# UNDERSTANDING *KARAI KASANG* AND *NATS*: A BASIS FOR DIALOGUE WITH KACHIN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

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## Introduction

The majority of Christians in Myanmar belong to the Kachin, Chin and Karen ethnic groups, who share certain similarities in terms of their indigenous cultures. The Christian population is approximately 6.3 percent of the country's total population of 53 million, while the Catholic population is only 1.4 percent.[1] Most of the people belonging to the largest ethnic group called Burman in Myanmar are Buddhists.[2] Despite the rigorous attempts of Christian missionaries, only a handful of them have converted to Christianity. Buddhism has taken root in the Burman people and has become part of their identity.

On the other hand, Christian missionaries were very successful in their mission work among adherents of the primal religions. It is important to note that Protestant missionaries

[1]Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar, "Missionaries," accessed 20 March 2018, http://www.catholicmyanmar.org /About/missionaries.

[2]In the political landscape of Myanmar, Buddhism has been politicized amid internal conflict and civil war. In 1960, U Nu, prime minister till 1962, declared Buddhism as the State religion. Religious discrimination can be seen in rules such as the requirement of special permission from the government to hold Church celebrations and to construct Church buildings. Religion can be a criterion to be promoted to higher ranks in government offices. Discrimination against religious minorities is often time perceived as discrimination against ethnic minorities.

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were able to bring about the conversion of more people among these ethnic communities and their zeal is as fervent today as it was in the past. Over time, the Catholic Church has also grown in number. As of 2018, there were sixteen dioceses with eighteen active bishops and five retired bishops, 937 diocesan and religious priests, 1,615 religious women and men, and 2,818 catechists.

However, many of the indigenous communities came to embrace Christianity at the expense of their cultures. To become Christians, they had to abandon their primal religion along with their traditional religious and cultural practices and slowly adopt the mindset of the colonial missionaries. Thus, they now view their ancestral religion with suspicion since it is believed to be under the influence of evil spirits. This perspective has become an obstacle for the churches to become more fully inculturated in the indigenous communities. Many indigenous Christians are afraid of evil elements in their cultures. Kachin Christians face the same challenges whenever they try to engage in inculturation.[3]

## The Kachin Context

The Kachin people are one of the major ethnic groups in Myanmar, with the majority living in the northern part of the country. Many Kachins also inhabit Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland in India and the Yunnan Province in China. Kachin

[3]Inculturation consists not only in the expression of the Gospel and the Christian faith through the cultural medium but includes, as well, experiencing, understanding and appropriating them through the cultural resources of a people. As a result, the concrete shape of the local Church will be, on the one hand, conditioned by the culture, and, on the other hand, the culture will be evangelized by the life and witness of the local Church. The Federation of Asia Bishops Conferences, "*Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection on Asian Context*," FABC Paper, no.60 (Hong Kong: 1991), 18, accessed 10 May 2018, http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc_paper_60.pdf.

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people are known as Jingphaw in China and as Singpho in India. The group comprises sub-groups Jinghpaw or Jingpo, Atsi, Maru, Lashi, Nung (Rawang), and Lisu. Originally, Kachin settled in the Tibetan Plateau and gradually moved southward to the Yunnan province of China, Myanmar, and India. They are known as mountain dwellers. Today, many of them have moved to the plain.

The clan system is essential in the Kachin society. There are five original clans: Marip, Maran, Lahpai, N'hkum, and Lahtaw. These clans are bound by the intermarriage system which is clearly defined and strictly followed. The Kachin people practice *mayu* and *dama* (wife-givers and wife-takers) in the marriage system among the clans. Therefore, one may not take wives from the same lineages to which one gives wives.

The term "Kachin" is given by outsiders. The origin of the term is not clear. Some believe that it was given by the British, while others assume that the term existed before the arrival of the British.[4] Kachins call themselves Jinghpaw. However, even the term *Jingpo* is considered exclusive to some sub-clans. Thus, the inclusive term for all Kachin clans is *Chyurum Jinghpaw Wunpawng Sha Ni*, meaning "unity exists among the bloody propinquity and kinship of Kachins, who share the milk from the breast of the common typical mother."[5]

Christian evangelization has been very successful in the Kachinland since the nineteenth century. Today, about 99% of people in the Kachinland profess the Christian faith and most

[4]The word " Kachin" was found in a stone inscription that dates back in 1442. (Myanmar Socialist Party, *Culture and Custom of Ethnic People: Kachin* [Yangon: Yangon Sape Beit Man, 1967], 54. See B. D. Maran, " Kachin: Lera Wawra Kikkik Kawkkawk Mahkawng," *Laiza: Kachin Research Journal* [2010]: 29.

[5]Lasi Bawk Naw, *Traditions, Beliefs and Practices: Links with Nature Conservation in Kachin State* (Yangon: Today Publisher, 2007), 67-68.

of them are Baptists.[6] A few Kachins still practice their traditional religion that relates to *Karai Kasang* and the spirit world of *nats*. As the Kachin Catholic population grew, the community was elevated into the diocese of Myitkyina in 1961.[7] On March 27, 1965, the first Kachin priest. Paul Zinghtung Grawng was ordained. He later became bishop in 1976, taking over the diocese with only ten indigenous clergy. Gradually, the Kachin Catholic Church continues to grow as the diocese faces different struggles.[8]

On August 28, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI created the new Diocese of Banmaw. Bamaw diocese has a total of twenty-two priests, over sixty-six religious, and 183 catechists, serving 30,010 Catholics. Ethnically speaking, in Myanmar, there are three proper Kachin dioceses out of the sixteen dioceses: Myitkyina, Bamaw, and Lashio. Lashio diocese, located in the Shan ethnic region, is also considered a Kachin diocese because most of its members are Kachins. Today, the diocese has 40 diocesan priests and 134 religious and 724 catechists at the service of 86,550 Catholics in the Myitkyina diocese.[9]

As the Kachin dioceses grow, the churches are also trying to become local and inculturated churches. For example, there was a long struggle to use the Manau dance in the liturgy. Gradually, the Church Christianized the dance for the liturgical celebration by leaving out the rituals or offerings to *nats* (spirits)

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[6]Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 387.

[7]Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar, "Myanmar Catholic Dioceses: General Characteristics of Myitkyina Diocese," accessed 20 March 2018, http://catholicmissionmm.blogspot.com.

[8]Edward Fisher, *Mission in Burma: The Columban Father's Forty-three Years in Kachin Country* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 146.

[9]Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar, *The Official 2016 Catholic Directory of Myanmar* (Yangon: CBCM, 2016), 56.

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during Christian Manau dance festivals.[10] In 2000, the Manau dance was incorporated for the first time in the Eucharistic celebration during the celebration of the Great Jubilee.[11] Many Kachin Catholics and bishops were deeply moved. Some even shed tears of joy as they witnessed the Manau dance in the liturgy for the first time. One bishop expressed his views with strong emotion, saying that now he understood the meaning and the power of inculturation.[12] This inculturation has reaped many spiritual fruits for Kachin Catholics, such as a sense of belonging to their indigenous cultures, a stronger sense of Kachin identity, a more significant affiliation with the masses, and a deepening of their Christian faith.[13] In fact, for the Kachins, many dances await to be inculturated into Christian worship. Among them, some Kachin priests are doing research on how to inculturate "the Kabung dance" and the dance performed during the funeral ritual, which the local Church prohibits.[14] The main difficulty in inculturating the Kabung dance is the widespread misunderstanding that it is under the influence of the devil. This was also the kind of misperception encountered in the Manau dance before the Church Christianized it. The failure to attribute the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit to the local traditions has been one of the chief obstacles to inculturation in the Kachin Church.

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[10]Fr. John Zau Doi, "Manau Dance and Its Integration in the Liturgy of the Eucharist in the Diocese of Myitkyina Myanmar," Unpublished M.Sc. Thesis, Asian Social Institute Library (Asian Social Institute, 2004), 159.

[11]Ibid., 191.

[12]Ibid., 190.

[13]Ibid., 191.

[14]Fr. Zaw Min Latt from the Bamaw Kachin diocese is currently doing his dissertation research on "The *Kabung* Dance to be Incorporated into the Catholic Funeral Rite" at the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines.

