



Symbolic Gift-Exchange as Church Inculturative Mission among the Pgaz K'nyauz in Northern Thailand

ABSTRACT

Since the opening of the Church's doors to the world during Vatican II, the field of missiology has become an interesting route to explore in theology and praxis. In the Asian context, inculturation has become the language of the day. Pursuing this trajectory, this paper began is an attempt to forge a paradigm for the Church's inculturative mission that creates spaces for recognition, dialogue, and negotiation in the encounter of the faith-gospel and the life-world of the Pgaz K'nyauz tribe in North Thailand. In view of an inculturated and emancipative faith, this paper finds essential ground in the works of Louis-Marie Chauvet on Symbolic Gift-Exchange anchored in the Jesus-event and its Christological assertions to provide a theological framework that structures the praxis of inculturation.

INTRODUCTION

As an institution with a privileged position, the Church creates advantageous structures and systems in pursuit of its noble causes and evangelization agenda. But, it also causes discrimination against and marginalization of its subjects and their realities. In its missionary enterprises *ad gentes*, it encounters the life-event of peoples situated in a particular complex context with unique realities. A problematic attitude that favored the hegemony of the Church arose from the proclamation “*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church there is



no salvation)”) that was appropriated into its evangelization *ad gentes*. The claim that goes back to the writings of Cyprian of Carthage in the 3rd century was ingeminated and amplified during the Middle Ages, resulting in its triumphalistic and ecclesiocentric tendency. With this, a polarizing wall was put up; it proselytized and implanted a church wherever it went. The divide logically privileged the Church and established its power that intensified in the advent of colonialism in the 16th until mid-20th century. But, did it really privilege the Church?

In Asia, the Church’s orientation on evangelization was cataclysmic—other religions, traditional-ancestral beliefs, and cultural practices deemed incompatible with its institutional dogma were demonized. Those of the Pgaz K’nyauz and other cultures in the region, were not spared. Not only did the Church eradicate and suppress the religious and cultural practices of these cultures, it also effaced and devalued their identity. This also estranged the Church from its true identity. Meanwhile, the Pgaz K’nyauz who had undergone historical-social suffering, grappled with culture and language they considered alien. Their alternatives are to either creatively negotiate with this or resign themselves to the imposing and alien structures and *weltanschauung*.

For this paper, I engage in theoretical analysis on theological discourses, archival-descriptive research on the Pgaz K’nyauz’s history and culture, interviews as well as actual missionary work. Theological assertions are based on scriptural exegesis and Christological insights of Church teachings. This paper aims to contribute insights on missiology by substantiating the notion of inculturation and affirming and recognizing the rich deposits of cultural insights that the Pgaz K’nyauz can share with the Church.

RETRIEVING HISTORY AND RECOGNIZING THE DISTINCTIVE IDENTITY

This section discusses the history, culture and worldview of the Pgaz K’nyauz. The discussion centers on their identity even as it is threatened by integration into the larger Thai polity and the dominance of Buddhism and Christianity.

Karen or Pgaz K'nyauz?

The Pgaz K'nyauz group constitutes one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Southeast Asia.¹ Living in the borderland between Burma and Thailand, this semi-nomadic group has been “pushed out of their native Tibet, Burma, and China by civil war and political pressures.”² Prehistoric accounts, such as those found in their myths, like the “Tho Mae Pa,” their mythical founder, prove that they are not native to the land they currently occupy.³ Statistical estimates put their population in north Thailand at 320,000 in 1997.⁴ In 2001, Kwanchewan Buadaeng notes they comprise 46 percent of the total highland ethnic population.⁵ “In 2007, they constitute slightly more than half of the Kingdom’s people of the mountains’ total statistics.”⁶

Pgaz K'nyauz is called “Karen” in the English language. In one conversation, Fr. Bamrung Suesanggam, CSsR, said, “The most difficult question for us to answer is “Who is the Karen?” since the word is unknown to us.”⁷ Harry Marshall’s study theorizes that the term “Karen” is a collective derogatory term for “people in the forest.” People in the lowlands (and foreigners) use the label to connote the highlanders’ supposed naïvety and seeming uncivilized nature. “The term, however, was later accepted by scholars to emphasize the unity of all Karen culture and their unique way of life .”⁸ The groups include “the *Pwo Karen*, *Sgaw Karen*, *Pa-O*, *Geba* and the *Bwe*” whose languages have been recognized as “Sinitic ... belonging to [the] Siamese-Chinese language.”⁹ In Thailand, only the Sgaw and Pwo Karen groups are present; their communities are in Chiangmai and

¹Rev. Harry Ignatius Marshall, MA, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study in Anthropology and Ethnology*, (Columbus: White Lotus Press, 1998), v.

