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A Challenge for the Thai Church



Introduction

Thailand is a hierarchical society. Understanding this simple idea is key to understanding Thai behavior, which is predicated on knowing who is in a senior or junior role, and the behavior that is appropriate to each. Missionary work in a Thai context must come to grips with the hierarchic dynamic, asking: how should I behave and what is expected of Christian leadership?

Findings

1. Thailand: a hierarchical society

In Thailand, the roles of senior and junior individuals are clearly defined. Most Thais are aware of their position of seniority or inferiority. Two reasons for acceptance of hierarchy include the religious context of Buddhism and economic factors.

Religious context of Buddhism

Status within the hierarchic system is believed to result from accumulated past karma in the form of merit (bun) or demerit (bap). Merit from previous lives will determine the state into which one is born. Traditionally, more credence is given to a person's right to seniority because of past merit, rather than earning it through education and other accomplishments. For the most part, karmic thinking still influences the Thai toward a passive relationship to the world and status in it. Each person has a predetermined place.

Economic factors

Hierarchic society is also perpetuated by economic factors: the absence of social welfare and the uneven distribution of wealth in Thai society. By economic necessity, Thai people depend on each other. There is no government housing, welfare state, government support for the unemployed or old-age pensions, disability allowance or child benefits. This means children depend on parents, parents later in life depend on children, poor family members depend on richer family relations.

2. Indebted relationships in Thai society

A correct understanding of patron-client relationships will result from a correct understanding of *bunghun* which has been "...described as any good thing, help or a favor done...which entails gratitude and obligation..."^[1] from the beneficiary. *Bunghun*, indebted goodness, is a psychological bond between someone who out of kindness and sincerity renders another person needed help and favor, with the latter person remembering the kindness and being ever-ready to reciprocate.

- The giver of *bunghun* will impart mercy and kindness, generally applicable when a superior or stronger person behaves benevolently to those below.
- The receiver of *bunghun* will feel gratitude, indebtedness (*pen ni bunghun*), normally resulting in reciprocity, especially loyalty.
- *Bunghun* is strongly felt within the nuclear or extended family, but exists on all levels of society, aiding in the flow of civility and friendliness.
- Each Thai is to an extent a giver and receiver of *bunghun*.

Blurring occurs between doing your duty as a professional (manager, teacher, etc.) and doing a personal favor, making it impossible to avoid *bunghun* relationships. Just "doing your job" can be an act of *bunghun*. In these situations there is in a binding or constraining of individuals to certain patterns. The result is *bunghun* receivers feel dependent or obligated, displaying personality traits including obedience, submission, and conformity.

A *bunghun* relationship, once begun, generally continues. Termination may generate feelings of rejection. Thais will uphold the relational interdependence as long as it benefits both sides, and as long as the patron is viewed as having greater merits.

Bunghun relationships result in strong vertical bonds (patron – client) and weak horizontal bonds (between fellow clients), leaning less toward egalitarian relationships with social equals, and more toward hierarchical relationships with social unequals.

3. Expectations for leaders and followers in Thai society

A. Expectations for a leader (follower/client expectations of a patron)

Expectations for a leader fall into two main areas: authority and benevolence. Exercising authority and benevolence over time leads to glory and honor (*baramee*).

- Authority. The position is based on merit. The leader should command respect, be feared and take the initiative.
- Benevolence (*prakhun*). The leader is expected to: be a father figure, head of family; provide protection and favors; cover subordinate's mistakes; reward lavishly; be forgiving and generous with time. This builds *bunghun*, indebtedness.

B. Expectations for a follower (what leaders, patrons, expect of followers, clients)

Expectations for a follower fall into two areas: deference and loyalty.

- Deference (*hi giat*). Subordinates are expected to: honor and respect; trust; withhold public criticism; cause no loss of face for the leader.

- Loyalty (katanhyu). Subordinates are expected to support, follow and promote the leader-patron, no questions asked. In ethical situations, boss loyalty rises above conscience. In the workplace, loyalty is to the leader, not the company.

4. Patron-client relationships and the Thai church

Thai church leadership is shaped by hierarchy, indebtedness and expectations of leaders and followers. Transformation in the Christian community will be gradual and will mean working within the system.

