PATRON-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS: A Challenge for the Thai Church

By Steve Taylor

INTRODUCTION

"Thailand is a hierarchical society"(Holmes 1995:26). This simple statement provides a major key to understanding Thai behavior. From childhood, every Thai is taught to be aware of who are their seniors, who are their juniors and the behavior appropriate to each. Those who do not recognize and conform to the norms of behavior are frowned upon and disliked in society (Podhisita 1985:32).

After many years serving as a missionary in Thailand, I had the opportunity to study Thai leadership patterns during a period of sabbatical leave in Singapore. My study answered many questions which had long puzzled me but also left me rather apprehensive as I faced returning to a position of leadership in Thailand. For instance, "servant leadership" had always been something I had sought to both model and develop in others. Yet in the Thai context, it appears that one is normally *either* a servant *or* a leader, but not both. How then should I behave and what should be expected of Christian leadership in this context? This paper explores the findings of my study and some of the dilemmas and questions I have had to face and struggle with as a result.

1. Thailand as a Hierachical Society

In Thai society, the expectations of those who are senior and those who are junior are clearly defined. Most Thais are keenly aware of their position of seniority to some (and the obligations they have towards them) and their position of inferiority to others (again with its own set of obligations). For example, it would be normal when eating out as a group, for the most senior in the group to pay for the bill. Thais are reasonably comfortable with the notion that some individuals in society "deserve" to have power. This is a remnant of the old *Sakdina* system whereby all citizens were given a rating based on the size of their land and their position or status in society.

There are at least two possible reasons for this acceptance of hierarchy. The first has to do with the religious context of Buddhism; the second relates to economic factors.

A. Buddhism

Buddhist thinking, most probably, is the first major contributing factor. One's status in the hierarchical system is believed to result from accumulated past karma in the form of *bun* (merit) and *bap* (demerit). The degree of "high-ness" or "low-ness" of an individual's status is believed to vary according to his store of *bun* and *bap*. The more *bun*, the higher one's status; the less *bun* (or the more *bap*), the lower the status. One can see from this the extent to which the Buddhist world view has influenced the Thai view of the social order (Podhisita 1985:33).

Merit from previous lives will determine the state into which one is born. Traditionally, it appears that more credence has been given to a person's right to seniority because of his/her past unknown merit, rather than the visible earning of it through educational qualifications and other accomplishments. Being born into certain prestigious families (having the right surname) is enough to guarantee prestige and honor. While there are some changes, particularly in Bangkok, where people are increasingly accepted for positions of authority on the basis of academic and other achievements, for the most part karmic thinking still influences the Thai towards a passive understanding of their relationship to the world around them and their status in it. Each person has his or her predetermined place. One may be able to change the way of things in part but do not hope for too much.

B. Economic Factors

A second major factor influencing the perpetuation and acceptance of hierarchy is the absence of social welfare and the uneven distribution of wealth in Thai society. Although the Thai are strongly individualistic (from a survey of urban Thais, Independence was regarded as the most important value held [Komin 1985:189]), by economic necessity, the Thai people have to depend upon one another. Each Thai born into the world is already dependent on others and in turn, others will be dependent on them. Apart from government schools (to which parents will pay a minimal tuition fee), and government hospitals (which generally work on a "pay as you can afford" basis), there is no government housing, no welfare state, no government support for those out of work, no government old-age pension, no disability allowance, no child benefits etc. Children are dependent on their parents. Later, parents are dependent on their children. Poorer family members are dependent on richer family members. These are facts of life which one may dislike but eventually must accept.

2. Indebted Relationships in Thai Society

Perhaps the most fundamental value that has emerged out of the hierarchical nature of Thai society is the concept of bunkhun. A correct understanding of bunkhun will lead to a correct understanding of "Patron-Client" relationships. "There is no English equivalent of this term but it may be

described as any good thing, help or favor done by someone which entails gratitude and obligation on the part of the beneficiary" (Smuckarn 1985:169).

Bunkhun, or indebted goodness, is a psychological bond between someone who, out of sheer kindness and sincerity renders another person the needed help and favor, and the latter's remembering of the kindness done and his ever-readiness to reciprocate the kindness (Komin 1990:168).