## The Kachin Traditional Religion (KTR)

The ancestral religion of the Kachin is called *Nat-Jaw*. Etymologically, the word *nat* is derived from the Burmese Pali word, *nat,* denoting "Lord." *Jaw* is a Kachin word that means giving or offering. In a literal translation, *Nat-Jaw* means "Lord-Offering." Kachin's faith is not confined to the region. Other groups in Myanmar, such as Burman, Karen, and Chin have similar faith expressions. The Burmese and some other racial groups in Myanmar use the same word, *nat,* to describe the term "spirit." In Myanmar, *Nat* Veneration is deeply rooted and clearly defined.[15] This Kachin ancestral religion is primal and primary in the Kachin's faith.

The primal religion is very important for the Kachins as it is the source of their identity, myths, social structure, ethics, environmental knowledge, songs, and dances that are intertwined with their ancestral religion. The Kachin religion is not idolatry because they do not worship animals or trees, although they believe in the spirit's indwelling in trees and other environmental elements. The believers of KTR live in a web of relationships with spirits.[16] KTR has no written scriptures. Its faith and practices have been handed down from past generations through oral tradition.

Communal rituals and other household religious ceremonies are strictly observed under the leadership of traditional

[15]Ola Hanson, *The Kachins: Their Customs and Traditions* (Rangoon: American Baptist Missionary Press, 1913), 149.

[16]The believers of traditional religions do not classify reality as supernatural or natural but as the invisible and the visible. This classification implies that both the seen and the unseen are in constant interactions. So, the invisible spirits or the unseen are taken for granted as real, which affects the present living who are destined for the afterlife. The natural-supernatural model is based on Platonic philosophy, which views reality as having two floors. Kant translated it into the phenoma/phenomena? and the noumea/noumena? (Mercado, *From Pagans to Partners,* 14).

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mediators or priests. An ecclesiastical or hierarchical setting, such as formal group structure, membership, and personnel is absent in the religion, but all the individual mediators help the communities in their respective roles. Today, however, the mediators and some adherents of KTR form the Association of the Kachin Traditional Religion (*Nat Naw Hpung*).[17] At present, only a handful number of the believers of KTR remain in Myanmar because of the collective conversion to Christianity in 1877.[18] In India, Buddhism has become the religion of the Kachins since 1892.[19] Large communities of Kachins in China still practice the traditional religion. However, the traditional religion is being shaped by the Cultural Revolution[20] in China and the presence of the Kachin Christian missionaries from Myanmar.

## The Character of Karai Kasang, the Supreme Being

The Kachins lived in the domain of the spirits until the arrival of Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century. The Kachins call their God Karai Kasang, who is considered the Supreme Being. The word *Karai* already means Supreme Being; the word *Kasang* follows in the rhythmic manner of the language.[21] Karai Kasang is the spirit above all spirits. Karai Kasang is a spiritual being without gender. There is no idol or portrait of the Supreme Being. Karai Kasang is a single/

[17]Lajawn Ngan Seng brought together KTR adherents to form the association of KTR called the Nat Jaw Hpung in Myitkyina. In 2011, Lajawn Ngan Seng was made Chief Minister of Kachin State by the Military authorities (Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin*, 410).

[18]Conversion is primarily assumed that the Kachins became Christianity because the Kachin traditional religion has similarities with Christianity, such as one Supreme Being and the notion of ritual offering (Ibid., 393 and 398).

[19]Ibid., 377.

[20]Ibid., 364.

[21]Lahpai Zau Tang, interview by author, 12 July 2018.

one Being without a spouse. No one knows the origin of Karai Kasang. The origin of Karai Kasang has yet to be discovered. Later, this term *Karai Kasang* came to be used by Hanson to translate the Christian notion of God, underscoring that the Kachin people had an innate understanding of a singular God.[22]

**Creator.** The whole creation is attributed to the work of Karai Kasang. KTR believers believe Karai Kasang is the omniscient and omnipotent Supreme Being who has power over all existence. Karai Kasang is invoked in every religious ceremony and ritual. However, this notion of the creator appears to be at variance with the story of the creation account written by Gilhodes in which Karai Kasang was seemingly given birth. Later, it was explained to him that Karai Kasang is the creator of heaven and earth.[23] He was confused about who Karai Kasang/Kasand is. Probably, he did not comprehend the difference between Karai Kasang, Hpan wa Ningsang, and Chye Wa Ningchyang, other spirit beings who participated in creation.[24] Kachin Christians address Karai Kasang as *Hpan Wa Ningsang* (the Creator) and *Chye Wa Ningchyang* (the Omniscient).

**Supreme Judge.** Furthermore, Karai Kasang is considered the Supreme Judge. For instance, when the culprit hides and justice cannot be met, the aggrieved party will shout in pain: "*Karai Kasang, hkye la rit law!*" (Karai Kasang save me!); "*Karai ngai n masu*!" (O Karai, I do not lie). If unjustly insulted, one may utter the name Karai Kasang : "*Karai e! ngai phe roi de mada*

[22]Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin*, 397.

[23]Fr. Charles Gilhodes, *The Kachins: Religion and Customs* (Calcutta: The Catholic Orphan Press, 1922), 99.

[24]See, Tsa Magawng Gam, *Jinghpaw Labau Girung Ka Ai Wa* (Myitkyina: Sut Pan Press, 2016), 41; Pungga Ja Li, *Wupawng Ningpawt Ninghpang Karai Hpaji* [The Origin of Kachin Theology], (Laiza: Kachin Research Society, 20144), 31; Lagai Brang Shawng, *Natjaw Htungkring Hte Kaga Labau Lasang Lam Ni* [Nat Worship, Oral Traditions and Others of the Kachins], (Yangon: Genesi Media, 2015), 175.

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*yu law!*" (O Karai, say that it should not be: see how they insult me!).[25] This swearing or uttering of Karai is a very powerful sacred action for the oppressed.

If a poor and insignificant person was oppressed by influential persons, they had nowhere to turn to demand for justice. In this circumstance, the oppressed party would go to a public space. Facing the sky, s/he would bounce with one leg on the ground seven times and shout, "*Lamu madu, Ga madu Karai e . . . yu la rit law*" (Karai, the Lord of heaven and earth . . . watch over me).[26] When people heard this uttering to Karai, they would be terrified. A terrible fate could befall the oppressor. Kachins were taught to refrain from such utterances to Karai because people would avoid the person or the village that was accustomed to such utterances.

Hence, elders would try their best to settle issues without swearing an oath. If elders could not settle a case, they would demand both parties to take an oath to Karai. Elders would place a Kachin sword on the necks of both parties while taking an oath to Karai. Kachins were so afraid of taking an oath because if one wrongly took an oath, sickness, and death might befall the person or his/her family members. Until 1962, in the Sumpra Bum area, the Kachin sword for taking an oath was kept in government courts together with the Bible.[27]

Karai Kasang is a benevolent being who grants favors and blessings without demanding or asking for any offering or sacrifice in return. No one can know Karai Kasang's realm or will; Karai Kasang is believed to live so far above humans that Karai Kasang has neither interest in daily human affairs nor any moral influence over them.[28] Another way of seeing it is

[25]Gilhodes, *The Kachins: Religion and Customs*, 5.

[26]Magawng Gam, *Jinghpaw Labau Girung*, 17.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Hanson, *The Kachins: Their Customs and Traditions*, 168–69.

that Karai Kasang does not directly interfere in daily human affairs because the Supreme Being governs the universe through *Nats*. Ordinarily, the *Nats* are the ones who are in contact with people, while Karai Kasang will only be involved when there are urgent cases.

Adherents believe that Karai Kasang never poses a danger to human beings like *Nats* and so they do not worship Karai Kasang regularly. However, there are times of crisis when the Kachins invoke the distant Spirit.[29] When a great natural disaster or war is looming, but the *Nats* are not able to help them, the believers of KTR will call Karai Kasang in their distress.[30] Interestingly, until today, when mediators of KTR pray, they first mention the name of Karai Kasang before addressing the respective *Nats*.

