's social values:

1. Because of the social value of respecting or deferring to one's parents, elders, superiors, or ancestors, the Isan's decision making to convert to Christianity is conditioned by the attitude and act of respect and deference toward those in authority, such as elders of the community, kin group elders, parents, or one's superior. Since all of the recognized kin group and village elders are Buddhists and are responsible for carrying on the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites, it is unlikely that there will be support for a decision to convert to Christianity, which the elders view as a rejection of Buddhism, the ancestral ways, and the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites. This condition is further shown by the respect for one's parents through being ordained as a monk and to follow the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites. Also, since Christianity does not provide a way to help the deceased loved ones whom they respect and might be wandering around the earth or in hell, it has less appeal than the Isan's present Buddhist religion. In addition, the Isan's belief systems embody the teaching and will of the ancestors and the community of elders. Thus, an Isan society and village community insists on the social value of those living under the village community's jurisdiction, care, and protection to show respect to those village elders and leaders by conforming to and observing the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites and other traditional customs of the community.

2. Because of the social value of *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* or gratitude, the Isan feel a "lifelong debt" to their forefathers who gave them a place to live; their parents who gave birth to them; their teacher who taught them knowledge and wisdom; their elders who instructed them in the proper way of life; and their ruler or king who provided land, protection, and peace. Thus, they are obligated to these people and, therefore, they demonstrate the obligation and reciprocally return to them any service which they believe makes their life better. Also they normally will submit to the same religion as their parents, elders, teachers, ancestors, rulers, or king. As a result, out of gratefulness and obligation to these people, this social value hinders the Isan from accepting Christianity because of their moral obligation to these people.

3. The patron-client/inferior-superior relationships. Because every person belongs to at least one patron-client relationship or entourage from which he receives support, protection, and advice, the Isan feels that he owes loyalty, respect, deference, and a relative degree of submission to him. As long as he continues to be in the entourage and dependent on his patron or superior for support and protection, his decision-making power is deferred to his patron or superior to a great extent. It is normal that the patron require his client or inferior to hold to the same social norms

and religious affiliation as his. Since the client's main function is to bring respect and a good name to his patron or superior, it is probable that his conversion to Christianity will result in a negative public image among the dominant Buddhist community in which he lives. Consequently, in the wake of the probable loss of his patron-client relationship and the support and protection that accompany it along with the uncertainty of the foreign religion (Christianity) which belongs to an outsider, it is unlikely that he will respond in favor of Christianity.

4. The matter of solidarity will continue to be important to the Isan society. The solidarity of the household, the kin group, and the village community will play an important role in the Isan's decision-making process.

Because the village desires solidarity, the Isan's household holds a membership in the village to which the household is obliged to carry out certain required functions. This is required in order to continue to be under the support and protection of the village and its leadership. Almost all of the government's support for the Isan of the Northeast is normally channeled through the office of the village chief and the members of the Sub-district Administrative Committee who are voted into the office by the people. A household in good standing has the right to receive the support from the government.

In addition, each of the households in the village is required to cooperate, participate and support the Buddhist religious and traditional customary merit making of the village. Any family refusing to cooperate or participate will be subject to some kind of negative sanctions. The head of the household will be the key person to be reprimanded for any uncooperative behaviors of the household. Furthermore, the duties of the children are to obey the household head and to make merit in the Buddhist religion for their parents. The matter is complicated further by the idea that man is under the leadership authority of his father as a single man and under his father-in-law when he is married and still living under the roof or in the same compound of his father-in-law.

If he does not submit to his father (as a single man) he will forfeit his right to the inheritance and economic support of his father, especially the dowry money for his bride. If he does not submit to his father-in-law (as a married man), he and his wife will forfeit their right to the inheritance and support (in the form of land and residence) from his father-in-law. Without the right to seek help from his father because he is now married and without the support of land and residence from his father-in-law, the man and his wife will probably endure hardship unless he has other financial or material resources to replace the loss. As a result, an Isan male (married or single) who has heard the gospel will probably not accept the gospel due to the tremendous hardship that will come upon him, his family, and his life.

Concerning the solidarity of the kin group, although the individual Isan has the right to make his own decision, he will rarely make any major religious decision without the moral support and backing of his household and kin group. When making a decision on matters that might affect his kin group's solidarity or social standing, he believes that approval or sanction from his kin group is indispensable. Without it, he is unlikely to pursue any major decision.