²Weena Kowitwanij. “Thai Church Seeking Greater Ties Among Tribal Groups in Thailand’s Hill Country,” 1. <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Thai-Church-seeking-greater-ties-among-tribal-groups-in-Thailand%E2%80%99s-hill-country-8834.html>.

³Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, 5.

⁴*Ibid.*, v.

⁵Kwanchewan Buadaeng, “Negotiating Religious Practices in a Changing Sgaw Karen Community in North Thailand,” 9. (Thesis dissertation, University of Sydney, 2001).

⁶Maurizio Peleggi, *Thailand: The Worldly Kingdom* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2007), 40.

⁷Interview with Bamrung Suesanggam, 2014, Thailand.

⁸Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, vi.

⁹*Ibid.*, 8.

Chiangrai in the north.¹⁰ Sgaw Karen refer to themselves as Pgaz K'nyauz while the Pwo Karen refer to themselves as P'long. Both terms means "human".¹¹ I will use the term Pgaz K'nyauz in the discussions to refer to the tribe in general and to emphasize a unique cultural-identity mentioned in Fr. Suesanggam's work:

*Pgaz K'nyauz can be translated as "I am (also) human." From this, I can say despite our gap in history and our lack of rootedness, as a tribe, suffice it to say that we are human beings situated in a particular context and situation in time that birthed our own unique culture. We are human beings in relation to others, to nature and to the Divine creator. Our identity is greatly linked in this understanding.*¹²

Like most minority groups, the tribe lacks written records of their past and their rich tradition. Researchers Brad Lindbergh and his companions postulate that much of the Pgaz K'nyauz history and knowledge are in the domain of oral tradition. It was only in 1831 when Jonathan Wade, a Baptist Missionary, adapted the Pgaz K'nyauz language to Burmese script.¹³ In North Thailand, missionaries use the Roman alphabet.¹⁴

¹⁰Chainarin Laoprom, CSsR "Today's Challenge of a Different Way of Approaching Mission in the North of Thailand: A Case Study of the Karen Hill Tribe in Thailand." A synthesis paper presented at St. Alphonsus Theological and Mission Institute in Davao City, Philippines, February 22, 2013, pp.2-7.

¹¹Prasert Trakansuphakon. "Adaptation and Cultural Heritage Through Traditional Agriculture: A Case Study of Karen of Northern Thailand" in *Traditional Occupations of Indigenous and Tribal peoples: Emerging Trends* (ILO), ed. Virginia Thomas (France: Cnossos/Dumas-Titoulet Imprimeurs, 2000), 11.

¹²Bamrung Suesanggam, "Understanding Sgaw Karen's Notion of K'la and its Relevance to Human-Nature Relationship." A synthesis paper presented at St. Alphonsus Theological and Mission Institute in Davao City, Philippines, March 2015, pp. 14-15.

¹³Brad Lindbergh, et. al. "The Politics of Change: The Effects of Thai National Government Upon the Karen of Tee Mae Ker Lah. <http://www.stolaf.edu/people/leming/ethno99.htm>.

¹⁴Lillian Harris, et. al. "Animism, Buddhism, and Christianity: A Karen View of Religion." <http://www.stolaf.edu/people/leming/ethno99.htm>.

The Characteristics of the P'gaz K'nyauz

The P'gaz K'nyauz are simple subsistence farmers in small mountain villages. They live in bamboo houses on stilts. The space beneath is where they keep their livestock. They fish in small creeks and hunt game in the forest. "Most of them living in the highlands practice swidden agriculture and the plain-dwellers, for the most part, cultivate irrigated paddy fields."¹⁵ In terms of gender roles, men are considered providers and the women are caretakers of the house and the children.