The giver of *bunkhun* is seen as having mercy and kindness. This quality is particularly applicable to interactions between people of different status levels where the superior or stronger person behaves benevolently to those below him. "A boss should be forgiving of a subordinate who has made a big mistake. A teacher should be generous with time and effort in order to help his students. A rich person should be generous with tips to servants and donations…" (Holmes 1995:31). The receiver of *bunkhun* will have the feeling of gratitude and indebtedness (called by the Thais *pen ni bunkhun*). This feeling runs very deep and will normally result in some form of reciprocity, especially in the form of *loyalty*. "One must appreciate those who have done favors for one. A child should feel great gratitude and indebtedness to his or her parents, as should student to teacher, servant to master, or a friend to another friend who has helped him or her" (Vichit-Vadakan 1990).

The *bunkhun* relationship is perhaps most strongly felt within the nuclear or extended family (Smuckarn 138-139). The concept of *bunkhun* is not limited, however, to the family nor to just one strata of society but exists on all levels, and aids society as a whole to flow in a civil and friendly manner. This concept of *bunkhun* may perhaps be the single most important aspect of social relationships in Thailand. Each Thai, to a greater or lesser extent, is both a receiver of *bunkhun* (from those *above* him) and a giver of *bunkuhn* (to those *below* him). Normally, the *bunkhun* relationship continues amicably and respectfully between the two parties through continuous cycles of giving, receiving and reciprocating.

The demarcation between doing one's duty (e.g. as a manager, teacher, leader etc.) and that of doing personal favors for others is blurred. As Chai Podhisita points out: "Duties performed by those expected to do so, such as parents and teachers, are considered to be not merely duties but also bunkhun"(1985:39). It is therefore impossible to avoid *bunkhun* relationships, at least to some extent since the very act of carrying out one's duties is to some extent an act of *bunkhun*. The result being a "binding" effect which limits and constrains individuals to certain patterns of behavior.

Since the Thai social system is hierarchically structured implying unequal interpersonal relations… it follows logically that these relationships generate in the receivers of *bunkhun* a sense of dependence and obligation characterized in such personality traits as trust, respect, obedience, non-assertion, self-effacement, submission, conformity, compliance, etc. (Komin 1985:184)

Those who begin a *bunkhun* relationship are generally required to continue it. One who terminates his or her *bunkhun* patronage may generate a deep feeling of rejection and disappointment in the former recipient. Chaiyun Ukosakul, however, helpfully points out that:

> The Thai will uphold this material interdependence only as long as it serves to benefit both sides. The Thais believe that the determination of a person's status in the social hierarchical order is dependent upon a composite quality called "merit" (*Bun*) or "virtue" (*Khwaam-dii*)….they can expect such visible evidence of their good Karma such as wealth or pleasure. …. This obligation or loyalty (between patron and client) will exist as long as there are mutual benefits; as long as the patron is viewed as possessing greater merits. However, if the patron should suffer misfortune, this would indicate that her/his merit is insufficient, or that her/his *Baap* (sin) has now overcome her/his *Bun* (merits). She/he is, therefore, no longer dependable, so her/his client withdraws. (1993:142-144)

One result of indebted (*bunkhun)* relationships in Thai society is that it produces strong social bonds in the vertical dimension (between patron and client) but relatively weak bonds in the horizontal dimension (between fellow clients). Lucien Hanks has pictured Thai social structures as a series of un-integrated chains linked together at their head (1968: 29-34). Zehner points out that a peasant farmer in his village tends to be orientated less towards egalitarian relations with other farmers than towards hierarchical relations with his social unequals. As a result, co-operative action by villagers in, say, improving local irrigation, is most easily accomplished by the intervention of mutual superiors (1987:5).

3.Expectionations for Leaders and Followers in Thai Society
A. Expectations for a Leader
(the follower's expectations of his/her leader, or the client's expectations of his patron/benefactor/boss)

I. Authority (*phradet*)
The leader holds his (hierarchical) position because of his merit. He should therefore be feared. The leader must

command respect. His manner, behavior, dress (and even his car!) should all reflect his position of authority. It is the boss who should take initiative and come up with the new ideas. It is his job to know what his juniors think rather than the junior's job to initiate saying it. It is his job to know when there is a problem rather than to be told it. He knows all the jobs under him and gives "hands-on" leadership. (These expectations of the leader or boss are quite different from those within a "flat" or "non-hierarchical", "power-distributed" society as in most Western countries).

II. Benevolence (*prakhun*)
The leader (or patron) is expected to be a father-figure (head of family). He is to provide protection, emotional support, favors, cover the mistakes of his subordinates and reward them lavishly. He should help manage their personal affairs from hospital bills to education costs or to funerals. These favors may even extend to other members of his subordinate's family. He should be forgiving, generous with time and effort to help personally coaching his juniors in their work (or in the case of teacher to student). He should be generous. Through these many acts of benevolence, he builds up the *bunkhun* (or indebtedness) with his workers.