The Isan realize the consequences of not listening to the counsel of the kin group elders who are responsible for the kin group's welfare and happiness. The negative sanctions against an entire household because a single member of that household is not acting in conformity to the kin group's norms can include discontinuation of protection, economic and labor support, and termination of

relationships. Although kin group solidarity provides positive influences such as basic economic, social, religious cooperation and support for members within the group, it negatively inhibits an individuals' decision to change to a new religious path not shared by the group. This frame of mind and the traditional values held by the Isan village communities have caused extremely slow Christian conversion growth for Protestant Christian work in Northeast Thailand.

Concerning the solidarity of the village community, the fear of being criticized and scolded by the Buddhist-dominant community seizes the mind of the Isan villagers and paralyses them from initiating any decision that would lead them from their old religion (Buddhism) to Christianity. Unless the community leaders and elders endorse Christianity, it is unlikely that the Isan villagers will consider Christianity as a religious option unless basic survival is at stake. Crises situations can be an external force that could possibly bring openness to the closed, traditional Isan communities. Also, because of the Isan's distrust for those outside their village and kin groups, the distrust for Christianity will continue if it is directly preached or taught by a Westerner or someone outside of the village.

5. Isan communities are driven to maintain social harmony by creating peace and agreement among their members. Very little room is allowed for ideas or religious persuasions that might lead to disunity. The commitment to social harmony consequently creates great resistance to the spread of Christianity since Christianity would be perceived as a threat to the social harmony of the village community.

6. Concerning the avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict in the author's ministry in Northeast Thailand, the Isan people in the Phosai district of Ubonratchatani continue to show an attitude of resistance to the gospel. Even if they are convinced that Christianity provides the way of salvation, they do not accept it because of fear of offending. In addition, possible retaliation in the form of negative sanctions has kept the Isan villagers from making their own decisions. An Isan villager realizes that if he or she gets too far out of line by not avoiding face-to-face conflict, "negative sanctions of non-cooperation and ultimately social ostracism may be imposed by his fellows." As a result, the Isan's decision-making patterns mostly conform to the preference of the village community leaders and elders.

This has greatly hindered the spread of Christianity in Northeast Thailand, especially where the Gospel is still relatively not understood and where Buddhism still responds to the spiritual needs of the Isan people. Because of the Isan's social value of avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict, they likely will take a position of compromise or accommodation to humans or "spirits" that are of equal or greater strength.

Circumventing confrontation and conflict will continue to be highly valued and prevalent among the people. The strong value of avoidance of confrontation and/or conflict implies that the Isan's decision to reject or accept conversion to Christianity generally lacks a cognitive basis. They make decisions to appease their guests, equals, elders, or superiors in order to avoid any confrontation and/or conflict with those people. The decisions not to convert to Christianity are based on the emotive drive to avoid hurt and conflict, which in turn cause opposition in the household, the kin group, or the larger village community. This also could result in the lack of many conversions to Christianity in the Isan region.

7. Social value of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)*: Because of the Isan's adherence to the social value of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)*, they are considerably reluctant to approach parents, elders, leaders, superiors, or patrons for any support in their decision making, especially if they believe that their decision might cause a disturbance to existing interpersonal relationships. As a consequence of the propensity for decision making from the top down (or hierarchical decision making), it is unlikely that under normal conditions the decision to change to Christianity will be made without being initiated from the person's leader, elder, superior, or patron. In addition, the reverential fear that an Isan's decision to convert to Christianity will create displeasure to his parents, elders, or patron will likely deter him from making that decision.

8. Social value of *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)*: The influence of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* that results in an attitude of noninvolvement and indifference has affected the Isan's decision to convert to Christianity among the Isan villagers. This is especially true since they would be embracing a 'foreign' or a *farang*'s religion (Christianity) for which they will be scolded and negatively sanctioned by their kinsmen, village community, and, probably, household members. The majority of the Isan continue to maintain the posture of *chaiyen (ใจเย็น)* or noninvolvement with Christianity so that they can avoid probable unhappy situations should they make the decision to convert.

9. The social value of *snuk (สนุก)*: Because Christianity is demanding in terms of religious activities, especially the required weekly attendance of church services, and living a pure and holy life, a large number of the Isan people who have heard the Gospel message responded that they did not think that they could be a Christian because of its insistence on purity in every aspect. Instead of being *snuk (สนุก)* or fun-loving, adherence to Christianity would prove to be a burden to them. In addition, the scolding (as opposed to fun or *snuk*) that a person will receive from changing religion from Buddhism to Christianity in a dominant Buddhist community will probably keep him from making a decision to convert to Christianity.