The P'gaz K'nyauz's religious worldview accounts for their characteristics and cultural practices and defines their economic and political life. Marshall's observations on P'gaz K'nyauz's mental and moral characteristics are that they are cautious and shy persons ... with a trait of fear.¹⁶ Yoko Hayami speculates that their humility is a result of their low self-esteem, which may be attributed to their "Y'wa" myth.¹⁷ Fr. Winai Boonlue, S.J., writes:

*The P'gaz K'nyauz do not have their own world, the world belongs to "Mu qa". They don't have their own land, the land belongs to Ywa. The P'gaz K'nyauz do not have their own time—the time belongs to the sun and the moon. And they don't even own themselves; they belong to the guardians of the Gods... nothing belongs to them...they only have their ability to take action as manifested in their different myths and stories like the "Hpo qai and Cau Pa" (The Orphan and the King). It tells a story of P'gaz K'nyauz as coming from nothing and as having to take action to create themselves.*¹⁸

¹⁵Julius A. Martin Malacas, "Transforming the P'gaz K'nyau Community into Earth Community in the Village of Ban Patheung": A synthesis paper presented at St. Alphonsus Theological and Mission Institute in Davao City, Philippines, March 2010, p. 7.

¹⁶Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, 23.

¹⁷Yoko Hayami. "To Be Karen and to Be Cool: Community, Morality and Identity among Sgaw Karen in Northern Thailand." http://horizon.documentation.ird.fr/exl-doc/pleins_textes/pleins_textes_4/sci_hum/39291.pdf.

¹⁸Fr. Winai Boonlue, SJ, "Karen Imaginary of Suffering in Relation to Burmese and Thai History: Conflict, State, Non-State Segmenting and Splitting on Religion, Community etc." http://crs.w3.kanazawa-u.ac.jp/other/doc/3_3_winai_boonlue.pdf.

“The Pgaz K’nyauz have a long history of social suffering, a history as long as its ancient myths that unites them ... Making connections has been one of the most important ways for them to utilize their ability for action so they developed religion, language, and song that would connect them.”¹⁹ This explains their sense of belongingness as well as interdependence that manifests itself during the planting and harvest seasons, in the building of a house, and in celebrations. After their labors, they engage in the “O’Mi Sauz Kauv” and “O’Si” (eat and drink together)—occasions for storytelling, teaching, and bonding. Households also do these rituals. When conflict arises in the family or community, the *hefkof* (the ritual and political leader of the community), intervenes. “The tribe has their [own] way of resolving conflicts through a process called “Tavmazgue” (to bring back the good [or what is cool] or reconciliation).”²⁰ If the conflict is not resolved, the person who causes the trouble becomes an outcast, which is a severe form of punishment that deprives the offender of identity and a sense of belongingness.

For the Pgaz K’nyauz who consider the peaceful coexistence of the villagers as all-important, conflicts have to be resolved.²¹ They look upon their traditional community as being in opposition to the forest, which is symbolic of the realm of wilderness and chaos. The community serves as the basic unit of ritual and social order; the autonomous community provides the basis for identity, character, and morality. It is where order is maintained. The community is an ideal condition of happiness and “coolness.” In this village-forest dichotomy, the *hefkof* is highly esteemed. Responsible for maintaining order and harmony in the community, he mediates peaceful resolutions in the community with the territorial spirit, Htik’caj Kauj K’caj (Lord of Water and Land). The community maintains good relations with this spirit to ensure their protection.²²

¹⁹Ibid, 3.

²⁰Interview with Suesanggam, 2014, Thailand.

²¹Ibid.

²²Hayami, “To Be Karen and to Be Cool,” 750-751.

An orderly and “cool” community is a precondition for harvests. The well-being of the villagers depends to a certain degree on their ritual and moral conduct.²³ The opposite of the “cool” is “red-hot village,” “strong land,” or “broken village-rice crop.” These images refer to a village torn by conflict and moral turpitude. When the community is not “cool,” illness, death, and famine can lead to either the abandonment of the area for a new site or a change in the ritual order. “Some even burn their houses and build another at some distance in order to stop the bad omen, especially if deaths and misfortunes occur.”²⁴

The Pgaz K’nyauz’s unique greeting, “*Ofmuxshopez*,” which is both warm and friendly, comes from their desire to maintain “coolness” in the community. Affirming their hospitality and blessing, the greeting reflects their gentle temperament, one that seeks to maintain good relationships within and outside their community. The elderly Pgaz K’nyauz habitually couple “*Ofmuxshopez*” with “*Ofcho ofcle biz muz sa p’guez*” (May all good things come to you, and may all bad things go away).