The exercise of authority and benevolence over a period of time will give rise to the leader possessing baramee ("glory" or "honor" - an accumulation of power and strength derived from respect and loyalty) (Holmes 1985:67).

B. Expectations for a Follower
(the leader's expectations of those he is leading; or the patron's expectation of his clients)

By building up meritorious acts on their behalf (*bunkhun*), the leader will expect to be repaid by:

I. Deference (*hi giat*)
The leader expects his subordinates to honor, respect and trust him. One should never publicly criticize, or cause one's leader to lose face. To openly disagree with one's leader may even be frowned upon.

II. Loyalty (*katanyu*)
The leader expects his subordinates to support, follow and promote him and his cause. They should be willing to do anything he wants - no questions asked. In cases of ethical decisions, their loyalty to their boss should rise higher than their conscience. Note that the loyalty expected of a client is rendered more towards the particular leader than the institution or company as a whole. This will become particularly evident when their leader leaves the company. Sometimes his whole section will leave with him.

If either the client or the patron fails to meet, or moves away, from these expectations, he can expect to be cut off from the bunkhun relationship and relegated to the "selfish circle" where he must fend for himself. Repairing damage to a *bunkhun* relationship is sometimes next to impossible. He is now outside the circle of *bunkuhn*, probably never to return.

4. Patron-Client Relationships and the Thai Church
The implications of hierarchy, indebtedness and the resulting expectations placed on leaders and followers are extensive when we consider the way it moulds leadership in the Thai church. While transformation is desireable within the Christian community, it must be acknowledged that this will be gradual and for the most time, one must learn to work within the system. Before moving onto specific concerns, the following observations may be made.

A. Inevitability
Working within the patron-client system is inevitable, just as speaking Thai in order to communicate with the Thai is inevitable. It is the basic way things work and to ignore this would be foolish. Indeed my own ministry has been enhanced and opened up through the dynamics of patron-client relationships, albeit unknowingly at times. This has given rise to many sincere and lasting relationships and openings for ministry in various places.

A correct understanding of expectations, roles and reciprocity, coupled with mutual respect, can give rise to strong life-long relationships. When relationships and structures cross the boundary of biblical principles or biblical ethics, however, the challenge remains for the Thai Church to be transformed by the renewing of the mind. It may take time, however, maybe even generations for a true transformation to take effect. While this transformation is in process, anyone wishing to work in a relevant way must to some extent work within the patron-client system.

B. Role of influential members
When discussing "patron-client" relationships within the church we are, to a large extent, considering the relationship between church leaders and church members. It must be understood, however, that "power" and "authority" within the Thai church is not necessarily derived from the "position" or "appointment" one may have. Often an important decision cannot be made in a church until a particular person is present. Whether that person is a church leader or not is of little significance. He or she holds an understood position of power or sway. The "influence" exerted is in relation to the extent of *bunkhun* or *baramee* they possess (or potentially possess) over the other members. Even when the person in question does not want or seek this influence, those who feel indebted will naturally give it.

One Thai pastor with whom I spoke, who leads a team of workers planting churches in the northeast of Thailand, told me of the danger of "benefactors" having more than their fair share of influence within a church. He particularly stressed the danger of someone giving part of their land for the building of a church. He emphasized the need to compensate the person financially at least to some degree. This, he said, is to avoid the person becoming overly influential.

An employer who attends the same church as his or her employees (such as a factory owner and his factory workers) is automatically an influential person. Employees would rarely dare to disagree or contradict the opinion or wishes of their employer. A clash of loyalty comes if the church leaders encourage the worker to do something contrary to the employer's wishes (or vice-versa). There is great potential for good in this situation, however, if the employer uses their position in a godly and selfless fashion.

Influential members of a godly character may also use their influence for good in the coordinating of certain projects within the church. This is particularly so when people need to be mobilized and the job needs to done quickly and efficiently. Because of the respect they hold, they can more easily motivate people to work together and to network with those whose co-operation is needed. This will be particularly important when the assistance of a civil servant or other non-church member is required.

Here we see clearly that the maturity level of the "influential-person" is a major factor in determining whether their influence works for the overall good or harm of the church. More specifically, the key question is whether they seek to dominate the policies of the church? In my own experience, wealthy members who have practiced their gift of generosity within the churches, often anonymously and without seeking to dominate the affairs of the church, have been a tremendous blessing and have greatly helped in the extension of God's Kingdom.