APPENDIX AI

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS WITH REGARD TO THE
ISAN'S BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS VALUES

The author has come to the following conclusions with regard to the Isan's
Buddhist religious values:

1.   The conclusion relates to the Buddhist religious value of sacred
hierarchy and inequality. Because the Isan society is highly hierarchical, the decision-
making process of the Isan people will continue to be patterned after the highest
person in the hierarchy, which is the Thai monarch. It is predictable that the majority
of the Isan will continue to remain Buddhists as long as those in authority or higher in
the social status, and especially the Thai monarch, continue to remain Buddhists.

2.   The second conclusion pertains to the Buddhist religious value of merit
making. Because each person living under the protection of a particular village is
expected to contribute toward the village merit-making activities, a person who does
not cooperate or participate is perceived as being disrespectful to their ancestral
traditions or the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)*. This type of social pressure to
conform to the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* and merit-making activities has
resulted in creating tremendous stress for potential Christian converts and also for
Christians living in Northeast Thailand.
The collective nature of merit-making activities provide significant
problems for Christian converts within the village as they no longer participate in
merit making as individuals (the Buddhistic, Brahmanistic, and magico-animistic
elements of merit making prevents Christians from participating) and therefore no
longer contribute to the overall merit of the village. The non-participating Christian
villagers are thought to be creating division and deteriorating the solidarity of the
community (group).

3.   The third conclusion concerns the Buddhist religious values of status,
power, and wealth. The author has concluded that the Isan's strong longing for a
better social and economic status to replace their difficult farm life in the Northeast,
for power to overcome their helpless state, and for wealth to purchase their way out of
their impoverished conditions adds to the appeal of merit making from Buddhism as a
way to meet this longing. As a result, the Isan find the tendency of Christianity to de-
emphasize the upgrading of social status, the gaining of power, and the accumulation
of wealth less appealing. Nevertheless, an Isan would not hesitate to risk adding
Christianity to their syncretistic belief systems as another religion. However, to give
up their syncretistic belief systems which guarantee status, power, and wealth through
merit making and only embrace Christianity is considered an unfavorable choice.

APPENDIX AJ

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS IN REGARD TO THE
ISAN'S TRADITIONAL CUSTOMARY VALUES

The author has made the following conclusions in regard to the Isan's traditional customary values:

1.   The Isan's traditional customary values and its *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮี ตคองประเพณี)* have the primary function of connecting the Isan back to the past and providing a foundation for community stability and security. Also, they provide a means of dealing with crises and normalizing human behaviors. The reason for this is that the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* is considered the final authority regarding behaviors and religious and social decision making in the village community. Therefore, it is doubtful that the Isan will make a decision to choose Christianity if Christianity can not at least replace what the traditional customs and its *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* have been able to give to the Isan. When Christianity first presented itself, it was rejected because it neither lived up to the Isan's traditional customary values nor adapted to the *hiit-kong prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)*.

2.   The traditional customary value of staying in continuity with the ancestral traditions is especially important to the Isan. These ancestral traditions (*chareet prapaynee-จารีตประเพณี*) serve the purpose of securing guidance from their Isan forefathers to face the challenges of the present and future. Because these *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* and other traditional customs were believed to have been given by the *thevada* (heavenly beings) through their ancestors, they have the authority, legitimacy and relevancy to deal with the Isan's present situations. However, when Christianity was introduced to the Isan people, an invitation was made for them to receive an unfamiliar and foreign message from an outside source of authority. The Isan perceive that Christianity detaches them from their ancestors and their ancestral traditions. Also it did not meet the felt needs of the Isan who had converted to Christianity such as how to deal properly with their deceased parents, grandparents, elders and other forefathers to whom they had been venerating and showing respect for as long as they could remember. As a consequence for Christianity's apparent inability to help the Isan deal with their past ancestral traditions on which they have depended for authority and legitimacy, the Isan have been unresponsive to Christianity and its message. Also their unresponsiveness was partly due to its foreign origin, but also because the Christians communicated a lack of certainty and security to the Isan.