Integration into Thai Polity and Buddhism

Western civilization during the colonial periods began encroaching on Thailand (then Siam) with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1511. The Spanish, Dutch (1601), English (1612), French Catholic missionaries (1662) followed with a colonizing intent.²⁵ The westernization of Thailand started under King Rama IV who adopted Western innovations. In the late 19th century, Western modes of thinking largely influenced King Rama V who devised various military and political reforms to centralize administration. In 1892, he changed Siam’s political administration to a cabinet government. This Thai polity was associated with policies that sought to downplay

²³Ibid.

²⁴Interview with Fr. Chakrit Chuleekorn, 2013, Thailand.

²⁵Surachai Chumsriphan. “The Great Role of Jean-Louis Vey, Apostolic Vicar of Siam (1875-1909), in the Church History of Thailand during the Reformation Period of King Rama V the Great (1868-1910),” *Dissertatio ad Doctoratum, Facultate Historiae, Ecclesiasticae Pontificiae Universitatis Gregoriana in Roma*, 1990, 107-113.

the cultural and ethnic differences within the country. In this period, the Pgaz K'nyauz subjects as well as the other indigenous tribes were integrated into the Thai-state "for economic and security purposes".²⁶ These "changes originated from the increasing population and the government concern over forestry depletion" in the north.²⁷ "In 1901, the Royal Forestry Development was established to ensure the conservation of the forested areas in the north where the Pgaz K'nyauz settled. The government of Thailand has long stereotyped the minority groups as: (a) threats to national security due to their residence in the border areas; (b) producers in the illicit drug trade; and (c) primary causes of deforestation in the north. These formed part of development planning and policies of the state's First National Social and Economic Development Plan (1962-1966) to the Sixth (1987-1992)."²⁸

By 1932, when Thailand changed from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, the Pgaz K'nyauz had totally disappeared as a distinctive element in Thai polity.²⁹ They became more "geographically as well as culturally and economically at the margins of the modern nation-state rooted not only in demographics but also in government policies."³⁰ They were almost invisible.

Only in 1985 did the Pgaz K'nyauz officially become part of the Thai nation state.³¹ The traditional Pgaz K'nyauz communities now develop as part of the wider national administrative and economic structure that once jeopardized its autonomy and boundary.³² "With this changing Thai administrative policy, the ... tribe's communities have undergone significant changes in terms of their conception of themselves, the surrounding national environment, and their position within it."³³

²⁶ Andrew Turton, *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States* (Great Britain: Curzon Press, 2000), 63.

²⁷ Hayami, "To Be Karen and to Be Cool," 755-756.

²⁸ Trakansuphakon, "Adaptation and Cultural Heritage," 17.

²⁹ Charles F. Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia* (US: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1977), 58.

³⁰ Peliggi, *Thailand: The Worldly Kingdom*, 41.

³¹ Interview with Suesanggam, 2014, Thailand.

³² Hayami, "To Be Karen and to Be Cool," 755-756.

³³ *Ibid.*, 753-754.

Aside from changes in the Thai government, religion is another relevant factor in this unification process. “Although the Thai nation declares religious freedom, it has embraced Buddhism (since the 13th century) in its nationalizing policies.”³⁴ In 1957, the *Thammachut* program that aimed at the promotion of rural development in conflict areas and the *Thammacharik* that sent monks to work among the hill tribes to propagate Buddhism were formed as the principal means of their integration into the Thai nation state.³⁵ The *Thammacharik* program’s idea was that “by making the Pgaz K’nyauz Buddhist, they are also becoming more Thai.”³⁶ “The program claims to have been the most successful with the Pgaz K’nyauz tribe.”³⁷ On a positive note, their integration into Buddhism has given them a new identity that is congruent with their beliefs, rituals, and way of life. Buddhism allows the Pgaz K’nyauz’s traditional beliefs and practices to continue.³⁸