C. Normal expectations within the church

As has been seen, expectations within relationships in the Thai context are quite clearly defined. These same expectations between elders and juniors carry over into the church.

The type of expectations members have towards their leaders depends on various factors. Principal factors are the level of education, the social status and the region of Thailand from which they come. Those with a higher level of education tend to have a greater demand for *teachers* who have credible academic qualifications. Those from a lower social level in terms of economic means, tend to have a greater demand for pastors who will care. With

regard to region, members who come from the south of Thailand generally tend to be more self reliant and independent. It is difficult, therefore to generalize. Certain trends, however, can be found to one degree or other in most churches. They are the same two qualities already mentioned, namely *authority* and *benevolence*. A further quote from Holmes provides a helpful summary:

> Over the centuries, the kings of Thailand have been feared and adored. Thais have grown to expect a leader to demonstrate a blend of authoritarianism and benevolence. Accordingly, many Thai politicians, civil servants, and corporate executives still model their leadership in the royal mold. (1985:62)

I. Authority

The Thai Christian expects his leader(s) to be credible. A leader who is credible makes those who are followers credible. Someone who carries an air of authority is regarded highly. A leader should be dignified. One who "fools around" or is too casual (or familiar) would generally not be appreciated or respected. Even doing manual work can at times lead to a loss of credibility. One Thai leader commented after he and I had spent a day painting his house that the neighbor used to call him *Ajarn* (teacher) and then his name. Now the neighbor just calls him by his first name (without the respect word)! Most Thai Christians do respect, however, a leader who is willing to serve, to do menial tasks, and to be *gan-eng* (at one with) the members. He or she would probably be respected for occasionally helping to wash the dishes after a fellowship meal - but could well lose respect if this became a regular practice. Although Jesus advocates servant-leadership, a leader is rarely expected to serve in this way.

Few Thai churches expect democratic decisions to be made by the members. Decision-making by the leaders is generally acceptable and expected. The members, however, will be happy if their opinions were sought first and if the overall decisions are projected as being to their benefit. Delegation of tasks is quite acceptable. Normally members would expect their leaders to delegate the carrying out of tasks (especially menial ones). However, they do expect the leader to maintain overall responsibility for the work delegated. "Hands-on" leadership, in this respect is expected. The leader should know how the work is going, the difficulties being encountered or potential problems. He should initiate any changes to the way the work should be carried out. He is expected to "read the signs" of discontent or disagreement, without the member needing to vocalize them. He must be ready to cover for the mistakes, failures or lack of completion of the work. After all, it is *his* work and therefore his responsibility. In some respects the church itself is seen to be his. Very often

people refer to a church as Teacher X's church. This of-course is not a biblical perception. Nevertheless, it is the perception often held by the members.

Most of the larger churches in Thailand have grown up around a "charismatic" leader who demonstrates authority and is able to inspire. Thailand has few Christian leaders, however, with this ability to inspire and draw a large following. More average leaders may be tempted to aspire to these qualities, yet more often than not their aspirations turn to disappointment.

II. Benevolence

Being a leader in the Thai context is almost synonymous to being a benefactor. Within the church, those who hold a position of authority are expected to use their position for the benefit of the members. The benefits expected will range from the material to the spiritual depending on the felt needs of the members.

For example, the pastor, in some cases, feels it his responsibility to find jobs for members of the congregation who are just joining the work force or who are jobless. In doing so he thereby assumes the role of guarantor for the individual he places in a job. This is what a patron in the leader class would normally do for one who was his client. (St John 1996:31)

The pastoral role of the church leader is therefore very important. Members have little difficulty expressing loyalty to a leader who makes them feel secure in his/her care. This care will extend to almost all aspects of the members' lives. This expectation, however, can be very demanding on a Christian leader of low financial resources who struggles perhaps to make end meet for himself, let alone those under his care.

It is the "moral support", however, which probably counts more to the Thai than the financial support. I myself have spent much time transporting and visiting the sick, helping members move house, helping members receive justice by representing them at police stations and in court etc. This kind of support is within the ability of most leaders, though again he must distribute himself fairly among the members. Sending a deputy to help someone in need is usually not appreciated. It maybe for this reason that most Thai churches are small, since any one leader can only effectively serve a few people.

The expectations of church leaders towards their members are basically the same as we have seen in society as a whole, namely *honor* and *loyalty*.

I. Honor
Most leaders would expect, or at least hope, that their

members will honor them, both because of the position God has given them, and because usually they have greater experience and knowledge of the faith. This is sometimes extended to include the perception that they possess some special endowment or *anointing* from the Lord. The members should therefore respect and trust them without expecting the leader to answer many questions.