**Karai Kasang becoming a Christian God**. The traditional religious term, Karai Kasang was used by Hanson to render the Christian notion of God in the Kachin language. He translated the Bible with the help of Christian converts from traditional religions such as Damau Naw and Seng Li.[31] Hanson is the one who created the writing system for the Kachins and compiled the dictionary of the Kachin language. Over time, the majority of the Kachins became Christians, and the term Karai Kasang entered into Christian theology and the spiritual world.[32]

Today, there is no difficulty for the Kachins to accept that Karai Kasang is the same God as Christians and the believers of KTR. For the believers of KTR, Hpan wa Ningsang and Chye Wa Ningchyang are lesser beings, not Karai Kasang. However,

[29]Ibid.

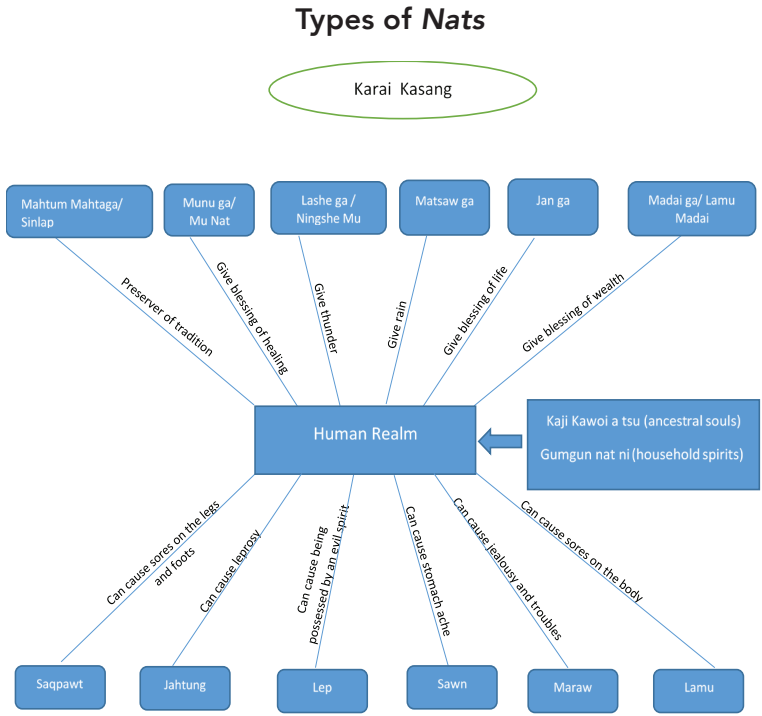
[30]Ibid., 169.

[31]Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin*, 398.

[32]Linguistically, some people consider that it is a process of losing the indigenous term, which contains an ideology system. Ibid.

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some Christians might interchange these words with Karai Kasang, and address Karai Kasang using the attributes of the Creator and the All-knowing using the exact words, *Hpan Wa Ningsang* and *Chye Wa Ningchyang*. Because of the limitation of the language, the exact words are used to refer to both the spirit beings and the attributes of Karai Kasang (the Supreme Being). Thus, confusion may occur from that language limitation. Today, the Christian notion of Karai Kasang is gradually getting extended to believers of KTR.




The table above is taken from Pungga Ja Li who researched on the Kachin traditional religion.[33] The researcher consulted with three *dumsa* on the abovementioned chart; they do not have any objection but mentioned that there are other

[33]Li, *Wupawng Ningpawt Ninghpang Karai Hpaji*, 39.

powerful *nats*. There can be a slight variation in different localities. Pungga Ja Li put the more reputable *nats* in an orderly fashion. The chart is self-explanatory. The powerful *nats* from the upper world are *Mu nat* (thunder), *Nbung nat* (wind), *Lamu Madai nat*, *Ga Madai nat* (earth spirit), *Shata nat* (moon), *Bungga nat* (pacifier).[34]

The remaining *nats* from the lower or underworld: Hka Mazup Jahtung (the spirit at confluence), Matsa nat, Darawng Dara Ran *nat* (a protector of law and judgment), Ndang *nat* (who cause harm to women during pregnancy or after), Majoi Ningsum *nat* (who can cause trouble before the success of a business), Myihtoi *nat* (who can cause sickness and wellbeing of health), Maraw *nat,* having a monster body shape which gave birth to several *nats*, Bai *nat* (who became *nat* from the soul of the dead body of a stillborn child) who gave birth to various Bai *nats*, Sawa Katsing *nat* (who became *nat* from the soul who died suddenly and can cause sudden fear to demand sacrifices), Tinggyeng Nat gun *nat* (who became *nat* from the soul of family members who died of accident and suicide)[35] and Mung nat gun (who became *nat* from the soul who died of accident and suicide death).[36]

In general, there are three kinds of relationships with *nats* for the Kachins. They honor benevolent *nats* and revere household *nats*. But they try to negotiate with monovalent *nats*, or

[34]Shawng, *Natjaw Htungkring,* 11-26.

[35]These types of *nats* can follow another clan through marriage. They can protect people while traveling or going to war. It resonates with a guardian spirit. Dogs and goats can be sacrificial animals in dealing with them. There is a story for the genesis of the types of *Nat gun*. A snake was eating one boy. Before that, the boy shouted for help from his mother. However, his mother ignored and the boy was eaten. The spirit of the boy was unresolved and became nat. From then on, people began to know the nature of *Nat gun*.

[36]Shawng, *Natjaw Htungkring,* 11-26.

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at times, expel them as they can give blessing and at the same time trouble. Mostly, the monovalent *nats* are regarded as evil because they bring more harm than good.

## An Overview of the "Kachinization" of Christianity

Christian missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had initiated laudable attempts to bring Christianity into Kachin culture despite their negative attitude towards KTR. Studying the Kachin language was the first successful attempt to know the Kachin people and culture. At the beginning of the study, the missionaries experienced clumsiness with the language and a lack of feeling for local customs.[37] Nevertheless, they pursued their study of the language and culture. The most outstanding person would be Fr. C. Gilhodes, a Paris Foreign Missionaries member, who published the book, *The Kachins: Religion and Customs*. His book even became a reference for some KTR priests.[38] The missionaries tried adapting the local culture to the Christian faith. An early inculturated Christmas Mass was recorded. During the midnight Mass in a Kachin village, at the consecration, to welcome Christ into the world, firecrackers, guns, drums, and gongs broke the silence outside the chapel.[39] Another important appreciation of the local culture was allowing the *Manau* traditional dance to be performed in the Christian context for the first time. Although the missionaries had a negative view of traditional beliefs, they were able to befriend the leaders of KTR. On some Christian occasions, Columban missionaries invited the leaders of KTR to celebrate together.[40]

[37]Fisher, *Mission in Burma*, 29.

[38]Bawk Naw, *Tradition, Beliefs and Practices,* 140.

[39]Ibid., 30.

[40]Fisher, *Mission in Burma*, 22.

Similarly, Baptist missionaries contributed much to bringing Christianity into Kachin culture. Their most outstanding contribution was translating the Bible into the Kachin language and putting the Kachin language into a written system. In their missionary approach, the Baptist missionaries used the "functional substitutes" approach to facilitate cultural change.[41] The Kachin marriage system was allowed to be celebrated within the Christian wedding ceremonies. Prayer meetings were used to substitute KTR ceremonies such as natal ceremonies,[42] weddings,[43] funerals,[44] harvesting festivals,[45] and other important experiences such as recovery from illness, starting on a long journey, and a happy return from a very long trip.[46] Remarkably, the procedure of prayer meetings that was used by Baptist missionaries is still being used today.[47] Kachin

[41]Herman Tegenefeldt, *A Century of Growth: The Kachin Baptist Church of Burma* ( South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974), 331.

[42]One of these meetings is held following the birth of a baby. It includes thanksgiving, a petition for the health and growth of the child, and the announcement of the name( Ibid., 333).

[43]The *mayu* (wife-giving clan*)* has one prayer meeting in their home the night before the bride is sent off for the marriage ceremony. The *dama* (wife-receiving clan) will plan for a meeting in the home of the bridegroom's parents the evening of the wedding day and perhaps for one or two succeeding nights (Ibid.).

[44]Prayer services in the home of the deceased begin the evening after his/her death and may be held several nights, especially if some relatives and friends are staying for a few days. These are held in place of the traditional death dance (Ibid.).