The Coming of Christianity

“The Church introduced its mission in Thailand in the environment of colonization, bringing with it Western civilization.”³⁹ Decades after the institution of the Sacred Congregation *De Propaganda Fide* in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV, French Catholic missionaries arrived in Siam in 1662 upon the invitation of King Narai of Ayutthaya. When he was deposed in 1688, Catholic missionaries were expelled and a severe oppression of Christianity followed. Missionary and church activities were restored only in the Chakri Dynasty when King Yotfa invited Catholic missionaries to return to Siam in 1785. In 1910, Catholic work began to spread quite rapidly into new areas of the country, particularly in the “hill tribes” in the north.⁴⁰ In 1926, Bishop Rene Perros (Bangkok) traveled to Chiangmai to see if the foundation

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵John Powers. *Destroying Mara Forever: Buddhist Ethics Essays in Honor of Damien Keown* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2009), 266-267.

³⁶Harris, et. al., *Animism, Buddhism, and Christianity*, 3.

³⁷Buadeang, “Negotiating Religious Practices,” 162.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Laoprom, “Today’s Challenge of a Different Way,” 31.

⁴⁰Erwin Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 347.

of the Church could be possible. It proved to be viable in 1930; he established a Catholic Mission Center in the north and requested Fr. George Mirabel, MEP and Fr. Nicholas Bunket Krisbamrung to start missionary activities in the entire region. In 1931, evangelization and conversion efforts commenced. The following year, the Church of the Sacred Heart and three schools—Regina Coeli College (under the Ursulin), Monfort College (under the Brothers of St. Gabriel), and Sacred Heart College (under the Diocese and Sacred Heart Sisters)—were erected. Other Catholic and Protestant missionaries arrived in Chiangmai around this time and focused on evangelizing, conversion, and civilizing efforts.

In Buadaeng and Harris's accounts, the Pgaz K'nyauz's conversion into Christianity provided the following: (a) a refuge for competency in a changing community; (b) material and spiritual support in times of crisis; (c) Christian concepts and rituals, which were congruent with their beliefs; and (d) a new religious identity and community identity. The Bible replaced the "Lost Golden Book" told in their "Y'wa" myth.⁴¹ Its negative consequences include: (a) discontinuation of all traditional rituals; (b) disintegration of ritual unity and order in the community; and (c) divisions among family and community members. Christians tried to promote the ideology of Christian morality and ethnic pride in the community, but it had no weight like that of the previous all-encompassing religio-political community.⁴² Today, the priest or the pastor of the community, not the political leader, is seen as the most powerful individual in the Pgaz K'nyauz village. Fr. Malacas observes:

In effect, the moral ascendancy and the deep respect that they used to give to their village chief (village ritual leader) are now given to the priest. Due to the absence of a moral leader, the priest becomes the visible leader that they consult with regard to almost everything pertaining

⁴¹Buadaeng, "Negotiating Religious Practices," 204-205; Harris et. al., *Animism, Buddhism, and Christianity*, 73-74.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 761.

*to faith, livelihood, and moral questions—including the major and minor problems within the family or major decisions for the good of the whole village in general.*⁴³

Pgaz K'nyauz's Assertive Creativity

Much of what has been discussed portrays the politico-religious struggles of the tribe that threaten to efface their rich identity throughout history. Aside from the obtrusive enforcing of Thai nationalism, the Church and its previous evangelization work with its proselytizing bent inflicted damage as well. Interestingly, the Pgaz K'nyauz, rather than resigning to what seemed inevitable, has ways of creatively asserting their identity in everyday life by maneuvering and negotiating with ecclesial and political structures. This is true in their

*continual ritual practices in small doses (e.g., Dei Pauz, blessing of the fields before planting, asking permission before cutting a tree, leaving and tying fruits of the harvest for spirits and animals in the forest, etc.), the myth-stories still remembered by the elders and passed on to younger generations, the sense of oneness with and respect for nature, the belief in the Divine and spirits, beliefs in the human k'la, in some remote areas hefkof still exists, a sense of belongingness, interrelatedness, and interdependence in the community, and the use of their indigenous parlance.*⁴⁴

This humble creative orchestration of the tribe creates spaces for the recognition of its identity. For the Church to be both relevant and emancipative, it has to recognize this creativity.