3.   Based on the traditional customary Isan value of the avoidance of misfortune and disaster, the author has concluded that the Isan have decided not to convert to Christianity because they believe that a misfortune and disaster may befall their household, kin group, or village community. As a result, this belief has hindered

individuals from deciding to receive Christianity. In the household, the kin group, or the village community, where the overwhelming majority of members are non-Christians, the ones who convert to Christianity are commonly charged with violating traditional customary norms and values. As a result of this violation, the spirits are believed to be offended and a misfortune or crisis happening in one's household, kin group, and village community is then blamed on the new convert. Thus, the fear of offending the spirits or *phid phi (ผิดผี)* and the possible resulting consequences exert a negative influence on the Isan's decision to convert to Christianity.

4.   The Isan's traditional customary values, together with its *chareet prapaynee* rituals and festivals, have provided psychological stability and security for the Isan people of Northeast Thailand and Laos. However, the author has concluded that Christianity has been perceived by the Isan village communities as not only an outsider's religion but also as an adversary to the Isan's *chareet prapaynee*. As a result, those who have converted to Christianity have found themselves in an extremely uncomfortable situation and this condition has been resulted in their being both insecure and unstable. Consequently, these factors have unfortunately acted as a deterrent or barrier for other Isan to make a positive decision to convert to Christianity.

APPENDIX AK

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS RELATING TO MATTERS
ON THE ISAN'S DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FOR CONVERSION TO
CHRISTIANITY

The author's major conclusions relating to matters on the Isan's decision-making process for conversion to Christianity are as follows:

1.   Most of the Isan people have made a previous provisional decision in regard to Christianity. Since the decision subsequently proves to be non-beneficial as anticipated or the decision has resulted in negative reactions from the individual constituents and community, the Isan converts have abandoned their provisional decision without following through with a permanent decision. (During the provisional decision period, the individual does not usually sever his/her ties with the former religion.)

2.   Although the Isan have the right to carry out individual decision making, decisions made without the consultation and support of the positional leadership authority will certainly meet with negative sanctions. In order to convert to Christianity, the Isan must sever his ties with those in the positional leadership authority role and also experience the loss of the support, protection, and resource needed for survival. Also, before the Isan will convert on a permanent basis, he will probably need strong assurance that Christianity will be able to compensate for what he will lose fom his fellow villagers if he does convert.

3.   Since the Isan society has established conditions based on their social values, their Buddhist religious values, and their traditional customary values in order to regulate the decision-making process of its members, it is unlikely that those who want to convert to Christianity will be able to meet the conditions. Thus, these pre-set conditions are a great hindrance to the spread of Christianity among the Isan.

4.   The matter of religion is not a private or personal matter but rather a public or community matter since the option to convert to Christianity means that he must discontinue his Buddhistic and animistic beliefs. This could subsequently disrupt health, happiness, security, prosperity, and solidarity as well as create social disharmony in the community. In addition, since the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* monthly rites and other traditional customs predominately focus upon and include the Buddhistic and animistic rituals, they probably can not be continued by new converts. Only a small part of the rites and traditional customs which serve the social functions without the rituals could possibly be observed. Failure to observe *these hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites and other traditional customs in any part by the individuals without the community action could be interpreted as a violation of community norms because the matter of religion is considered a community's affair.

Only the elders of the community and the collective body can make the decision to suspend and discontinue the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites or the traditional customs. As a result, a change to Christianity is perceived as a rejection of the essential elements of the Isan's *chareet prapanee (จารีตประเพณี)* which consists primarily of Animism and Buddhism. It is therefore a threat to the village community's integration and solidarity. Due to this situation, when an Isan makes the decision to convert to Christianity, it is normally a provisional decision and the person who decides to convert to Christianity probably does not play a significant role in the village community. In some cases, the convert may be serving in an important position in society; if so, he probably will either lose that position later or will lose the public recognition he previously enjoyed. Thus, because so much power for decision making is assigned to the village community led by its elders and leaders, the spread of Christianity faces tremendous hindrances in Isan village communities.

5. Blessing and support by the elders and the village chief are very important for a conversion to Christianity, and, if this takes place, the likelihood of negative sanctions is minimal. The publicly recognized right and power of the elders and village chief are derived from the authority of the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* and the religion of Buddhism. This gives them the legitimacy they need to lead the villagers. By contrast the Christian evangelists' or pastors' right and power to lead the villagers to make decisions is not recognized by the unconverted Isan. Thus, in the eyes of the Isan's village community, the Christian evangelists and missionaries lack any legitimacy for decision-making authority. Except for the humanitarian and development work, their religious activities in the community are perceived as only creating divisions and social disharmony in the community.