[45]A special thanksgiving service is held in the church, which has been decorated with various vegetables and fruits from the fields (Ibid.,334).

[46]Ibid., 333.

[47]Commonly, the host will give a simple statement of the particular case for the need for prayer. The usual components are a hymn or two scripture reading and prayer by the leader, followed by a message on a biblical theme. The service is usually followed by at least tea or a light meal. Neighbors, regardless of religion, are invited to these services as an expression of social relationships. (Ibid., 333).

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Catholics have a similar procedure.[48] Prayer meetings have become one of the significant identifiers of Kachin Christians.

Until now, the "Kachinization" of Christianity is ongoing as local Kachin Christians gradually continue this process. Under the early missionaries, Kachin traditional tunes were not allowed during worship in the Baptist Churches. Later on, young Protestant Kachins began to compose hymns in the traditional tunes. However, the tunes disturbed the elders who converted from KTR.[49] At present, Kachin Catholics are at the stage of finalizing their translation of the Bible into the Kachin language.[50] In terms of iconography, Kachinization can also be observed in a statue located in front of the Chapel of San Luka College where Mary is shown as a Kachin woman holding a baby Jesus in Kachin costume, which subtly illustrates the local Catholic Kachins' view on Christology and Mariology. Baptist Christians, whose forefathers and mothers have burnt the objects and altars of the *nats*, have become friendly with the believers of KTR to a greater extent. In 2002, Rev. Mading Hkaw Sau and Rev. Maran Seng Awng invited the leaders of the KTR association from Kawng Ra to Kamaing to participate in a Christmas party.[51] The gesture strongly signifies that relationships between Christianity and KTR have significantly changed over time.

[48]The researcher participated in a prayer meeting of Kachin Catholic family in Myitkyina.

[49]Tegenfeldt, *A Century of Growth*, 335.

[50]Saya Felix Labau from Lasho Diocese, with whom the author had a chance to meet at San Luka College on 22 July 2018. He is one of the prominent members of the Kachin Catholic Bible translation team.

[51]Many believers of KTR attended the party, including prominent Dumsa such as Zau Nan and Du Naw Pat (Bawk Naw, *Tradition, Beliefs and Practices*, 141).

## Positive Experiences of Inculturation

Although met with initial opposition, some Kachin traditions have been incorporated into the Christian liturgy and celebration to some extent. One of the most significant moments was the performance of the Manau dance in the Eucharistic celebration in the Great Jubilee of the year 2000. In his thesis, Fr. John Zau Doi, a Kachin priest, recorded this first Manau dance experience in the liturgy.[52] Today, on their Christian occasions, both Baptists and Catholics celebrate the *Manau* dance, which is used to honor *nats* with the utmost cultural respect.

The attempt to introduce the Manau dance into the Church's liturgy, especially in the Eucharist, requires much consideration. Thus, the bishop, by this time, a local Kachin, conducted meetings to understand the meaning, performance, symbols, and compatibility of the dance.[53] In fact, the main person behind the attempt to integrate the dance into the liturgy was a local priest who completed his study of liturgy in Rome. He was assigned to take charge of the liturgy during the Centennial Jubilee Celebration. His initiative at liturgical inculturation (Kachinization of the liturgy) was motivated by the local liturgical celebrations during the Pope's visits to different countries.[54]

His inspiration came from the offertory dance performed by the Indonesians at St. Peter's Basilica during the Asian Bishops' Synod in 1998. When he proposed the Manau dance in

[52]Zau Doi, "The Kachin Funeral Rite: A Case Study in Dialogue with Culture in the Diocese of Myitkyina, Myanmar," Unpublished MA thesis, the Saint Anthony Mary Claret College Library (Saint Anthony Mary Claret College, 2016), 135-208.

[53]Ibid., 177.

[54]Ibid., 178.

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the liturgy of the Jubilee Celebration, the bishop was hesitant. The bishop called for careful preparation and great caution in the Novena Masses before the celebration.[55] This initiative has now become a tradition in the Kachin Catholic Church to dance Manau in the liturgy during solemn occasions such as priestly ordinations and anniversaries.

The performance of the Manau dance in the liturgy brought tremendous joy and a sense of fulfillment for many Kachins as they witnessed their traditional dance in the Eucharistic celebration for the first time. Tears of overwhelming joy could be seen in the faces of the people who attended the liturgy including the two Kachin bishops who were so moved that tears welled up in their eyes.[56] One of the Kachin bishops commented that prior to this event, he did not know the essence of inculturation, but now he cherished the value of inculturation.[57] One priest expressed that the experience was as if he was ascending to heaven.[58]

This heartfelt experience brought a new dimension to the life of Kachin Catholics. Many felt that the liturgy is brought closer to people and their sentiments. Prior to this, the liturgy was viewed as a bit foreign, whereas now they began to see their cultural costumes and symbols in the liturgy.[59] The traditional tune that accompanies the dance also played a significant role in intensifying the feeling of interconnectedness between the Kachins' cultural identity and their Christian faith.[60]

[55]Ibid., 179.

[56]Ibid., 190.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Ibid., 192.

[59]Ibid., 191.

[60]Ibid.

This experience of inculturating the Manau dance has motivated local priests to search for other traditional rituals to be integrated into the liturgy to deepen their sense of belonging to the local Church as Kachin Catholics.[61] Some felt that the Kachin dance in the Mass is perhaps the highest honor rendered to the Kachins' culture[62] and helps root liturgical worship in the local cultures.[63]

## Inculturation: a Contested Exercise

Efforts towards the localization or indigenization of Christianity are proceeding in the Kachin Catholic Church in such a way that it brings them comfort and challenge. This is not easy for Kachin Christians because their culture is closely associated with KTR. Today, the Christian Manau dance is fully accepted by Kachin Christians. However, many individuals do not participate in the dance, believing that the dance is related solely to the KTR. In fact, in a recent Manau dance in Edin, Myitkyina in November 2018, some did not participate given the total rejection of the KTR.[64]

A negotiation process is taking place in preparation for many Manau dances. In the Kamai region, before dawn, the traditional rituals were done without publicizing them. Some of the group members of the committee for a Manau dance would perform a ritual offering of a sacrificial pig at the foot of the Manau posts. In the morning, the Manau dance was performed in a Christian way. These Christians still hold dearly to their beliefs in the *nats*. The "split" in the practices

[61]Ibid., 194.

[62]Ibid., 197.

[63]Ibid., 198.

[64]N Jai Sin Wa Naw, interview by Sr. Mornica Kai Ja, 19 November 2018.

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suggests that the negotiation is still in the "kachinization" process of owning what rightly belongs to them as Kachins and Christians. Manau dance appears to be torn asunder by the contestation between KTR and the Christian traditions.[65] Dr. N-Gam Tang Gun rightly observes that "the Kachin Christian still faces a cultural as well as a theological conflict whenever this Manau Dance would be celebrated in the time of Kachin State Day and on other special occasions."[66]

The Kabung dance (*Kabung dum*) presents another controversy. The dance is used in funeral services. Literally, *Kabung dum* means "to make a movement with sounds and songs."[67] Although the dance is believed to be a purely traditional custom without the KTR ritual, the local Church is still reluctant to acknowledge it. Fr. John Zau Doi is taking an avid interest in "Christianizing" this dance.[68] The Kabung dance is usually performed at night to console and accompany the bereaved family during the era of the ancestors, an era before the majority of Kachins became Christians. The bereaved family tendered a party on behalf of their departed member. The bereaved family served traditional liquor until nightfall. The

[65]Gun, *The Origin of Kachin Manau*, 38.

[66]Gun, *Kachin Culture and Tradition in Myanmar*, 98.

[67]Zau Doi, "The Kachin Funeral Rite," 82.

[68]Fr. John Zau Doi has collected a group of elders to study the Kabung dance and make it a Christian dance. He sponsored the group to produce a modern version of striking the traditional gongs, that play during the funeral. After weeks of their trial, the group found out their new ways of gonging cannot supersede the ancient one. They said that the accident way of playing gongs can penetrate the hearts of Kachins. Whenever a Kachin hears the sound of the gongs, they are excited to go to the funeral. Fr. John Zau Doi reshaped the meaning of the dance. Instead of mourning for the dead, he intends the dance to be in line with our Christian Easter faith, that is to say, the dance is performed with the notion of resurrection. Sometimes, the experimental dance is performed in the cemetery. (Fr. John Zau Doi was interviewed by the author on 10 July 2018.)

consumption of liquor led to drunkenness and, sometimes, to sexual misconduct.