⁴³Malacas, "Transforming the Pgaz K'nyauz Community," 14-15.

⁴⁴Interview with Suesanggaam, 2014, Thailand.

PAVING THE WAY FOR THE RECOGNITION OF PGAZ K'NYAUZ'S IDENTITY

This section demarcates the possible trajectory for the Church inculturative mission since Vatican II in view of its repercussions for the Pgaz K'nyauz's life-world. Chauvet's symbolic gift-exchange discourse is used to provide theological grounds for the task of promoting dialogue and negotiation in mission.

Creating Spaces of Dialogue and Negotiation

Influenced by postmodern thinking and Vatican Council II, the Church is redirecting its missionary enterprises and theological discourses on evangelization in the Asian context towards inclusivity and sensitivity for plurality, aware as she is of the rich worldviews, rationalities, values and meanings embedded in cultures. Since the Council, the Church's evangelization in Asia has been using inculturation, which is continually being refined and redefined in and through its praxis. Vatican II's openness and its re-rooting in the life-event of Jesus aims at substantiating its identity and significance in an era critical and suspicious of complicities. In Chiangmai, the Church recognizes and appreciates the Pgaz K'nyauz's distinctive cultural identity.

To advance the Church inculturative mission in Chiangmai, the Pgaz K'nyauz's culture (understood in its postmodern sense) and its everyday life must be considered as the space of dialogue and negotiation.⁴⁵ The Pontifical Council for Culture states: "From the time the Gospel was first preached, the Church has known the process of encounter and engagement with cultures" (cf. *Fides et Ratio*, 70), for "it is one of the properties of the human person that he can achieve true and full humanity only by means of culture" (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 53).⁴⁶ There is then a growing need to retrieve and rediscover

⁴⁵"Culture is a historical process grounded in the lived reality of culture itself wherein the members of the social group are agents of change, innovation and identity-making of which power relations and struggles are immanent." Peter Phan, *Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue: A Challenge to Christian Mission*, 6. www.ofm.org/capgen06/relatio/04phanen.doc.

⁴⁶Pontifical Council for Culture, "Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture," 1999 EWTN, 1. <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCCAPPRO.HTM>.

the authenticity of the gospel message and the life-event of Jesus that serves as its redemption and trajectory. Its implications include Christological assertions and the virtues of humble vulnerability and obedience to the salvific *telos* of the *missio Dei*: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the father’s only son.”⁴⁷ It means following the kenotic path of incarnation. It also means cultivating greater sensitivity to the universality of the seeds of the Word in different human cultures and realities. Julian Saldanha emphasizes that:

*...the Son of God works on our salvation by becoming one of us, a part of our life and history...born in a poor family, he entered into the daily struggles and hopes of his people, especially the little ones and shared their joys and sorrows... [he] penetrated into the hearts of his people by truly human dialogue led them to the divine light...this is the way of incarnation that the disciples must imitate.*⁴⁸

Following this trajectory, the Church’s inculturative mission among the Pgaz K’nyauz could play an emancipative role in lives stricken by external forces and structures that alienate and devalue its identity. Giving Christ an indigenous garb is not (yet) inculturation. The crux of inculturation is that it is necessarily a “religio-cultural dialogue and emancipative”. In short, it must engage all aspects of the life of peoples in mission.⁴⁹ Noting this, Louis-Marie Chauvet’s seminal theological work on “symbolic gift-exchange,” following Marcel Mauss’s gift-theory, is seen as essential in structuring the Church inculturative mission to create spaces for the recognition of the Pgaz K’nyauz.

⁴⁷Cf. Gospel of John 1:1; 1:14.

⁴⁸Julian Saldanha, “Inculturation: Teaching of the Church,” 215, in *Rooting Faith in Asia: Source Book for Inculturation* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2005).

⁴⁹Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspective from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 5-8.