6. Because of the manner in which a decision is reached and how it is enforced in the context of the village community, the matter of Christianity will probably not be represented in a village meeting. Those who have converted to Christianity and are still living in a predominately Buddhist village that still uses the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* will probably suffer some degree of negative sanctions because of their decision. Part of the sanctions probably will include being considered an outsider, and, therefore, not regarded as being under the full protection and support of the village. In addition, by not participating in the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบ สอง)* rites and other traditional customs of merit making (which are expected of every household) he will be considered both disrespectful and disloyal to his parents, his elders and his ancestors. As a consequence of the Isan's fear of negative sanctions, coupled with their social values of continuing the traditional customs of their ancestors, Christianity will probably not be accepted as a viable option for the majority of the Isan people and will be rejected by its village communities. As result, their individual decision making is conditioned by the village community elders and leaders. However, the real test is whether Christianity has the ability to make itself an integrated part of the village communities and society. This will be a key factor if Christianity is to survive in the Isan region of Northeast Thailand. Then the community might exercise less control upon its members who desire to convert to Christianity.

7. To support and bless the adoption of Christianity for its kin group or to allow the members of its kin group to convert to Christianity is to lose respect and

standing as one of the important kin groups in the village communities. It is common for the individuals who are considering a decision to convert to Christianity to ask the new group (Christian church) for some assurance of protection and support in the event that they become Christians. Even if they do not ask the new group for this assurance, the individuals considering the decision to convert to Christianity must be assured that the new Christian group to which they will bind themselves can meet the felt needs left after separating from the previous unsaved group. Thus, since Christianity is probably unable to provide such an assurance for most of the people, the likelihood of any significant response to conversion is probably very minimal. As to the point of the Isan's severing relationships with their kin groups and choosing to follow a religion with whom they have had no prior connection is virtually unthinkable. As a result, the people's royalty, respect and submission is likely to remain with the existing system of the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* with its focus primary on Buddhism and the animist beliefs of the spirit cults.

8. Because of the pressure to get converts to revert back to their former religion of Buddhism and animistic beliefs in spirit cults by the relatives, a large number of those who have made provisional decisions to follow Christ have reverted to their former religious practices so that they can continue to be protected by the village leaders and elders. As a consequence, those who potentially might convert to Christianity decide to abandon the idea of conversion after seeing their relatives or friends turning back to Buddhism. This, therefore, has hindered other people from converting to the Christian faith.

9. Individuals, out of fear and also *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* are reluctant to make any religious decision without first consulting the household head and getting his support because the household head has great authority over the individual decision-making process, and especially in the area of conversion to Christianity. It is unlikely that individuals will make a decision to convert to Christianity if the household head does not support the decision.

10. On this basis, as long as an Isan couple is living in the same residence as the father or father-in-law, or is depending on the resources of land and property of their father or father-in-law, it is probable that a decision to convert to Christianity will be postponed until the father or father-in-law has passed away.

11. Because conversion is seen as disrespect for the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* and sometime as a threat to the well-being of the household (because those who are converted to Christianity are shunned and denied assistance from their unconverted neighbors, friends, and even some of their relatives), those who make decisions to convert to Christianity are perceived as evil. This consequently creates fear among others who are considering Christianity and thus hinders them from considering Christianity.

12. When it comes to making a decision to convert to Christianity, the Isan's individual decision-making power is tremendously conditioned and restricted. These conditions and restrictions are based on the Isan's value system operating through the elders and leaders of the village community, the kin group elders, the heads of the household, and significant others. As a result, conversion to Christianity will continue to be minimal unless the conditions are changed.

13. It is improbable that the individual will make a decision to convert to Christianity without the consent of his counterparts in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)*, patron-client, or superior-inferior relationships. Also, because of the social value of *krengchai (เกรงใจ)* and the avoidance of confrontation and conflicts, it is doubtful that individuals will approach their patron or superior to gain their support for a decision to convert to Christianity. If the individuals are convinced that converting to Christianity is a better tradeoff, they will then make the decision and be prepared to experience the loss of other relationships.

APPENDIX AL

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE
DECISION-MAKING APPROACHES OF THE ISAN PEOPLE

The author has drawn the following conclusions concerning the decision-making approaches of the Isan people:

1. On the basis of these findings, the author has concluded that it is not likely that under normal conditions an individual Isan will make a decision on his own to follow Christ unless a *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* or reciprocal relationship has been built with a Christian evangelist, pastor, or other Christian who would act as a significant other in the decision-making process. However, in order for the individual to make a decision to convert to Christianity, the strength of the relationship with a pastor, evangelist or a believer who takes on the role of a significant other has to surpass the demand or pressures of the elders and leaders of his village community, his kin group elders, the head of his household, and/or other significant people in his life.