The initiators of integrating the Kabaung dance into the Church have adapted the dance in such a way as to avoid the occurrence of social misconduct. For several funerals of the affluent Kachins, the dance is performed in Myitkyina and Tanai.[69] On some occasions, a few priests have participated in a new Kabaung dance. Still, many priests and lay people are also deeply divided over this traditional dance. Some young Kachin Catholic theologians are willing to propose a Kachin Christian funeral rite.[70] Apparently, it is still a long way towards accepting the celebration of a Kachin funeral rite because, at the moment, the people are already struggling to adopt the *Kabung* dance, from the funeral custom of the KTR into a Christian dance. Sometimes, KTR beliefs can still be found in Kachin Christian funerals, especially in rural areas. Some elders evoked the ancestral spirits to bring the soul of the dead to God so that the soul would not be wandering in limbo. KTR believed that after death, they would be together with their ancestors.[71]

The natal ceremony faces a similar resistance among the Kachin Christians. Some still consider the ceremony as too traditional in its symbolic meaning. It is proper to KTR. Thus, some people opt to celebrate the natal ceremony with cakes instead of ginger and dry fish. On the other hand, some Kachins opine that if the traditional way of the natal ceremony is not carried out, it is "un-Kachin." The Kachin wedding ceremony is likewise contested. Some weddings are celebrated, first in the Church and then in the home, where blessings are sought from the ancestral spirits. A respected elder would usually lead the

[69]Fr. Peter Hka Aung Tu, interviewed by the author, 21 June 2018.

[70]Zau Doi, "The Kachin Funeral Rite," 91.

[71]Gam, *Jingpaw Labau Ginrung*, 17.

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ceremony without the presence of a priest. Sometimes, the priests were not even invited to such ceremonies.

In the face of this, some Kachins appear to be "schizophrenic" or "double-minded" in their faith and practices. Others become highly conservative. These challenges in inculturation show us the need for respect and discernment on the part of the Church in its dialogue with the local cultures, including the KTR, be it with the *Nat Jaw* or *Nat Jaw Htung*, as urged by the FABC. In general, many Kachin Christians view the need for greater appreciation of the Kachin tradition. However, for some, it only means appreciation of the cultures apart from the belief system of their ancestors. For others, the Kachin tradition means an inclusion of the cultures and faith of their ancestors.[72] Today, the Kachins are even more poignantly aware of their cultural estrangement because of the alienating impacts of globalization and the modern way of life.[73]

## Towards a Kachin Pneumatology

As we have seen, the worldview and belief system of KTR are strongly rooted in the spiritual domain, providing a holistic paradigm to understand human beings, nature, and the spirits/*nats* world. Thus, the nature and character of *nats*/spirits should be theologically valued by the local Church. Indigenous theologians like Yangkahao Vashum of Nagaland

[72]The most important elements are their belief (religion) and art (Culture dance). They cannot live without belief. They believe in the Creator (God) and spirits (*nats*) to whom they attribute everything for their living and environment." Interviewed by Zau Doi. Zau Doi, "The Kachin Funeral Rite," 74.

[73]Because the people are losing much of their culture due to globalization, it is proposed that another way to preserve the local culture is to continue the practice of oral storytelling. (Interviewed by Zau Daoi, Zau Doi "The Kachin Funeral Rite," 75).

began to speak of the spirits of the Christian faith.[74] So, too, do Kachin Christians, but not without their share of difficulties. Understandably, the spirits are still consigned to superstitious beliefs as if they are spirits in the forests and mountains. Those who believe in the spirits are regarded as persons having psychological issues. At best, if such spirits are considered real, they are regarded as evil spirits. Thus, some Kachin Christians still look at the believers of their traditional religion as devil worshipers. This is an existential challenge or quest for Kachin Christians who live among the many spirits.

The challenge posed to the Kachin Christians is either to regard the *nats* as evil spirits or ignore the many spirits because the spirit world is too complicated and incomprehensible. In this context, Kachin Christians are further pulled away by the modern sciences and even by their Christian theology since both have no interest in the spirits. Nonetheless, this tension does not discount or invalidate some of the experiences of the believers of the spirits as real and even good spirits, assisted by the research of a few anthropologists who have a different view on the spirits through their experiences of undergoing initiation, falling into trances, dancing ecstatically with the spirits and performing healing rites themselves.[75]

The Church seems theologically limited when it comes to contact with the many spirits in other religions and traditions. The Christian worldview is dominated by a Western rationality that fails to deal adequately with such beliefs. Hollenweger notes that "the fact that the issue of spirits has produced so

[74]Yangkahao Vashum, *Christology in Context: A Tribal-Indigenous Appraisal of North East India* (New Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2017).

[75]Mary Douglas, "Other Beings, Postcolonially Correct," in *Mission and Culture: the Louis J. Luzbetak Lectures,* ed. Stephen B. Bevans (New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 65.

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much dissension and discussion shows that it aggravates a weak spot in Western theology, which tends just to label such beliefs as 'psychological' or superstitious."[76] In general, this is a real challenge for Christians since Christian pneumatology has not always been given sufficient attention. The Holy Spirit and his activities were developed in books of "Spiritual Theology" or Spirituality, which were considered of lower rank in the academic hierarchy.[77] Christian systematic theology was excessively Christocentric and less Trinitarian until after the Second Vatican Council.[78]

One of the consequences of this limited development of Christian pneumatology is that the Catholic Church has indiscriminately designated all other spirits outside of Christianity as evil spirits. This notion was further accentuated by the belief that there is no salvation outside of the Church. God's saving will in all religions has been recognized since the time of the Apostolic Church.[79] Thus, the Second Vatican Council began the re-recognizing of the works of the Holy Spirit in other religions (cf. *GS* 22; *LG* 16). Vatican II's declaration, *Nostra Aetate* stipulates that "the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions"[80] The Church realized that the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers to

[76]Kirsteen Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 153.

[77]Ibid.

[78]Felipe Gomez, SJ, *The Holy Spirit: Theology and Spirituality* (Makati: St. Paul, 2010), 3.

[79]James H. Kroeger. M.M. "The Faith-Culture Dialogue in Asia: Ten FABC Insights on Inculturation," in *God the Creator: Universality of Inculturality*, ed. Christopher Shelke SJ, *Studia Missionalia*, vol.57 (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana , 2007), 91-115.

[80]Pope Paul VI, *The Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions* (*Nostra Aetate)*, 28 October 1965, Vatican Archive, accessed 15 February 2019, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/ documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery (*GS* 32). *Nostra Aetate* affirmed with all clarity that "from ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers throughout things and the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father.[81] This perception and recognition penetrate their lives with a profound religious sense."[82] Furthermore, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 28 affirms that the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit are universal, limited by neither space nor time.[83]

Since the Second Vatican Council, Christian pneumatology has developed along with realizing the works of the Holy Spirit in other religions. This realization was also extended to traditional religions in Asia and Africa. In 1997, the FABC Office of Theological Concern recognized a theological paradigm shift in the Church's perception of indigenous peoples.[84] The FABC bishops recognized that God has been speaking to indigenous peoples through their cultures over the centuries. The Asian bishops began to study the traditional religions and came to understand that communion with nature, communion with ancestors and progenitors, communion with the world of spirits, and finally communion with the creator God are characteristics of most indigenous peoples in Asia.[85] In light of this, the Asian bishops affirmed with conviction that much of

[81]Ibid.

[82]Ibid.

[83]Pope John Paul II, *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate* (*Redemptoris Missio*), 7 December 1990, Vatican Archive, accessed 15 February 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html, no.28.

[84]Fung, S.J., *A Shamanic Theology of Sacred Sustainability,* 9.

[85]Karotemprel, "The Indigenous/Tribal people and Renewed Church in Asia,"12.