SYMBOLIC GIFT-EXCHANGE AS CHURCH INCULTURATIVE MISSION

Chauvet sees the importance of the sacraments as a symbol of incarnation (God who constantly reaches out). In *The Sacraments*, he explains, “sacraments are God’s way of disposing grace at the mercy of the body;” avowing that the “very being of God can only be conceived of as “human” in its very divinity;” but not reducing it to mere humanity since God is ultimately “totally other than human.”⁵⁰ Through the incarnation, what is most spiritual takes place in the most corporeal.⁵¹ This is the significance of sacraments as memory and ritual: to manifest the gift of incarnation and present a God who constantly reaches out to humanity; and to provide a medium or space whereby human beings express gratitude for the gift of presence and salvation.

Chauvet posits that the sacraments are major expressions in human history of the embodiment (historical/eschatological) of the risen One in the world through the Spirit. Sacraments are situated in the dynamism of a secular history reread as holy history. Thence, the theological affirmation of sacramental grace is understood in the wake of the Church’s faith in the power of the risen One continually raising for himself, through the Spirit, a body of new humanity.⁵² For Chauvet, the sacraments are part of an overall symbolic scheme or order that mediates “the world” by functioning as a language that shapes their perception of the world. It mediates God’s new world (the kingdom), and thereby the values of that world so that the Christian thereby is shaped by the sacraments to take on these values.”⁵³

To analyze the process, sacraments basically manifest the dynamics of Divine-human relation that is characterized by “gift – reception – return-gift.” Every gift requires a return-gift to continue the progression; however, in this scheme, God, the pure *wholly Other*, is independent of the *return-gift* and *reception*. Hence, in order to

⁵⁰By body, Chauvet means not only the individual body but also the institutional body or aggregates of individual persons.

⁵¹Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001), xii.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 159-160.

⁵³Theophilogue, “Book Review: *The Sacraments* by Louis-Marie Chauvet (2010),” 1. <http://theophilogue.com/2010/04/20/book-review-the-sacraments-by-louis-marie-chauvet/>.

continue the process, humans must extend the *obligatory return-gift* to others (humans), leading to a series of *exchange-reception of gifts* to ensure that in the process the Kingdom (and its values), serving as its *telos*, is continually being incarnated in human history. In this process of exchange, humanity thrives and is transformed. On the other hand, the dismissal of the *obligatory return-gift* leads to the demise of humanity. Mary Douglas states, “A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction.”⁵⁴ The *reception of the gift* is as important as the extending of the gift. As Mauss puts it, “there is no really pure gift (then) for if we persist in thinking that gifts ought to be free and pure, we will always fail to recognize our own grand cycles of exchanges.”⁵⁵

The *obligatory return-gift* results into the series of *exchanges of gifts* that must ascend to the level of the realm of the symbolic—meaning, motivation, and purpose of habits in the everyday life. Chauvet, based on Mauss, believes that there are two different levels of exchange that are represented by the value-sign and the logic of nonvalue in every society: (a) the logic of the marketplace, and (b) *symbolic exchange*. The first is based on exact recompense, the second is spontaneous, pure ulterior motive.⁵⁶ In commerce or the logic of the marketplace, the three types of value are: “a) the ‘use’ value; b) the ‘exchange’ value; and c) the value of a thing that has the ability to differentiate social positions.”⁵⁷ On the other hand, the “symbolic exchange,” which is not governed by the logic of value and the marketplace opens onto the field of nonvalue where what is being exchanged are not objects. Rather through gifts, the true objects being exchanged are the *subjects* themselves in a process of mutual recognition.⁵⁸ “For the symbolic essence of the gift is precisely characterized not by the worth of the object offered—this can be practically nothing in terms of its usefulness or commercial value, and yet the ‘nothing’ offered is received as a true

⁵⁴Mary Douglas, “Foreword,” in *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss, translated by W.D. Halls (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), x; xv.

⁵⁵Ibid., xv.