2. Because of these findings, the author has concluded that everyone in the village feels that they must abide by the consensus of the village, especially concerning the observing of the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)*, merit-making activities, or other cultural constraints. When a Christian convert refuses to participate in the village activities which otherwise have the consensus of the village, the village community elders and leaders then have their authority undermined. As a result, the convert probably will face some form of negative sanction in the village and this will then serve as an example to others in the village so that they will not follow.

3. Based on these findings, the author has concluded that as Christianity is able to assist individuals in dealing with the urgencies or crises in their lives, it will have a role in the Isan's society. By providing them with protection, security and stability and by helping them in family, schooling, and other felt needs, Christianity will then have a good chance of gaining converts. Besides the deference approach through building *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)*/reciprocal, patron-client, or superior-inferior relationships, Christianity still has a window of opportunity to win converts from the Isan region through the piecemeal approach.

APPENDIX AM

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS FROM THE FIRST
INTERVIEW RESEARCH PROJECT WHICH FOCUSES ON THE REASONS
FOR THE ISAN'S CONVERSION AS WELL AS THEIR OPPOSITION TO
CHRISTIANITY

The author's conclusions from the First Interview Research Project focus
on reasons for the Isan's conversion as well as for their opposition to Christianity:

1. The majority of Isan Buddhists are nominal followers of Buddhism
who continue to observe Buddhism in the form of merit making in order to carry on
the *prapaynee (ประเพณี)*. As opposed to the strict followers who know and understand
the precepts of Buddhism, these *prapaynee (ประเพณี)* Buddhists are more receptive to
the Christian message than the strict followers of Buddhism because they only
practice a form of Buddhism with little understanding of its teaching.

2. Those who heard the gospel from their counterparts in the *bunkhun
(บุญคุณ)* relationships (parents, relative, or teachers) were more likely to convert to
Christianity than those who heard from those farthest from their counterparts in the
bunkhun (บุญคุณ) relationships. However, if one's counterparts in the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)*
relationships are opposed to Christian conversion, it is likely that that person will not
convert to Christianity.

3. To have one or more Christian family members or relatives raises the
percentage of a person's likelihood of converting to Christianity.

4. Family solidarity and happiness continue to occupy the majority of the
minds of the Isan households and communities. If Christianity can transform
households into being a close and loving family, the chance of converting more of the
Isan population will be increased.

5. The tangible and/or intangible helps received from Christians provide a
place of stability and security as well as building the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationship. As
a result, those who desire to win a convert from among the Isan people should build
the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships. Also, the Christians who are in a position of being a
patron or superior in a relationship with the Isan people or who head up an entourage
should take advantage of influencing the Isan people who belong to these
relationships or in the entourage. There is a sense of obligation from the Isan who are
recipients of the *bunkhun (บุญคุณ)* relationships to respond in favor of the suggestions or
feelings of the givers in the relationships.

6. In general, Christianity still has a good name among the Isan people
and many are interested in Christianity. However, the interest normally does not
translate into a conversion decision until the tradeoff is in favor of Christianity.

7.   Over half of the Isan indicated that they absolutely could not accept Christianity regardless of its good reputation and good teaching. They reasoned that by accepting Christianity it would mean disrespect for the family's religious inheritance. The decision for the rejection of Christianity is based on the family or household.

8.   Almost 70% of the respondents who decided to not convert to or oppose Christianity have indicated that they absolutely will not consider conversion to Christianity for any possible reason. Therefore, if this group is not brought to a real understanding of Christianity, they will continue to provide the momentum for others to oppose Christianity in the future. Any effort to reach out to this group and help them to experience the tangible and intangible benefits of Christianity will be to the advantage of the furtherance of the gospel.