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the indigenous peoples' worldview and ethos are compatible with the Christian faith. Thus, indigenous peoples' traditional beliefs, rites, myths, and symbols can provide material for developing indigenous theologies and liturgical ceremonies. [86] Thus, Christians in Asia are invited by the FABC to dialogue with the traditional religions along with other religions. In other words, the Asian bishops contend that the presence of the Holy Spirit in traditional religions needs to be recognized and appreciated.

## Movements of the Spirit of God in the Kachinland

Recognizing the activities of God in the universe can be found in the biblical tradition. God is at work outside of the community of God's chosen people. We see this, for example, in the cases of Abraham and Melchizedek (Gen 14: 17 – 20), Moses and Jethro (Ex 18:1-26), Isaiah referring to Cyrus (Isa 44:24-28; 45:1; 2 Chr 36:22-23), Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10) and Jesus and the Syro-phoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30).[87] Concerning the movement of the Spirit, Walter Kasper poignantly notes, "Whenever something new arises, whenever life is awakened and reality reaches ecstatically beyond itself, in all seeking and striving, in every ferment and birth, and even more in the beauty of creation, something of the being and activity of God's Spirit is manifested."[88] Thus, it is important to note the activities and movements of the Spirit in the Kachin communities, especially from the missionary era to the contemporary period, since the arrival of missionaries and the Eurocentric

[86]FABC, FABC Document: 1997 -2001, vol, 3, *For All the Peoples of Asia,* ed. Eilers, Franz-Josef (Manila: Claretian Publications, 2002), 26.

[87]Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation*, 164.

[88]Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Chris*t (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 22.

theologies posed a decimating challenge to the existing spirit world in the Kachin society.

The new villages established by these early missionaries were strong pull factors of evangelization. These early missionaries promoted human progress by bringing education, health, and modern social structures so that people were no longer under the power of their tribal chief. The new Christian converts loved the new villages. Living in a new village in the lowland with stable farming was much more comfortable than living in the mountains with the rotational slash-and-burn cultivation. The Kachin converts in the new villages experienced a sense of freedom from the traditional chiefs who had to obey and give some portion of their crops.

The schools attracted parents who wanted their children to have a modern education. Usually, the children from missionary schools would first become Christians, and only then would the parents of the children convert to Christianity. The downside of conversion to Christianity was the demand for allegiance, which at that time entailed belittling the traditional religious system, for instance, through the burning of religious objects of their former religion. Hence, the Western religion of the early missionaries supplanted the Kachin traditional religion. Though biblical theology states that the Spirit blows where it wills alas, God's omnipresent Spirit was trapped within the confines of Western trappings.

During these early encounters with the missionaries, some Kachins needed more clarity in embracing a new religion, even though many Kachins viewed both their existing faith and the faith brought by the missionaries as compatible. A case in point is the Kamlin village in the 1870s. When the Kachins heard about the Christian message, they appreciated the preaching of the missionaries. They approached the missionaries and asked if it

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was possible to amalgamate Christianity and their traditional faith.[89] The missionaries could not respond to this request. The Spirit of God had challenged early missionaries, but they remained "walled in" by the confines of Western categories.

However, the activity and presence of the Spirit can be more easily recognized today. Both Catholic and Protestant Kachins have learned to respect their ancestral religion again. At present, believers of KTR and Christianity can come together at the same table to celebrate their friendship over meals and show their respect for each other's faith. Many Kachin Christians seek a KTR *dumsa* (priest) to study their ancestral religious practices to adapt them to Christianity. The movements of the Spirit outside of Western Christian institutions are gradually recognized. However, it remains very difficult to comprehend the works of the Holy Spirit in the religious practices of *nats*/spirits.

## An Asian Way of Discernment of the Spirit and spirits

The realization of the goodness and wisdom in KTR enables Christians to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit. However, some continue to stigmatize the believers of KTR as devil worshippers.[90] The experiences of rejection and denigra-

[89]Evans, *History of the Catholic Church in Burma*, 346.

[90]The primal religions were often accused of propagating idolatrous and satanic practices. Their members were called people living in "darkness and far from God" because they were considered to believe in a world full of evil spirits and powers and to depend on the intercession of dubious magicians, witch doctors, healers, and exorcists. The Christian message was presented to them as a liberating force, which, with the power of the Holy Spirit, brought light to the darkness and delivered these people from age-old oppression and slavery to religiously false ideas that could only be called superstitious and idolatrous (See. The Office of Theological Concerns of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *The Spirit at Work in Asia Today*, 1-96).

tion of traditional Kachin religio-cultural beliefs remain stumbling blocks in local efforts of theologizing on the relationship of the *nats* to God's Spirit. In particular, using Western categories among Kachin Christians remains the greatest obstacle to appreciating and comprehending their traditional religiosity and worldview. Until now, the theological and cultural hurdle in dealing with their ancestral religion remains a challenge. There is no huge theological challenge for Kachin Christians to recognize KTR's God, Karai Kasang, as the same Creator God of Christians However, it is much harder to deal with spirits/ *nats* of KTR because nature and sacrificial offerings seem to be archaic or "primitive" in the eyes of Christians. The Asian Bishops rightly recognize that the indigenous worldview is distinct from that of other peoples.[91] At the same time, FABC stresses the need to "discern the presence of the Spirit as expressed, believed, imaged and symbolized by believers themselves in these Asian traditions."[92]

In light of this dialogue,[93] one theological challenge for the Kachi Church is to discern the work of the Holy Spirit in the KTR among the *nats.* In a broad stroke, the spirits of KTR can be distinguished and categorized. In the experiences of the Kachin Christians, discussing the *nats* has generated much-heated debate. Although believers of KTR claim that there are

[91]Sabastian Karotemprel, "The Indigenous/Tribal people and Renewed Church in Asia," in The Renewed Mission of Love and Service to the Indigenous Peoples of Asia, FABC Papers, no, 92 (Hongkong, FABC, 2000), 3, accessed 15 February 2019, http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc_paper_92g.pdf.

[92]The Office of Theological Concerns of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences,*The Spirit at Work in Asia Today,* 1-96.

[93]The final statement of the First Plenary Assembly of FABC states: "In dialogue with these religions, we will find ways of expressing our Christian faith. The great religious traditions can shed light on the truths of the Gospel. They can help us understand the riches of our faith."

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good and evil spirits, the task of discernment of the spirits still needs to be improved for Christians to relate to the belief of KTR.

This is where the local Kachin Churches find themselves in a quandary. All spirits of KTR besides the Supreme Being were regarded as evil by early missionaries. Today, with the development of theology, Kachin Christians would not regard all spirits of KTR as evil. Thus, many Church leaders take a cautious position, saying, "Not all the spirits in KTR are necessarily evil spirits." At the same time, it is a challenge to accept all spirits, even the benevolent spirits of KTR, as good spirits. This is a great existential challenge for Kachin Christians, especially in their endeavor to become a truly local and inculturated Church. For instance, some Christians continue to resort to KTR rituals in times of crisis. Nevertheless, it remains a daunting challenge to reconcile the spirit world of KTR with the Christian spirit world, especially with the Holy Spirit. Besides, Christians are generally unfamiliar with the discernment of spirits.

There are at least, three well-known schools of discernment in the Catholic tradition: the practice of the interior life, the social involvement of religious orders and institutes as they adjust to modernity, and the experience of the contemporary renewal movement.[94] First, in relation to the practice of interior life, Ignatian discernment is well established. In Ignatian spirituality, "discernment of spirits" is used. However, Ignatian discernment focuses more on good and bad spiritual forces influencing the thoughts and affective states, leading to moral decisions and actions. This discernment is not concerned about the discernment of nature spirits.

In the second school of discernment, the discernment of spirits evolves around searching for the will of God or ways

[94]Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation*, 169.

of social involvement for a particular mission or work. The third is discernment in the contemporary renewal movement, especially, in the charismatic movement, which is much more complex. For example, the Holy Spirit's experience of speaking in tongues in Charismatic prayer meetings is a delicate matter because few Church leaders are reluctant to endorse such experiences, even though speaking in tongues can be traced back to the Scripture.