II. Loyalty
Loyalty to the church is usually synonymous with loyalty to the leader and his vision. Because of feelings either of indebtedness or of deference towards a senior, a follower would rarely refuse a request from his leader. The follower's own inclination towards performing the task is of little consideration. Nor will he/she be guided by his/her conscience. It is expected that the follower will do it anyway in consideration of the other, his loyalty rising higher than consideration of himself or even his conscience.

Not only is loyalty expressed through serving, but also through promoting the leader. As has already been stated, increased credibility or advancement of the leader increases the credibility and advancement of the followers. They all may rise in importance, influence or recognition together. It is not, however, permissible to advance oneself (or be seen to be advancing oneself) beyond that of one's leader. This would be regarded as *disloyalty* and any working relationship between the two would be greatly hindered.

5. Concerns Regarding the Patron-Client System within the Church
Many benefits may be derived from the patron-client system. These include close lasting relationships, mutual responsibility and generosity. When the leader is able to fulfill the member's expectations it may also promote fast numerical church growth. There are, however, many potential problems and dangers.

Hierarchy and inequality are fundamental to the patron-client system and while it is very tempting for Christian leaders to take on the role of protector, provider (or patron); in doing so he is perpetuating a hierarchical system which is not biblical. The equality of all believers is a clear Christian doctrine which must be upheld at all costs. Christians are all brothers and sisters, having only one lord and master. Leaders need to listen to their members and at times receive instruction from them. Members need to understand that God can as equally speak to them as to their leaders. It *is* permissible for the leader to do menial tasks, as was displayed by the Lord Jesus Himself in washing His disciples' feet. When help is given, both the provider and the recipient must clearly understand that their relationship remains as one of equality.

In relation to the importance of every individual, the poor and weak in society may easily be overlooked. They are disqualified as patrons and can offer little as clients. This must not be perpetuated or condoned within the church. A clear understanding of this great truth of the equality of all believers must permeate and renew every mind.

Indebtedness is a fundamental aspect of the patron-client relationships but runs contrary to the Christian mandate to "owe no man anything" (Rom. 13:8) and Christ's teaching to give, expecting nothing in return (Mt. 6:3; Mt. 10:8; Lk. 14:12). Even simple acts of kindness, even when done "with no strings attached" rarely fail to produce a sense of "indebtedness" in the recipient. Dr. Chaiyun Ukosakul writes that Christians should remove the word *bunkhun* (indebtedness) from their vocabulary and replace it with *prakhun* (grace) (1994:289-290). All favors done should be done as dispensing grace ("freely you received, freely give" Mt. 10:8), for the sake of the kingdom of God, and without thought of personal gain, future benefit or other. In no sense should the receiving party feel or be put under obligation to the giver. Each member of the Christian church must act out of obedience to God, not out of debt or obligation. This does not need to be to the exclusion of basic Christian gratitude. Nor does it exclude the possibility of employing indebtedness in some positive ways, as in the case of Paul and Philemon in regard to Onesimus. My point here, is to emphasize that the Christian should reject all aspects of placing another under obligation to him/her.

On the other hand, the patron-client system is one of the main reasons for the notable lack of teamwork which the Thais themselves readily admit. Often members fail to feel joint ownership of the ideas of their leaders. They may feel unable to voice their own ideas, or are ignored, or may feel their cooperation only promotes the status of the main leader. At the same time there is a failure of competent leaders to work together since the same clients cannot be shared by more than one patron. A Thai proverb says that "two tigers cannot live together in the same cave"! The result is poor interchurch cooperation, especially when a leader's work centers on him/herself rather than the Kingdom of God. Other patrons are then seen as competitors rather than partners.

CONCLUSION

As stated in my introduction, understanding leadership in the Thai context has produced a variety of dilemmas and questions. To what extent should one play along with the traditionally accepted roles? To what extent may one dare to challenge those roles without being ostracized, especially if one is challenging someone more senior? Can one follow the biblical model of leadership and still be respected as a leader? In my own experience, much sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is required to both adapt to and appreciate the Thai

cultural way but also maintain Christian integrity. I have found that I *can* dare to be different, but not in a legalistic way. Rather, sincerely and daily, responding to the Holy Spirit enables me to be authentic in my walk with the Lord and with my Thai brothers and sisters. In my role as a teacher to future Thai leaders, I teach them to submit to their leaders, be loyal followers, even when they feel abused. But they should learn from their own frustrations so that when it is their turn to lead others, they can begin to model a new way.

Steve Taylor is....

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