⁵⁶Douglas, “Foreword,” viii. Also Geoffrey Holsclaw. “Christ in Circulation: The Eucharist and Money (1997),” 1. http://www.academia.edu/551655/Christ_in_Circulation_The_Eucharistic_Exchange_and_Money.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Alastair Roberts. “Symbol and Sacrament’ Chapter 3: Subjects and Mediation,” 1. <http://alastairadversaria.wordpress.com/2012/01/07/symbol-and-sacrament-chapter-3-subjects-and-mediation/>.

gift—but by the relationship it creates or recreates.”⁵⁹ Chauvet argues that the underlying reason to this pattern of exchange is the ‘desire to be recognized as a subject (generation of subjects) and not not to lose face, not to fall from one’s social rank and not to compete for prestige;’⁶⁰ that in this process, there is a reversible recognition of each other as fully a subject – a human person. Chauvet argues that this *obligatory exchange* is in fact “what allows us to live as subjects and structures all our relations in what they contain of the authentically human.”⁶¹ Not only does it have a reconciliatory character, it has its transformative and emancipative elements.

The Church’s inculturative mission, based on the structure of the *symbolic gift-exchange*, is necessarily the *obligatory return-gift* that extends as well as the space of the *reception of the gift* that facilitates the process of the *exchange of gifts*. To do such, the whole dynamics of inculturative mission as *symbolic gift-exchange* must follow the process of *gift - reception - return-gift*, having the incarnation of the kingdom in human history as its *telos*. Thus, the task is transformative and emancipative. In this process, however, the Church’s role as an agent for the extension of the *obligatory return-gift* is quite clear compared to its function as the space of *reception*. For this to work, the Church must follow the kenotic path of humble vulnerability. If it does not (and it would be difficult since it threatens the institutional Church), the dismissal of the space of *reception* will bring the (Church) its own demise. That is why, the ecclesiocentric, triumphalistic, and superior attitude will prove to be disastrous; less to the subjects of its mission *ad gentes* but more to its own self. It hinders its transformation and growth as the invisible sign of the Kingdom. To alter this, the Church must rid itself of its pure-image mentality, recognize that God is the author of mission, and re-root to the epitome of the *symbolic gift-exchange*, Jesus. Now, this demands kenotic-incarnate presence, recognition of gifts from other religions and cultures, dialogue, solidarity and negotiation that the *symbolic gift-exchange* structures.

⁵⁹Louis-Marie Chauvet. *Symbol and Sacrament*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 107.

⁶⁰Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 102. Also Holsclaw “Christ in Circulation,” 1.

⁶¹Roberts, 1.

Symbolic Gift-Exchange in the Context of the Pgaz K'nyauz

I have had high hopes for the mission work among the Pgaz K'nyauz after the changes that followed Vatican II, particularly on inculturation. Since the Council, the Church in Chiangmai has been involved in the life of the Pgaz K'nyauz's; it has developed several means to help them deal with economic, political, and cultural discrimination and marginalization. However, to move the inculturative task further along, the Church has to create spaces for the reception of gifts, that the Pgaz K'nyauz can offer. The use of their own language in liturgical music, prayers, and liturgical celebrations is a good way of recognizing their identity. Now, if the Church has its sacraments—the medium (memory-ritual) of Divine human-relations—the Church must recognize that the Pgaz K'nyauz has these also in their memories, rituals, and beliefs that have significant emancipative and transformative elements in their lives. To dispose of these in order to impose foreign concepts and rituals is a departure from the process of *symbolic gift-exchange*. This will be detrimental not only to the tribe but also to the life of the Church since it contradicts the universality of the seed of the Word, the works of *missio Dei*, thus, hindering its transformation.

CONCLUSION

Vatican II's re-rooting in the life-event and gospel of its foundation—Jesus—renews the understanding of the Church and opens new trajectories in the field of missiology. Inculturation has become the new language of doing mission. In its effort to be relevant and emancipative in the lives of the Pgaz K'nyauz who have a long history of marginalization and discrimination, the Diocese of Chiangmai imbibed this new language and its spirit. To affirm the efforts and to further the task of inculturative mission among the people, this paper structures the praxis of inculturation through Chauvet's "symbolic gift-exchange" anchored in the theology of the incarnation. It is seen as a humbling task that demands kenotic-incarnate presence and recognition of gifts, solidarity, dialogue, and negotiation in view of the

incarnation of the kingdom in human history, particularly in the lives and realities of the Pgaz K'nyauz. The question now is, "To what extent would the Church dialogue and negotiate with the life and realities of the Pgaz K'nyauz so that the tribe would be able to recognize their identity in the Church?"

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