On the other hand, the Asian bishops insightfully propose *five criteria* for the discernment of the Holy Spirit: the fruits of the Spirit, the values of the Kingdom, the sense of faith in the Church, a listening attitude, and fostering love, harmony, and unity. The first and most fundamental criterion for the discernment of the Spirits is the presence of the fruits of the Spirit, which St. Paul describes as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:16-25). As a tree can be known by its fruit, the presence of these fruits of the Spirit affirms the presence of the Holy Spirit.[95]

The second criterion is the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Christ, which goes beyond the institutional Church. The Asian bishops assert that the working of the Spirit of God in the history of humankind is to be understood and interpreted about the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Christ.[96] The third criterion concerns the sense of the faith of the Church which begins by paying attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling the reception of divine revelation in which God is fully encountered by humanity through Jesus Christ.[97]

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[95]The Office of Theological Concerns of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *The Spirit at Work in Asia Today*," 1-96.

[96]Ibid.

[97]Ibid.

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The fourth criterion is a listening attitude and openness to be appropriately guided by the Spirit since the Spirit blows where it wills and the presence of the Truth and the Spirit is not limited to the Church.[98] The fifth criterion for discernment of the Spirit is the importance of love and unity in the world, among which love is the greatest (1 Cor. 13) biblical (Johannine) criteria.[99] Having these criteria in mind, the theological appraisal of the spirits of KTR will be explored.

## Mutual Enrichment

After reflecting and discerning the fruits and characters of benevolent spirits in KTR, we can state that all the life-giving *nats* can be considered kindred spirits since they are indispensable for sustaining life in cultures, religions, and societies.[100] As such, KTR benevolent *nats* such as Sinlap *nat*, Mu *nat*, Ningshe Mu *nat*, Nbung *nat*, Lamu Madai *nat*, Ga Madai *nat* (earth spirit), Jan *nat* (Sun spirit), Shata *nat* (Moon spirit), Bungga *nat* (wind) and other benevolent spirits can be said to participate in the divine assembly of *Ruah Elohim* in the task of sustaining creation (Ps 29:1, 82:1; Deut 10:17).[101] Gumgun *nats* (ancestral household spirits) continue to intercede for blessings for the household. These benevolent spirits, akin to guardian angels, sustain and nourish creation. These indwelling spirits embody the sacred power of the absolute Creator.[102]

Christian pneumatology may shed light on KTR pneumatology about Christianity and other traditional religions. The nature of KTR spirits can be related to the biblical tradition,

[98]Ibid.

[99]Gomez, *The Holy Spirit*, 209.

[100]Fung, *A Shamanic Pneumatology in a Mystical Age of Sacred Sustainability*, 124.

[101]Ibid., 125.

[102]Fung, *A Shamanic Theology of Sacred Sustainability*, 96.

as mentioned above. This understanding can help Kachin Christian converts see that their indigenous faith is, in fact, related to Christianity. The universal characteristic of Christian pneumatology shows that *nats* also have a universal characteristic. Being intermediaries of God, the *nats*/spirits participate in the divine activity of God's life-giving Spirit, which continues to hover over the entire world in his unending work of renewal and re-creation(Job 34:14–15; Ps 104:30).

The KTR belief and experience of many spirits is very important for Christians. Christians, especially early missionaries, could not approach and deal with the phenomena of many spirits. Thus, Christian missions became a contestation of power between the Christian God and Karai Kasang, to the point that all spirits in KTR, whether good or bad, were relegated to the margin. One-Holy-Spirit Christian pneumatology faces a challenge to respond to this spirit-world reality.

In modern theology, mainly Protestant theology, angels and demons alike are generally condemned to the realms of superstition, and what remains is "God and man."[103] Catholic theologians Karl Rahner and Yves Congar consider only the Spirit of God and the human spirit.[104] For the local Churches in Kachinland, this is not only a theological concern but a serious pastoral challenge. Unfortunately, many local priests and pastors are unable to address this phenomenon of plural spirits for fear of the capricious activity and the need for fetishes and mantras that such a worldview with many spirits can generate.[105]

The pneumatology of KTR demonstrates that the believers of KTR live in a world of harmony with spirits under the

[103]Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation*, 151.

[104]Ibid.

[105]Ibid., 152.

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guidance of a sustaining Karai Kasang who assists believers with the heavenly spirits to overcome evil forces in times of trouble and struggle. Joy and harmony prevail in the lives of believers of KTR. The KTR pneumatology of many spirits may enable Christians to rediscover the plural character of divine activity. From the beginning of the creation, the Trinitarian God is at work. Besides that, intermediaries, angelic beings, are also involved in divine activity.

The experiences of KTR and other traditional religions show that the Spirit of God sacralizes and sustains the world through the angels, who are spirits. The appreciation of the context of many spirits might help Christians to have a better understanding of the nature, existence, and the work of the Holy Spirit, who has the power of indwelling (Rom 8:9) and life-giving ( Gen 2:7).[106] It is an invitation to ponder and pay attention to the boundless activity and movement of the Spirit of God who blows at will (Jn 3:8).

However, our present Christian understanding of the nature of the spirits is still at the early stage. Christians are still learning to recognize and respect the spirits in KTR and other traditional religions. British theologian Kirsteen Kim, who had served as a missionary in India, hopes that these kindred spirits "will be seen and appreciated for what they are, without being rejected on the one hand or subsumed into Christianity on the other."[107]

[106]Simon Pau Khan En, *Nat Worship: A Paradigm Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar* (Yangon: Judson Research Center of the Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2012), 137.

[107]Fung, "What Christians Can Learn from Shamanic Pneumatology," 124.

## Towards A Harmonic Pneumatology

The experience of the believers of KTR with the spirits is relational. The creation stories of KTR are about interrelatedness and connectedness between heavenly beings, human beings, and nature. They have a less anthropomorphic expression of the Divine in they encounter the Divine in spirits. They experience the divine through their senses and intuition. In the creation story, the Supreme Being appears as the Sustainer of the relational matrix of universal life forces, spirits, humans, and created things and beings. All existence, visible and invisible, is sustained in this relational matrix.

When dealing with undesirable spirits, believers of KTR do not cast them out, making the exorcism ritual of KTR very unique. There is no forceful repelling or rebuking of the malevolent spirits. These unwelcome spirits are asked to leave with a diplomatic approach. Besides giving them an offering, a traditional priest uses pleasant words with a nice tune to request the malevolent spirits to go away. This exorcism reminds us of how Jesus expelled the evil spirits he allowed to enter into a great herd of swine (Mark 5:8-13). A similar attitude is seen not only in many primal religions in Asia but also in Africa, where "exorcism" is understood and practiced as placating spirits rather than casting them out.[108]

The believers of KTR honor the benevolent *nats*, especially those of their households who are their ancestors. They believe that the benevolent *nats* are superior to the malevolent *nats*. In a traditional Manau festival, the offering is given to both kinds of *nats*, reflecting the Kachins' understanding of the interconnectedness of the *nats* to their lives. They live within a harmonic web of the spirit world. In the KTR, the benevolent

[108]Kim, *The Holy Spirit in the World: A Global Conversation*, 170.

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spirits are given offerings to obtain blessings. However, they may cause harm to a household if the household members forget to perform the ritual. If the rituals are not properly done, trouble can befall the household. Another offering ritual is needed, showing that offerings and rituals are a means of communication and maintaining harmony within this matrix.

Sometimes, the malevolent *nats* may cause disorder and rupture this harmonic relationship seemingly without cause. But in most cases, human beings have violated the order of the harmonic web through negligence and wrongdoing. Reconciliation and restoration of the relationship can be achieved through offerings and sacrifices. This religious worldview of "relationship" can also be found in other traditional religions in Asia and Africa.[109] A mixture of fear and reverence may be present in the hearts of the believers of KTR as *nats* are more powerful than human beings. At the same time, the joyful communal dancing during the spirit rituals strongly suggests that the believers of KTR rejoice in the presence of the *nats*.

Based on his experiences with primal religions in the Philippines, Albert Alejo, S.J. remarked that negotiation is a better way to deal with spirits.[110] He reflected on how ordinary Catholics practice the "spirituality of negotiation." In the popular religiosity of Catholics, people express their faith and prayer through devotional prayers and sacrifices such as novenas, a series of nine days or nine weeks of unbroken devotion. People commit themselves to these novenas to grant particular blessings. One of the popular devotions of the Catholics in the Philippines is honoring the image of the

[109]Laurenti Magesa, *African Religions: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 248.