APPENDIX AN

DETAILED RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS FROM THE SECOND
INTERVIEW RESEARCH PROJECT WHICH WAS CONDUCTED TO
DISCOVER THE ISAN'S DECISION MAKING INVOLVING NINE MAJOR
DECISION-MAKING AREAS

The following conclusions have been drawn from the Second Interview
Research Project which was conducted to discover the Isan's decision making
involving nine major decision-making areas (marriage and divorce, career choice,
medical treatment, education/schooling, inheritance, building a house or choosing a
residence, religious observances, religious change, and conversion to Christianity) in
three districts (Nathan, Phosai and Khemarat) of Ubonratchatani province:

1.   The village community elders and leaders whom the Isan consider to
be the upholders and propagators of the *chareet prapaynee (จารีตประเพณี)* or *hiit-kong
prapaynee (ฮีตคองประเพณี)* were chosen by 89% of the respondents as ones who must take
part in making any decision concerning the observances or practices of Isan's current
religion (Buddhism), while 65% said that the elders and leaders must be a part of
one's decision to change to another religion. However, ironically, only 40% of the
people said they must have the elders and leaders of the village community take part
in their decision to convert to Christianity. From these findings, the author has
concluded that the author's supposition that the elders and leaders of the village
community have the authority to enforce the observances of the *hiit-kong prapaynee
(ฮีตคองประเพณี),* including the *hiit-sipsong (ฮีตสิบสอง)* rites, or the traditional customs of
merit making inherited from the Isan's ancestors. Also, the elders and leaders of the
village community are responsible for imposing negative sanctions on the village
members who do not abide by the village mandate. However, only 65% of the
respondents thought the elders and leaders of the village community should become a
part of the decision-process of the individuals if they want to convert to another
religion. As a result of this position, it is likely that the village community will take
action against anyone who converts to Christianity without the elders and leaders of
the village community being involved in the decision-making process.

2.   While 87% of the respondents said that the elders and leaders of one's
village community must take part in one's decision-making process, 92% of the
respondents said that the kin group elders (heads) must take part in one's decision
making for the continuity of the observance of one's current religion (Buddhism).
This is followed by 76% of the people responding that elders and leaders of the
village community must take part in the decision-making process of the individuals,
while 58% indicated that the elders and leaders must take part in one's decision to
convert to Christianity. This finding is consistent with the fact that the highest
ranking elder of the kin group elders is the *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร),* who is assigned
responsibility for caring for the spirit of the kin group (*phi sua*), and is endowed with

power to make sure that members of the kin group continue to carry out the traditional customs of the *phi sua (ผีเชื้อ)* and also the *hiit-kong prapaynee* (primarily consisted of Buddhism and animist belief in spirit cults-ฮีตคองประเพณี) from the ancestors. If any member of the kin group is considering changing to another religion, he/she must seek the advice or permission of the kin group elders, in particular the *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร)*. Without doing so, the *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร)* would consider the person who converted to Christianity to be disrespectful to his position and the household head in which the converted individual is a member. He would then be reprimanded by the *chao kote (เจ้าโคตร)*. As a result of this perspective and out of respect for the kin group elders, most Isan will continue with their current Buddhist religion.

3. Of the 89 respondents 64% of them said that the household heads must be a part of the individual decision-making process with regard to the enforcing of the observance of current religious practices. However, only 61% indicated that the household head should take part in the individual decision to change to another religion, while only 38% expressed the opinion that the household heads are to be included in the decision-making process of the individuals. From this finding, it can be concluded that the household heads still hold major responsibility to carry out religious duties in the village community. As a result, it is unlikely that a household member will gain support to convert to Christianity in a dominant Buddhist village community.

4. While 100% of the 89 respondents said that they would take part in their own choices of career or marriage/divorce, only 98% of them hold that they must take part in observing and upholding their current religious practices. Ninety-eight percent of the people further indicated that they must be involved in making their own decision to change to another religion. However, only 82% of them indicated that they should take part in the decision to convert to Christianity. From these findings, it can be concluded that 18% of the people who responded to the questionnaires said that they should not take part in the decision-making process to convert to Christianity. The decision to convert to Christianity should be made by either the household heads, the significant others, the elders and the leaders of the village community, or the kin group elders. In addition, because 98% of them believed that they must take part in observing and preserving the current religion of syncretistic Buddhism which had been passed down by the Isan's forbears, it is probable that Christianity will continue to face barriers to the gospel from this overwhelming majority.

5. While the significant others' (a son, daughter, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, grandparent, patron, or superior) most important role is related to medical treatment as indicated by 88% of the respondents, when considering the change to another religion, 36% of them said that they should include significant others to take part in the decision-making process, while only 28% replied that they should allow the significant others to be part of the decision-making process of the individuals. From these findings, it is significant to note that because the significant others often have the responsibility to bear the financial burden for the medical treatment, the highest percentage of the respondents is given to significant others. As a result, if a decision to convert to Christianity affects significant others, it is probable that the one who is considering conversion will not proceed until advice has been sought from the significant other(s).