A. Inevitability

Working within the patron-client system is inevitable and it would be foolish to ignore such a reality. Relevant work will be based on:

- A correct understanding of expectations and mutual respect, which can lead to life-long relationships.
- Patience and hope: transformative renewal of the mind of church members may take time, perhaps generations, to move toward biblical principles and ethics outweighing existing societal structures (indebtedness, etc.)

B. Role of influential members

The authority and power of Thai church leaders and members isn't necessarily derived from position or appointment. Influence is derived and exerted based on *bunghun* and *baramee* possessed, not whether the person is a church leader. For example, a decision may be delayed until the influencer is present. There are a variety of situations where influence, wanted or unwanted, can be a danger or clash. Two examples include: 1) a benefactor who may have too much influence in the church or 2) when an employer attends the same church as an employee who would rarely dare to disagree with the employer.

On the other hand, there is potential for good. Influential members can display godly, selfless behavior, such as coordinating church projects, mobilizing people, boosting cooperation, and other ways.

C. Normal expectations in the Thai church

The type of expectations church members have toward their leaders depends on the leader's education level, social status and region of origin in Thailand. Though it is difficult to generalize, two qualities emerge:

authority and benevolence. Holmes^[2] summarized it well: "For centuries, Thai kings have been feared, adored. Today, Thais expect a blend of authoritarianism and benevolence...in a similar royal mold."

- Authority — Thai Christians expect a leader to be credible, dignified, not to fool around or be too casual. Manual work can erode credibility if done too often, but can be acceptable in limited amounts, which would lead to being at one with (*gan-eng*) members. Servant-leadership is rarely expected, decisions are general made by the leader, who delegates tasks. Overall, the leader is expected to: be responsible for the work and know its status, initiate change, sense discontent, and cover mistakes and incomplete work.
- Benevolence — Church leaders are expected to use their position to benefit members, ranging from material to spiritual needs. One example would be finding a member a job. The pastor-leader then assumes the role of guarantor for the placed individual, mirroring what a patron would do for a client. Moral support probably counts more than financial support and is within the ability of most

leaders, but it must be distributed fairly, a reality that may explain why most Thai churches are small.

Expectations of church leaders toward members are honor and loyalty, the same as is seen in society.

- Honor is seen as due to the leader because of the position God has given and the leader's greater experience and knowledge of faith.
- Loyalty to the church is generally synonymous with loyalty to the leader. A follower feels indebted, deferential and rarely refuses a request, with loyalty rising above self-consideration or conscience.

5. Concerns about the patron-client system in the church

Hierarchy and inequality, fundamental to the patron-client system, bring benefits, but the system could be seen on some fronts as not biblical. Christian doctrine allows for: equality of all believers, who have one Lord; leaders who listen, sometimes receive instruction; members who understand God can speak to them, not just to leaders; leaders who do menial tasks; providers of help and their recipients are equals, including society's poor and weak who are disqualified as patrons and clients.

Indebtedness, also fundamental to patron-client relationships, in some ways can be viewed as contrary to Christ's teaching to give and expect nothing in return (Mat 6:3; Mat 10:8; Luk 14:12). A better model would be grace (*prakhun*), in which favors are dispensed freely for the sake of God's kingdom, without thought of personal gain. Balancing that, the recipient should not feel obligated or indebted.

Other concerns surface, including lack of teamwork when: members don't feel joint ownership of a leader's ideas, or feel unable to voice ideas or ignored; or when leaders fail to work together because clients can't be shared among patrons or when other patrons are viewed as competitors.

Conclusion

Understanding leadership in a Thai context produces important questions. When to play along with or challenge traditional roles? How to follow a biblical leadership model and still be a respected leader? To adapt to and appreciate the Thai cultural way and maintain Christian integrity is the goal, and will require:

- Sensitivity to and leading by the Holy Spirit
- Seeking daily to authenticate walking with the Lord and Thai brothers and sisters
- Teaching Thai leaders to: submit to other leaders, be loyal followers, learn from frustrations and model new ways of leading.

[1] Chai Podhisita. 1985 "Buddhism and Thai World View". in *Traditional and Changing World View*, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute, 47.

[2] Holmes, Henry and Tangtongtavy, Suchada. 1995 *Working with the Thais*. Bangkok: White Lotus, 62.

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