[110]Alejo,"Religion and Secularization," 193.

Santo Niño, an image of the Child Jesus. Alejo remarked that "based on the people's experience, we human beings do not command the Lord to give us immediately what we want, but we have to haggle."[111] Offering sacrifice to benevolent *nats* may correspond to this Christian negotiation.

Thus, the faith of KTR believers is concerned with how to live in harmony with the nats in the web of relationships. Relationship is the ultimate concern in KTR. Even in rituals honoring particular *nats*, they offer some sacrificial meal to whichever *nats* may be present around the event. Thus, the worst mistake the believers of KTR can make is willful neglect of the spirits who are especially close to their households,[112] such as the respective *nats* who dwell in the trees or mountains. Such negligence may disrupt a person, a family, or a community. Ordinary believers of KTR decipher such disruptures as signs that they need to recommunicate or amend the harmonic relationship. Illness is one such phenomenon for the believers of the KTR. The communal dancing in some ritual offerings to benevolent spirits strongly demonstrates the notion of thanksgiving and rejoicing with the spirits. The relationship is expressed through bodily language through dancing in the community.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

Fr. Leonardo Mercado, SVD, the Executive Secretary of the Episcopal Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, boldly declared that traditional religions are Christian partners. His view reflects the new attitude of the Church promoted by recent popes and Church documents. For instance, Pope John

[111]Ibid.

[112]Ibid., 150.

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Paul II and Pope Francis have apologized to the indigenous peoples for not giving sufficient respect to local cultures and religions. During the Great Jubilee 2000, Pope John Paul II even solemnly confessed that the Church has committed sins "in actions against love, peace, the rights of peoples and respect for cultures and religions."[113] For his part, Pope Francis humbly stated in Puerto Maldonado that "those of us who do not live in these lands need your wisdom and knowledge to enable us to enter into, without destroying, the treasures that this region holds."[114] With no less vigor, the Asian bishops have likewise encouraged Christians to engage in a constructive dialogue with traditional religions in Asia. In light of this new attitude of the Catholic Church towards traditional religions, this research has taken a step toward dialogue with the Kachin traditional religion through the lens of Christian pneumatology.

The challenges faced by the Kachin Christians in their encounter with their traditional religion show that what is at stake is a theological problem interlaced with a cultural issue. Colonial missionaries and anthropologists designated the Kachin's religion as primitive, uncivilized, and demonic and their traditional beliefs as animist or pagan.[115] Based on the theory of evolution, the Kachins were considered culturally

[113]Pope John Paul II, *Universal Prayer: Confession of Sin and Asking for Forgiveness*, Vatican Archive, accessed 12 March 2019, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/documents/ns_lit_doc_20000312_prayer-day-pardon_en.html.

[114]Pope Francis, *A Meeting with Indigenous People of Amazon*, 19 January 2018, Speeches, accessed 12 March 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco_20180119_peru-puertomaldonado-popoliamazzonia.html.

[115]During the Age of Discovery or the sixteenth century, the Europeans looked on the other as demons. During the Enlightenment, the Europeans looked at the other as ignorant (Mercado, *From Pagans to Partners*, 26).

and religiously inferior and thus needed to be Christianized as well as Westernized so they could be delivered from darkness and brought to the light.[116] Thus, Christianity preached the message of liberation from this primitive way of life. However, this left the Kachin Christians in search of their lost cultural identity. Today, many Kachins, especially the young, no longer care to learn about KTR. What is urgently needed is a new liberation of the Kachin from the misinterpretation of the Kachin culture.

## The Future of Inculturation

Inculturation must necessarily involve a discerning and open dialogue among all the stakeholders. Inculturation also requires an interfaith sensitivity to cultural ownership. An arbitrary or one-sided attempt at inculturation is a disrespect to KTR due to the unwarranted belittling of a centuries-old belief system and its followers. A truly indigenous Christianity must respect the beliefs that have long been attuned to the divine presence in Kachinland.[117] It is imperative for Christians to inculturate the gospel with integrity and dignity through a dialogical process in the context of Kachin society. To this end, the Church has converted Kachin people to Christ; it is the turn of the Church to allow itself to be converted by the wisdom of the Kachin people.[118]

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[116]Mercado, *From Pagans to Partners*, 26.

[117]See, Graham Paulson, "Toward an Aboriginal Theology," *Pacifica* 19 (2006), accessed 20 March 2019, https://unlearningthe problem .files. wordpress.com/2010/05/graham-paulson.pdf.

[118]John Mansford Prio, "Dignity and Identity: The Struggle of Indigenous People in Asia to Preserve, Purify and Promote Their Cultures," in *PCC Asian Convention: Proclaiming Christ to Asian Cultures: Prophecy and Fulfillment*, FABC Papers, no. 104 (Hong Kong: FABC, 2002), 20.

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The liturgy can be the best venue for Kachin Christians to reclaim Kachin traditional culture and spirituality. This involves a communal effort among the laity and ordained leaders of the Church, along with the theologians who are in respectful dialogue with the reputable Kachin traditional women elders. The successful incorporation of the Manau dance in the Eucharist shows that what is good in Kachin's culture and spiritual values is compatible with Christianity. Furthermore, this process can be a venue for promoting lay participation in the Church. We recall that Kachin lay elders played a vital role in integrating the Manau dance into Christianity. The elders are considered consultors and bearers of cultural knowledge. In this way, the local church, the people of God, will be the primary agent involved in inculturation. A contextual ecclesiology can also emerge through this gradual Kachinization of the Christian faith.

## Interreligious Social Engagement

The relationship between Christianity and KTR has changed in recent years. However, it is more out of social friendship that the leaders of KTR are invited to Christian celebrations. The leaders of KTR and Christianity can do more than socialization. Both parties may collaborate in promoting Kachin culture. The Church also encourages "dialogue of life" and "dialogue of action" with other religions, for instance on ecological concerns.[119]

Amid the political crisis in Kachinland, with regular skirmishes and wars that have driven out many Kachins from their towns and villages, the Christian Churches have tried to

[119]PCID, *Letter of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences in Asia, the Americas and Oceania,* 21 November, 1993, Vatican Archive, accessed March 13 2019, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_21111993_trad-relig_en.html.

contribute to the peacebuilding process by facilitating peace training programs, helping the internally displaced and calling out injustices done by the government. However, the role of KTR is still invisible. The spirituality of the harmonic relationship of KTR may be put at the service of the peacebuilding process. Its age-old spiritual wisdom can enable the believers of KTR to live in harmony against all evil forces and be resilient during crises. This will be a new frontier for the Church to work with believers of KTR in search of political stability and peace in the Kachinland.

Across the border, the role of KTR is very significant as most of the Kachin communities in China belong to KTR. The Kachin elders and leaders from Myanmar need to respect the Kachin communities from China and India who profess different religions.[120] The change of attitude toward traditional religion has become a theological and social-political challenge for cross-border interfaith dialogue. Thus, Christians, believers of KTR (especially from China), and Buddhists (from India) need to become partners in building up Kachin identity, unity, and solidarity.

## Towards a Fruitful Rather than Tragic Encounter

Mary Douglas, who did her anthropological research with the Lele people in Congo, remarked that Christianity and the Lele religion met, but both religions lost in the encounter. The Lele religion was reduced to techniques of identifying sorcerers, while Christianity acquired knowledge of sorcery.[121] It was a traumatic experience.

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[120]Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin*, 365.

[121]Mary Douglas, "Other Beings, Postcolonially Correct," in Mission and Culture: the Louis J. Luzbetak Lectures, ed. Stephen B. Bevans (New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 51.

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In the case of the Kachin, if there is no constructive encounter between Christianity and KTR, a centuries-old belief system might be reduced to black magic or sorcery, while Christianity wastes the opportunity to gain from its wisdom that comes from the same Holy Spirit, the source of all truth and goodness. Hopefully, the attempts towards integrating Kachin culture into the Christian faith will continue and contribute to a renewed and deeper appreciation of both the Christian faith and Kachin culture for present and future Christians in Kachinland.