6.   It is interesting to note that none of the respondents believe that they have the sole decision-making power regarding the matter of current religious (Buddhist) observances or practices. However, when it comes to making a decision to change another religion, 11% of them said that they have the sole decision-making power (without needing any others to take part in the decision-making process). Also, 28% of the people hold that they have the sole decision-making power to accept Christianity or reject Christianity; partly because most of the respondents knew that the one who conducted the interviews is a Christian. Nevertheless, these findings confirmed that the Isan decision making is conditioned or restricted by other factors.

7.   When it comes to changing to another religion, 44% of the respondents indicated that they are the principal or primary decision makers but only alongside other decision makers such as the village community elders and leaders, the kin group elders, the household heads, and significant others. This finding confirms the view that although the individual has the power to make individual decisions regarding the change of religion, he will rarely do so without the support of others. When it comes to converting to Christianity, the percentage slightly increases from 44% to 46% in which the individuals are seen as the principal or primary decision makers, while 54% of the respondents attribute the principal or primary decision-making power to convert to Christianity to be someone other than themselves. From this finding, it can be concluded that more than half of the Isan people surveyed hold that the decision to convert must principally or primarily be made by other people. These included the village community elders and leaders, the kin group elders, and the significant others.

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VITA

Chansamone Saiyasak was born in Pakse, Laos, to a Laotian mother, Pheng, and a Thai (Isan) father, Desa, on April 30, 1966. As a young boy, Chansamone had been living with his Buddhist grandfather in Ubonratchatani (Northeast Thailand) until 1979 when he followed his parents to resettle in Nashville, Tennessee. In 1982, Chansamone became converted to Christianity under the ministry of Dr. Alfred G. Henson, the senior pastor of Lighthouse Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee.

Chansamone graduated from Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia in 1990 with a B.A. in Religion with a concentration on Cross-Cultural Studies. In 1990, he married Patsalin Shiao, a Laotian (Chinese) registered nurse who also became a Christian convert at Lighthouse Baptist Church and attended Liberty University but later transferred to and graduated from Belmont University with a B.S. in Nursing. Also, in the same year, Chansamone enrolled Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Cordova, Tennessee, and graduated with a Master of Divinity in 1994 and a Doctor of Ministry in Missiology in 2000.

In 1994, Chansamone served as the Minister of Missions at Lighthouse Baptist Church and also founded and directed the Mekong Evangelical Mission (MEM) in Nashville, Tennessee. Dr. Lee I. Bruckner has since then served an MEM's board chairman and Dr. Alfred G. Henson as MEM's principal advisor. In that same year, he was ordained as a minister of the gospel at Lighthouse Baptist Church. A year later in 1995, Chansamone co-founded the Global Foundation (GF) in Franklin, Tennessee, and has since then been serving as its vice-president. The purpose of GF is to provide humanitarian help to Christian ministries world-wide.

On December 26, 1995, Patsalin who had faithfully carried out the work of missions in Thailand alongside Chansamone passed away with cancer. Chansamone returned to Northeast Thailand in 1996 to continue the work of MEM and the planting of Mekong churches. His sister Keota and his brother returned from the United States to join him in Northeast Thailand in 1997. In the same year, Chansamone re-married to Piyapon in Ubonratchatani and joined the faculty of Ratchatani University in Ubonratchani where he served as a full-time instructor. In 1999, Chansamone founded the Mercy Foundation (MF) as a humanitarian and educational organization and registered it with the Thai government.

By the year 2007, Chansamone, Tom Chanthavong, Jay Saiyasak, and their wives, together with others on the MEM team, have established the following institutions in Northeast Thailand: Mekong Bible Seminary (MBIS), the Mercy Christian School (MCS), the Mercy Home for Children (MHC), the Mekong Radio Station (MRS), the Mercy Church Association (MCS), and a number of the Mekong/Mercy churches throughout the country of Thailand. Chansamone also currently directs the MBIS and the MCS. Piyapon serves as the main principal of the MCS. In 2006, Chansamone was elected to serve as Secretary of the Coordinating Committee of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand of the Northeastern Region. In March 2007, MEM was finally registered with the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand. Chansamone and Piyapon have two sons: Alexander Sirikoon, age 7, and

Nathaniel Tirapong, age 5. They have also adopted two girls: Umalai, age 11, and Molly, age 7.